This story picks up several years after the end of The Alternate Journey. If you haven't read The Alternate Journey, this would make no sense.
Chapter 1

"Whoa..." Maddie smiled to herself as she looked out the full length windows of her downtown office.

She had been so engrossed in the reports she was reading that she hadn't realized the sun had drifted low on the horizon and the day was nearly over. No wonder she had been squinting as she read. With a sigh, she sat down the file and leaned back in her chair, her full attention turning to the window, to the deep autumn colors that cast over her magnificent view of the city. Rubbing at her temple with her fingers, she glanced down at her watch—the one Bishop had worn when he was alive. It was time to go.

As she rose to her feet, she began closing up folders and shuffling her stack back into order. Ian had sent over a handful of philanthropic proposals to the New York office for her to read over as she began to step into her recently developed, uniquely suited role with Bishop Industries. Sitting in her late husband's office, at what had been his desk, there were still small hints of him left. It had been nearly a year and a half since he had left her, since he had perished in that plane crash that terrible night and she had only recently been able to move into this space, to begin to walk these floors on her own. The color pallet had shifted, the room taking on a softer curve to it, but he was still there; in the dark of the wood and the elegance of the construction. Anyone who knew him, would see him in the space.

Sliding her files into her bag, Maddie pulled on her coat, wrapping her scarf around her neck twice before she lifted the bag onto her shoulder and left the desk. When she had agreed to come to work for her father-in-law, they had worked together to sculpt a position that would allow her to work in a charitable nature and to maintain the independence and mobility she had desired after she had lost her husband—the same spirit he had walked with.

"I'm heading home Jillian," Maddie smiled at the young woman who worked as her assistant. "You should do the same."

"As soon as I finish sending off this last update," the tall brunette smiled in return. "Enjoy your weekend Dr. Bishop."

"Thank you," Maddie met her eyes, her nerves flashing for just a moment as she remembered what lay ahead of her that evening. "You do the same."

With a quick wave of her fingers, she was disappearing into the elevator, riding from the top to the bottom and stepping out into the New York City dusk. It was late October and the chill of deep fall had settled over the city. Pulling her scarf tighter to her neck, she could hear the heels of her boots on the pavement as she walked the few blocks to her apartment.

"Good Evening Dr. Bishop," the wonderfully warm older man at the front desk nodded to her as she moved through the lobby.

"Mr. Charles," she nodded in return. He was kind and sweet and loyal and he, as with many of the people who surrounded her, had offered her a strength, a peacefulness, a feeling of home when she had returned to New York after Bishop's death.
After a short trip up to the top floor, she was stepping into the beautiful apartment that was her home—reaching for the switches to turn on the lights and the music as she shed her coat and scarf and hung them on the hooks in the entryway. It still felt strange to come home to something so quiet, but the music helped. Moving inside, she rubbed friction into her arms, going first for the fireplace in the living room, flipping the switch and grinning as the flames lapped up; warming her instantly.

Continuing on into the kitchen for something to eat, for a glass of wine, she rounded the corner and stopped short; her eyes falling on the reason for her early return home that day, the reason for the very slight flutter of anxiety in her stomach, for the nostalgia that seemed to have walked with her everywhere she had gone that day.

A single bottle of Scotch.

With a deep breath she moved past it, continuing on with her quest for food, laughing at herself as she moved. She could still remember the day he called her nearly six weeks ago. She had been stunned to hear his voice on the other line, slightly confused even. But when he told her he was coming to the states, that he had some time after an early dinner with the Mayor's Office, she had remembered. That bottle of Scotch her husband had left him—one of the very few items he had specifically listed in his will and the only thing, other than a letter, that he had left to his best friend.

So when he had offered to have somebody stop by for it, Maddie had invited him to her home to retrieve it himself. Though she had no way of knowing for sure, she had sensed a smile when he agreed. And she had been right, he felt a small slip of relief, this invitation was his way of making some sort of small, much needed connection with the man who had been such a big part of both of their lives.

He was more than happy to come and get it. Though he had insisted he didn't want to inconvenience her, she had insisted that he wasn't and they had both agreed. Following his dinner with the Mayor, he would stop by to collect the bottle.

The bottle that now sat on the bar that split her living room from her kitchen—the bottle she had pulled from their liquor cabinet that morning before going to the office.

Her nose crinkled as she pulled a cold slice of pizza from the fridge, thinking about the dark, warm liquid Bishop had loved to drink. It really made so much more sense for her to pass off this bottle to somebody who would at least enjoy it. Taking her food and a glass of wine to the couch, she turned on the news and let it run in the background as she ate; listening to music and watching the headlines as they flashed on the screen.

"In Royal news today, Prince Harry—the Duke of Sussex—is in town on the first leg of his US Tour. Tonight he is dining with the Mayor's Office at a benefit for Youth Sports League and tomorrow he will be out with the young people the League impacts the most; playing and running and most certainly showing the charm that has won the hearts of many fans..." Maddie snickered as she watched the news anchor give a few more short details about the trip and pass it on to weather. Despite what would go down as probably one of the roughest, most talked about years of his life, Harry seemed to be bouncing back just fine.

Finishing her pizza, she held onto her glass of wine and leaned back on the couch, looking around her home. She had thought it would be difficult to return here, to come back to this place that had been her home. In fact, she had avoided it for longer than she should have. But when she finally
found the strength and the will to come back to the city that had been theirs, she found something amazing. Instead of memories that made her cry, that made her sink into a dark, depressing grief—instead of thoughts that made her sad and upset—she found him.

He was there, in their space; his memory, his spirit—it surrounded her in this home that they had created together. And what she had always known to be true when he was alive, was also true when he was dead—wherever the spirit of Bishop was, it was nearly impossible to stay in the dark, heavy space for too long.

Don't misunderstand. She had grieved. Deeply. Heavily. Darkly. She had grieved for her lost husband and all that they would miss out on—the family they would never have, the growing old they would never experience, the laugh that came from deep inside of him that she could never quite replicate. She had sunk into the despair that she knew was coming.

And she remembered him.

She remembered his life and his spirit and his love for her.

She would smell his clothes and sit in his space and read the letter he had left for her over and over...and eventually, eventually, she pulled out. She stood up and she began her life again.

Here, in their home, with remnants of Bishop still around her, she stood up and continued on. And just like the office that had been his, this space had evolved into something that was hers all while holding onto the essentials that were him. Taking her plate and her glass to the kitchen, she stretched her arms up over her head and padded down to her bedroom. She had a little bit of time before he arrived and she wanted to run a brush through her hair and maybe splash some water on her face.

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When the buzzer rang out into her apartment, announcing her expected guest, Maddie tipped back the last of her wine and padded over to the door in a pair of Bishop's large, striped socks.

"Dr. Bishop, there's a Harry Sussex here to see you." The voice belonged to Andrew Martinez, a younger man who must have just began his night shift.

"Thank you Andrew," Maddie smiled as she pushed the button and waited.

There was a part of her that thought for a moment that she should be nervous. She hadn't seen him since that morning in France when they had let Bishop's ashes go off the cliff that the two boys had played on as children. Though she had read about him over the last year and a half, though she had most certainly seen coverage on the news of all that had happened in his life—and she assumed he had heard the same of her—this was the first time they would be in the same room. But the small sliver of anxiety she had felt early had melted away though and there was no nervousness left.

Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was being back in her home or the late hour or the fact that this was something that Bishop had explicitly asked for—whatever it was, her nerves were relaxed as she waited for the soft knock on the door.

And when it came, she smiled, took a breath and opened it up.

And there he stood; the remnants of his suit still in tact; minus the tie and a few top buttons. He
had the same wild red hair, though maybe a little less of it, and the same blue eyes. He stood tall in front of her, biting at his bottom lip in the only show of nervous habit as he smiled.

"Maddie," he blinked his eyes as he took her in.

"Harry Wales."

"Actually," his lips curled up just slightly. "It's Sussex now."

"Ha. Yes it is," she laughed lightly, caught up in the moment for just a second before she shook her head and stepped to the side, glancing behind him. "Jim would you like to come in and look around?"

"Yes Ma'am," he smiled, stepping around Harry and into the house, passing Maddie with kind eyes and a nod. "Thank you."

"So..." Maddie's arms crossed over her chest as she turned back to Harry. "How was dinner with the Mayor?"

"Long," he chuckled.

"And you're playing...basketball? In the morning?" Her eyes squinted as she tried to remember.

"I'm going to try," he nodded. "How did you know that?"

"The news," she gestured towards the living room.

"Of course," he shrugged. "Of course... Your hair, it's darker."

"It is," she reached up to smooth over the brown locks she now donned. "I went for something a little different."

"It's nice."

"Thank you."

As a quiet settled over them, their eyes met and Maddie smiled; a genuine, honest smile. And he returned it; without reservation, without hidden motive or agenda. And it was honestly the nicest, simplest gesture he had seen in quite some time.

"Hey listen...thank you," his voice cracked a bit as he spoke. "For letting me come over tonight. You didn't have to and..."

"It's not a problem," Maddie shook her head as Jim rejoined them. "It's not a problem at all."

"I'll just be down in the car," Jim spoke to Harry before turning a nod and a smile to Maddie. "Dr. Bishop."

"Jim," Maddie grinned, nodding as he stepped out and Harry stepped in. "Right this way..."

Harry followed behind her into her home, his eyes taking in the space as he moved through it; seeing evidence of her and Bishop everywhere he looked. He noticed the touches that were hers,
the pieces that had been his and he smiled when he caught the wedding picture hanging up in the living room.

He smiled. Never in his life would he have imagined that particular reaction to that particular memory. But he did. The last year and a half of his life had changed his perspective.

Losing Bishop had changed him. And for some crazy reason, he felt at ease here in this space. So he smiled and let it be what it was.

"Here we are," Maddie, oblivious to what was going through Harry's mind, gestured to the bottle with a flourish. "One bottle of Scotch."

"Wow..." Harry's voice came out in a breath, his eyes full of awe and reverence as he looked down at it. "There it is."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed at his expression. "Yes. There it is. I have to tell you, I'm a little...shocked I guess that he left you some bottle of Scotch."

"Well, it's not just some bottle of Scotch, now is it," Harry lifted his eyebrows as he took the bottle carefully from the counter.

"What?" Maddie's eyes narrowed as she looked to him; amusement and confusion evident in her expression and her voice.

"It's not just any old bottle of Scotch..." he snickered, his hands running over the smooth glass. "It's..." He didn't know how to describe it truthfully—memories of his best friend were hitting him over and over again; a relentless wave of nostalgia.

"It's what?" Maddie's forehead scrunched up. "I don't understand..." Her eyes shifted to the bottle.

"Ah," Harry smiled, snapping back from the past and looking to her with a bit of a smirk. "Well, Bishop clearly never told you the story behind how he...acquired this particular bottle."

"No," she shook her head slowly. "He did not tell me a story about buying a bottle of Scotch."

"That's because he didn't just buy it..." Harry could feel the warmth in his cheeks as he remembered.

"He didn't?"

"Ha, no..." Harry rubbed at his chin and she could tell he was thinking something over; making a decision. "How about this," he took a breath and a chance. "How about we open this up, have a drink...to Bishop. And I'll tell you a story that is guaranteed to make you laugh."

"I don't know..." Maddie smiled as she crossed her arms over her chest; eyeing him carefully. "I generally hate Scotch."

"I'm sure Bishop appreciated that," the amusement danced across his face.

"He did," Maddie laughed.

"Well I think you might like this one," Harry held the bottle up and raised his eyebrows
questioningly. "Come on. Have a glass of Scotch and a laugh...in memory of your husband?" And just like that they both smiled; the memory of him, of his laughter drifting into both of their minds. And if Maddie was honest, she was actually thrilled to have somebody there who had known him, who understood his spirit and just how much she missed him. Even if it was Harry.

"Well when you put it that way," she softened and nodded. "I'll get some glasses." She stepped around him towards the bar just off the kitchen.

"They should be the ones with the..." Harry called after her but she cut him off.

"I know which glasses to serve Scotch in Harry," she laughed lightly as she tossed a look over her shoulder. "I was married to the man."

"Sorry," he chuckled and stepped back, looking over the bottle.

"Do you want whiskey rocks?" She called out as she gathered two glasses into her hand.

"No thank you," He shook his head.

"Yeah, he wouldn't either," Maddie returned with the glasses. "He bought them for me thinking that it might help me enjoy it but..."

"No such luck?" Harry supplied.

"Not even close," she laughed. "Want to have a seat in the living room?" She nodded her head just behind him.

"Sure," he agreed, following her lead into the wide open room; his eyes widening at the view from the windows. "Wow...that's amazing."

"I know," Maddie grinned as she paused to look, to savor it. "He really knew how to pick 'em, huh?"

"He absolutely did," Harry agreed; his eyes drifting from the window to her to the bottle in her hand. His heart swelling as he thought of his friend, of all the history in that room alone. With a deep breath he looked down at the bottle and in a low voice almost meant for only him, he smiled. "Alright Bishop....let's do this." He twisted the cap off and sat it down on the low table next to him.

"Here you go," Maddie held out one of the glasses.

"Thank you," he took it from her and poured the warm liquid into the glass; his smile pulling higher as the Scotch level rose. "Here you are..." He handed the glass back to her, taking the empty one and doing the same.

"Thank you," Maddie smiled and held her glass gingerly in her fingers, watching as he finished his pour, setting the bottle onto the table before he stood upright and took a deep breath.

There was a moment, a flash in his eyes that made them darker, deeper; heavier. There was a slight waver in his smile that told Maddie that even though he was happy to be there, even though this was meant to be a warm moment between friends—there was a sadness underneath, shared grief at a great loss. Her eyes glossed over just a bit as she raised her glass up and smiled encouragingly.
Swallowing back the emotion that pulled at him, Harry cleared his throat and toasted his best friend. "To live in the hearts we leave behind is not to die."

"Perfect," Maddie blinked at the tears and clinked her glass to his. "Salute."

"Salute."

Together they brought their glasses to their lips and together they drank. The smooth, warm liquid tickled her throat as it went down and when she pulled her glass away, Harry laughed at the expression on her face.

"He must have loved that," Harry nodded to the way her lips pursed, the way her nose crinkled.

"He absolutely did," Maddie narrowed her eyes at him and lowered to the couch beside them. "Though I will admit this bottle is better than most."

"Well it should be," Harry laughed, following her lead as he sat next to her. "It cost fifty thousand dollars."

"Jesus Christ!" Maddie's hand flew to her lips. "Why in the hell are you wasting it on me?! I don't even like Scotch!" She held her glass out to him.

"Come on," he chuckled at her response, shaking his head at the glass in her hand. "Wasting it? What am I going to do with it? Serve it to people who didn't know him? Hold onto it and let it gather dust?" He took another sip. "No way. I'm going to drink it with his Scotch-hating wife and I'm going to tell you a story that...apparently...he never told anyone."

"Okay," Maddie pulled the glass back and settled more comfortably onto the couch. "This I want to hear."

"Okay," Harry took a breath and leaned back, turning his body slightly towards hers as he brought up the memory in his own mind. His eyes crinkled at the sides as his smile pulled wide across his face. "We were thirteen...."

"The story of how you two ended up with a fifty thousand dollar bottle of Scotch begins with 'we were thirteen'?"

"Mmm Hmm," Harry nodded as he sipped.

"I think I'm going to need more," she rolled her eyes and held the glass out to him; watching as he poured, trying not to think of the outrageous price as she sighed. "Okay. You were thirteen." With a wide grin and the mischievous look in his eyes, Harry opened his mouth and began.

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She wasn't sure exactly what it was that made her feel so warm that evening; the Scotch they had been drinking or the wild laughter his story had evoked, or maybe just the simple fact that for the first time in a long time, she felt at ease and familiar and happy. Remembering Bishop did that to her, remembering him with his best friend made it even bigger, even better. For all that had gone on between the three of them, she knew this to be true. Harry loved Bishop; nearly as much as she did. And Bishop loved him back. And sitting together on that couch, drinking through over half a bottle of outrageously expensive Scotch telling tales of the Bishop they both knew so well...it made
"You were not, were NOT dressed up as women!" She clutched at her stomach as the laughter rolled from her body; her glass balancing in her hand.

"We were!" Harry insisted; wide eyes and a loud laugh. "We had to be! They don't just let thirteen year old boys into estate auctions!"

"Of course they don't," she wiped at her eyes and took another sip. "Certainly not internationally recognized Princes."

"Certainly not!" Harry's eyes danced as he remembered.

"But tell me this," Maddie leaned in. "What did you do when it was time to pay? Certainly they didn't accept a check or... I don't even know WHAT from two boys dressed...poorly I would imagine...in drag."

"Ha!" Harry clapped his hand to his knee with a shake of his head. "No, no, no. No they would not." He leaned to the table, pouring more Scotch into both of their glasses. "Bishop paid cash."

"Cash." Maddie blinked; her voice going flat. "Bishop had fifty thousand dollars cash."

"More than that," Harry shrugged. "But that's what his winning bid was."

"And nobody questioned from where exactly he had fifty thousand dollars cash.""People don't question cash Maddie," Harry met her eyes, loving the conversation, loving the back and forth. "Or at least they didn't that day."

"Of course," she groaned at the pure hedonism in all of it. "And then what? He paid for the bottle and what? Called a cab back to the city?"

"For the most part," Harry nodded. "We had a driver take us back to London."

"And you didn't drink it," she arched her eyebrows.

"Nah," Harry shook his head, growing more and more calm and quiet as he remembered. "We were young and feeling bold and nostalgic and..." He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, turning to meet her eyes. "We made plans to drink it the year we turned fifty."

Maddie's eyes blinked as her emotions stirred. "Why fifty?"

"We thought that was old..." He chuckled; low and soft. "We had no idea really..."

She sucked in her breath and when she spoke her voice was quiet and soothing and it made his heart ache. "Harry, why didn't you wait? To drink it?"

"Because," he turned wide, emotion filled eyes to her. "This is better. Drinking it with you is...it's the closest I'll ever get to drinking it with him. And I really can't drink it alone."

"Fair enough," she stumbled over the words, fighting to control the way it all made her want to cry. But this wasn't supposed to be a sad night; this was supposed to be a happy accident of a night. So
she held her glass out to him and nodded to it. "I'm empty. More please?"

He nodded, taking a deep breath as he reached for it. "Though I'm not entirely sure he would be a big fan of me getting his wife drunk off of it..."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, watching as the humor returned to Harry's face. "It's okay, I've got my eye on you and he knew better than anyone...I can handle myself."

"Of course you can," Harry laughed and handed her glass back. "Now..." He settled back on the couch. "I think it's your turn."

"My turn?" She spoke into her glass; eyebrows lifted.

"Mmm," he nodded, taking another sip. "Surely you have a tale or two I haven't heard."

"Surely," Maddie nodded, her smile growing smug as her eyes flashed to his. "You sure you want to hear the stories I have?" An eyebrow arched as she alluded to their history; to the paths they had crossed.

With certainty, with absolute conviction, Harry held her eyes and nodded. "Yes. Yes I really really do."

"Okay..." She took in a breath, allowing her mind to drift back over her years with Bishop. Turning her body to face his, she ran a hand through her hair and smiled; wide and wistful and full of the memory and she began.

Maddie wiped at the tears that pressed from eyes; laughter coming loud from the both of them. "Jesus..." She sighed, tipping her head on the back of the couch; her smile seemingly a permanent fixture as she turned to look at him. "He was just so..."

"Hilarious?" Harry offered. "Crazy? Wild?"

"Full of life," Maddie sighed, looking down at her glass with barely a sip left inside. "He just...he really lived you know?"

"I do know," Harry nodded; his smile softening as he looked down at her. The space between them grew quiet and heavy and they both knew where the conversation was headed, that eventually it was going to surface. "Can I...Can I just tell you something? Even though it's probably going to make you cry?"

"Ha!" She barked out a laugh, already fighting back the tears that were pushing to make an appearance. "I don't think he would appreciate you making me cry."

"He absolutely would not," Harry shook his head, in complete agreement. "But God Maddie...the words you said at his service...about how he must have just lived a full life because he lived his so much bigger and better than the rest of us..."

"Hmmm..." She smiled and shrugged. "I had to tell myself something to...get through it."

"I know," he swallowed back his own emotions. "But...I think you were right. He just...he went for
"It, didn't he."

"He really did," Maddie nodded, taking in a deep breath to try to calm herself.

"Your words resonated with me that day," Harry drained his glass and sat it on the table in front of him. "Everything you said...it was like you were saying it right to me..." He chuckled and looked at her. "How ridiculously conceited is that?"

"Well," she smiled and shrugged. "Some of it was meant to be right to you." She turned to completely face him.

Harry nodded, his hand rubbing over his face as he struggled. And then with a wavery voice, he repeated her verbatim. "For those of you sitting here today wondering if he knew how much you loved him, if he knew how much he meant to you, if he knew that the argument you had last month was nothing, if he knew that he held a place in your life, in your heart..." His head dropped then, falling into his hands as the tears came. Even with the smiles and the laughter, the tears came.

"Oh Harry..." Maddie moved then, sliding to sit right next to him; her arm moving around his shoulders, soft and soothing. "He knew. He...God Harry. Those words were meant for you. I didn't want you to think...I don't want you to think that he held onto any sort of grudge with you. I...you have to know that. You have to. He loved you so much, he did and I promise you, I promise you...he knew that you loved him."

"I was such an asshole to him," he sniffed and wiped at his cheeks with the back of his hand. "All he was doing was exactly what I asked him to do and all you were doing was exactly what I forced you to do and I was such a prick to him..." He lifted his head, turning his wide, teary eyes to her.

"He thought so too," Maddie joked, smiling as Harry did. "He understood Harry. He really did. He...he understood. He knew why things had settled the way they did. He was a smart man; a big boy...he knew what he was doing and he knew that it would hurt you and he...God..." She blinked at her tears. "It wasn't easy for him to hurt you like that. It wasn't easy at all...but when you came to his mother's funeral and then to the house in London to see him, when you came to talk..." Maddie took a deep breath. "He walked lighter after that. He breathed easier....." She sniffed. "He knew you loved him Harry and he loved you; very, very much."

"I'm so sorry," Harry shook his head, bringing himself back together; getting it under control. "I...I didn't come here tonight to make you upset."

"You didn't," she shook her head, smiling as her tears slipped from her eyes. "Remembering Bishop doesn't make me upset; it doesn't make me sad..." She chuckled as she wiped at her cheeks.

"Yeah," Harry sighed; nodding his head as he calmed down. "You know he'd kill me for this." He nudged his shoulder to hers.

"For what?"

"For getting you drunk and making you cry," Harry chuckled.

"No way," Maddie shook her head, rubbing her hand up and down his back. "He would love that we're remembering him this way. Taking down a fifty thousand dollar bottle of Scotch and telling stories about him that make us laugh until we cry?! He would LOVE that this was how we were remembering him."
"Ha!" Harry's head pulled back in a laugh. "You're right. You're absolutely right."

"I am," she agreed with a pleased smile. "Come on..." She patted his back. "Don't be so hard on yourself Harry. Things...work out as they are supposed to. And Bishop never stopped loving you. Not once."

"I know," he took a breath and turned his eyes to hers. He knew that. He understood that—but it didn't make it any easier. "You know that I loved him too. You know that even when..." He blinked and shook his head. "Even then I loved him."

"I do know that," she hugged his shoulder. "And he did too."

"Good," Harry smiled and took another deep breath. "Good." He hoped that was true, he had to assume it was. As he remembered the letter he had left him, the letter still at home in his wallet, he pulled his eyes up; looking around the living room, around this place that had been their home. And Maddie could see the shift of his expression when he looked over the mantle. His eyes squinted and his forehead scrunched up and he had just enough Scotch in him to snicker and turn to her. "What in the hell is that?"

Maddie's eyes followed his, though she didn't need to look to know exactly what he was talking about. "Ha!" She laughed, clapping her hands together in front of her. "Oh wow...That, that was Bishop's favorite piece of artwork in the entire world."

"What?" Harry turned to look at her, confusion and amusement fighting for control of his face. "You're kidding."

"Not in the least," Maddie shook her head, growing soft as she thought about it. "Though to be fair, you should know that it was probably his favorite because...well...I painted it for him."

"Ah I see," Harry chuckled. "It's all coming together now...." Rising from the couch, he moved towards it; looking it over with a shake of his head. "Good God, Maddie."

"I know," she laughed, moving to stand next to him. "It was one of the first things I did after...well, after we broke up." She shrugged casually. "One of the first things I did was enroll in this art class and I just, I loved it. It was good for me in so many ways..." Maddie sighed. "Though clearly my talent leaves something to be desired."

"Clearly," Harry laughed.

"Hey!" She smacked his arm.

"Sorry," he rubbed the spot.

"Anyway...this was my first painting and that year I gave it to Bishop for Christmas...to thank him for...everything," she smiled as her mind drifted to that time and place that seemed so far off now. "Anyway. He maintained his abject horrification for months, all while the thing hung in his office in Paris..." She wrapped her arms around herself, smiling as her eyes lifted up to it. "And then when we moved to New York, it came with him. And there it is."

"There it is," Harry nodded, studying her for a moment; debating his next words. "You know...if there ever was a physical representation of just how much he loved you...this is it."
"Ha!" Maddie laughed; loud and wide. "Oh God. It's so true!"

"Just hanging right here in your living room," Harry shook his head.

"For everyone to see," Maddie sighed.

"Exactly like he loved you—right out in the open, for everyone to see."

"No shame," Maddie agreed; her heart warming. "No regrets."

"None at all," Harry nodded; sharing the look in her eyes, the soft understanding they both held onto. "I'm really happy you had him Maddie."

"God me too," she exhaled. "Me too."

"Yeah...." Harry sighed and turned to look around the room.

"We have to finish it up," Maddie nudged him with her elbow as she pointed to the nearly empty bottle on the table. "We can't leave it like that."

"Okay," Harry nodded, stretching to reach it as they returned to the couch. "Here we go...." He poured the liquid into their glasses, trying his best to divide up the remaining before he sat the empty bottle back on the table and sat back.

With their shoulders touching and their feet propped up on the table, they let the words fall silent, clinked their glasses together and drank. Maddie was the first to finish, swallowing as she turned her glass upside down on the table and smiling wide.

"Done," Harry was right behind her, following her lead and setting his glass upside down next to hers.

"Done," Maddie echoed, turning her smile to him as she bumped her shoulder to his. "You okay?"

"Mmmmm," he nodded, his arm moving around to her back; rubbing softly up and down. "Are you okay?"

"Absolutely," Maddie sighed, leaning into him just a bit. "I actually...I had no idea how much I needed something like this..."

"Yeah?" He lifted his eyebrows with a soft smile.

"Yeah," she nodded, thrilled at the memories that had been evoked, at the laughter that had come. "In fact..." Maddie sat up with wide eyes as she caught sight of the clock. "Oh my God!"

"What?" Harry's eyes tracked her, his head resting on the back of her couch.

"Harry..." She nudged him, pointing to the clock on the wall behind him. "It's three in the morning."

"What?" He laughed, pulling his wrist to his face; squinting as he read his watch. "Jesus...how did that happen?"
"I blame you," she pointed at him. "And the Scotch."

"Ha!" He moved to sit up, his hands clapping against his knees. "I guess I can go ahead and take the hit for this one." He turned to look at her then; soft smile and tired eyes. "I appreciate you drinking it with me though."

"It was—and I can say this with a straight face—absolutely my pleasure," she returned his smile, his sentiment. "He would have been very proud of the way we took down that bottle."

"Yes," Harry nodded with a chuckle. "He would have..." Harry looked her over, collecting his memories from the night, thinking about how great it had been to be there with her; not wanting it to end. "I really hate to be a downer but I think that it's time for me to call it a night."

"Of course," Maddie nodded. "Do you have a full schedule tomorrow?"

"I do," he thought it over. "Breakfast with the Urban Youth League and then a basketball game in the afternoon."

"Breakfast?" She lifted her eyebrows, already feeling sorry for his quick turnaround.

"Yes," he groaned knowing it was going to be a rough morning for him.

"Well...at least basketball is your strong suit," she couldn't help the joke, or the wink that came with it.

"Ouch," Harry's hand clutched at his chest, the way she looked at him drawing heat and emotion to the surface; confusing him for a blink of a moment. "You have to make fun?"

"I do," she grinned. "At least a little bit. Come on Sussex," she patted his knee and stood up. "Let me walk you to the door."

"Okay," he sighed, reaching for the empty bottle of Scotch and rising to follow her through the room. "Do you mind if I keep this?" He held it up as they neared the door.

"Of course not," she shook her head. "It's all yours. He left it to you."

"Thank you," Harry nodded, his voice dropping as his meaning deepened. "I meant it Maddie. Thank you. For....for letting me come over, for letting me come in, for having a drink..."

"A drink?" She snickered. "Try twelve."

"Thank you..." He laughed along with her. "Thank you for tonight."

"You're welcome," she smiled wide; her cheeks pink from the alcohol and laughter. "I had a really, really nice time."

"Me too," he agreed, growing the slightest bit nervous as he looked down at his shoes; unsure as to exactly how a moment like this was supposed to go. They had once meant a great deal to each other—still did in many ways—but they hadn't spent a night together like this in so long and they probably wouldn't see each other for a very long time.
When his eyes lifted from the floor to meet hers, his breath caught in his throat at the way she was looking back; bright, happy eyes and a genuine smile. And when she stepped forward and moved her hands to his shoulders, he felt his heart catch. "Good night Harry," she spoke softly as she leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Seeing you, doing this was just...perfect." When she moved to kiss his other cheek, his instincts took over. Before he could stop himself, before he could remind himself why it might not be a good idea, why it might not be welcomed, his arms were moving around her and pulling her tight and he was hugging her.

For the first time in a handful of years, he was hugging Maddie.

And she, with an easy familiarity, was hugging him back.

And it was the best he had felt in as long as he could remember.

"Thank you," he whispered into her hair; his emotions barely teetering on the edge. "Thank you..."

"Of course," Maddie smiled into his shoulder, letting her senses take him in; his touch, his smell.

"Take care of yourself Harry."

"You too Maddie," he turned to kiss her cheek before he, reluctantly, let her go. "You too."

Maddie smiled and stepped back. "You'll be okay getting home?"

"Yes," he nodded. "I won't be driving."

"Good," she laughed. "Good."

"Okay then," he reached for the door handle and turned a smile back to her. "Goodnight Maddie."

"Goodnight Harry," she hugged her arms across her middle and watched as he opened the door and stepped through it.

With a sigh of a laugh and a groan from the way her head was already processing all the Scotch, Maddie locked her door behind him and made her way down the hall to bed; her heart and her soul just full of warmth. This had been a night exactly, exactly like Bishop would have wanted. She and Harry hadn't even talked about what their lives had been like since they lost him, hadn't even touched on all that had fallen on him or where she had been since Bishop had died—instead they had come together, put aside all of the past and they remembered this man that they had both loved.

Bishop. And it was his smile and his eyes and his voice and his laughter and his voice that flooded her mind as she drifted off to sleep that night.
One of the side effects of working part time was that Maddie had a considerable amount of time to herself. For the most part, that had been a blessing.

Following Bishop's death the previous August, she hadn't gone back to work. She couldn't go back to work. She pulled inside of herself and knew that there was no way she would be able to be of service to anyone. As she began to come out of the deep dark depression, she had looked around at her options. There was a part of her that thought about running, about immersing herself in something so big it would swallow up some of the pain she still felt; much like she did when her father had passed.

But running to Bendal wasn't really an option any longer. So she turned to the lessons she had learned living with Bishop and she began to travel. She kept to the ground for a long chunk of time; cars and trains taking her around the continent; into Canada, down to Florida, into the mountains. She spent time reading and writing and taking in these beautiful natural wonders. She met new people and she spent entire spans of days keeping only to herself. But slowly, and with the spirit of her husband right along with her, she began to seek out the parts of her life that made her feel whole and alive again.

As the Spring dawned new life, Maddie returned to New York and decided to teach a class—just one over a four week session in the summer. It was good to be back, good to interact with the students and open her mind up to learning again—to teaching. But as the class came to an end, she wasn't sure that was exactly what she wanted to be doing. And then her father-in-law had come to see her. He and Michael came for a long weekend and somewhere over reminiscing and checking in, he made an offer that she simply couldn't walk away from.

So she had picked up at the New York office of Bishop Industries; focusing solely on the charitable side of the enormous enterprise. It was perfect for her. It wasn't a full time position, allowing her to continue to travel, to grow, to come out of the dark. Allowing her to keep all of those elements in her life that had been an integral part of the healing process.

And Maddie knew she was lucky—blessed really. When Bishop had left her everything, he had really left her the opportunity to grieve him, to miss him and to heal and begin to live without him. He had left her the means and the opportunity and, in the way he had lived and loved, he had left her the spirit she would need to go through this.

It hadn't been easy. It still wasn't easy. And there were most certainly times in her day, in her nights, when the heaviness was nearly too much. She would look to the spot he had occupied in their bed, or she would reach for the phone to call and tell him a story that would make him laugh or to seek his advice and the loss of him would wash over her again and again.

And she would leave the office early or she would go back to whatever hotel or cabin she was staying in and she would crawl into her bed and she would cry.

And eventually, eventually...she would rise again.

That's exactly what she did the next day. With a slight headache left over from the Scotch she had drank the night before, Maddie woke and showered and dressed and as she poured a cup of coffee
and looked forward to a relaxed day with a handful of errands, she took notice of the smile that had been on her face since she had opened her eyes.

"Did you see what happened here last night?" She spoke out into her home, chuckling as she thought of her husband. "Told you I would drink Scotch once you were gone..." She looked to the tulip mouthed glasses still waiting in the sink for her to hand wash them and put them away. "Fifty thousand dollars..." She shook her head. "Jamie Bishop." With a deep breath that slipped into a sigh as she thought of him, as she thought of the great humor he would have gained knowing about last night, knowing that she had helped Harry finish an entire bottle. He would have loved every single thing about it.

He would have loved to have been there.

Her eyes welled up with tears, tears that brought a smile to her lips—memories of him bringing up so many more emotions than just sadness. One of the side effects of working part time meant that Maddie had a considerable amount of time to herself. And sometimes that meant she would find herself lost in thought for longer than she wanted.

"Okay..." She took a deep breath and let it out. "Okay." With a nod of her head and a sniff at her tears, she held onto her mug and reached for a piece of fruit from the bowl on her counter and shifted her attention to her grocery list. There were still things to be done. Taking her list and her breakfast into the living room, she flipped on the TV and let the news play in the background.

And somewhere in the middle of her brainstorm about dinners for the week, about where she would be and what she might be hungry for, the anchor said his name and pulled her from her thoughts.

"Prince Harry is out in full force again this morning. Having breakfast with the Urban Youth League before heading to the court for a bit of basketball. When asked about it this morning on his way into breakfast, he had this to say,

'If history has any bearing on my current performance, we can all rest assured that the young people I'm playing with today will find a great, and easy victory with me.' With his trademark smile and a wave to his fans, he was off to breakfast—looking to be in top form, if I do say so myself..."

Maddie couldn't help the snort of laughter that came from inside, any more than she could help the way she studied the ten seconds of film looking for signs of the hangover she assumed he had. But the anchor had been right. Whatever it was about the way he pulled himself together, he did look in top form.

"Asshole," she joked, looking down at her own slightly rumpled self and reaching for her tea as she turned her attention back to her list.

Or more accurately tried to turn her attention back to her list. Because somewhere in her mind, in a place that was growing larger and larger, what she was really thinking of was how nice the night before had been. She was thinking about how great it was to have spent time with somebody who had known Bishop, who had loved Bishop. She was thinking about how great it was to have spent time with Harry—Harry who was so much more like the Harry she had remembered from long ago.

She was thinking about Harry.
Her eyes drifted back up to the paused screen as her mind wandered.

She knew he had a full day ahead of him and she knew, thanks to the mostly smitten anchor, that he would be in town until tomorrow afternoon when he would fly to DC. And she wondered...easily and casually...what he was doing that night for dinner.

And then she caught herself. "Madeline Bishop," she laughed, shaking her head as she pulled it together. "Come on. Focus."

And she did. For now, she focused; on the list, on her errands, on what laid ahead of her that day. But eventually, at the store, walking through the aisles, choosing a pastry for breakfast...eventually those thoughts would return. Her mind would wander to Harry and his evening plans and though she tried to shrug it off, tried to dismiss it, it was pervasive and as soon as she had unpacked all of her shopping items, she found herself looking down at her cell phone debating internally over her next move.

But one of the things that had stuck with her since the loss of Bishop was that she no longer allowed herself to go back and forth over the shoulds or should nots that might stand in her way of doing something she wanted. She had tried to consciously stop overthinking things, stop trying to stop herself from something that might make her smile—no matter how small.

So in truth, it only took a few minutes before she took a deep breath and swiped her finger across the screen. Finding the phone number he had called from the night before, she dialed and pressed the phone to her ear, looking out at the city below her as she waited for him to answer.

"Hello?" He answered quicker than she had thought he would, sounding a bit breathless and surprised.

"Harry?" She smiled.

"Maddie?" He was surprised.

"Yes. I'm sorry," she chuckled, turning away from the windows as her cheeks flushed just a little. "I'm sorry. I hope it's okay that I called. I know you're busy and..."

"No, no," he was quick to interrupt her. "I have a bit of a break before we head over to the hospital and...is everything okay?"

"Of course," she nodded, taking a breath and swallowing back a bit of nervousness. "I just thought that maybe...I don't know. I..." He let out a soft, amused chuckle. "I just thought that maybe..." She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror as she passed by and she stopped in her tracks; taking in her reflection. Her cheeks were pink, her smile wide and for just a moment it threw her. "Maybe..."

Sensing her hesitation, Harry spoke up. "Can I confess something?"

"Sure..." She blinked as she watched herself.

"I...ha..." He let out a soft, amused chuckle. "I have debated over calling you for about an hour."

"You have?" Her eyes pulled away from the mirror, her attention diverted.

"I have," he breathed. "I thought that maybe...I don't know. I..." He was having a hard time with it
"I had a great time with you last night; laughing and sharing memories and...it felt nice."

"It did," she agreed with a small smile.

"And I thought...I don't know... I am in New York tonight and after I'm done here today, I'm free and I thought it would be nice to spend it with an old friend." He sucked in a breath and swallowed.

"I thought the very same thing," she admitted with a grin.

"You did?" Harry let out a breath.

"I did," she nodded. "That's why I called. I thought maybe...I don't know, maybe you would like to have dinner or something."

"I would!" His voice perked up. "I would love to have dinner."

"Good, good," Maddie sank onto the couch as Harry continued on.

"What would you like to do?" He asked, thinking over the options. "I mean, you could come over to the hotel and I could order something up or we could go out somewhere, though I suppose that could get...."

"Interesting?" Maddie offered.

"Exactly."

"I was actually thinking maybe you could come over here," she glanced around the room, her eyes settling on her little French man in a box. "I can cook something for dinner and that way we don't have to deal with anybody seeing and assuming and..."

"I think that would be perfect," Harry appreciated her thoughtfulness, knowing that all it took was one photo and they would be immersed in a craziness neither of them wanted or needed. "Can I bring anything?"

"You mean like a fifty thousand dollar bottle of scotch?" She joked bringing just the kind of laughter to the moment to wash away any awkwardness.

"Yes," he laughed as he shook his head. "Or dessert?"

"Sure," Maddie shrugged. "You can bring something for dessert. What time are you done?"

"Six. I can stop by my hotel and change and then come over about seven?"

"Works for me."

"Great. I'll see you then."

"I'll see you then."

"And Maddie..." Harry hung onto her for one more beat. "Thank you for calling."
"You're welcome..." Maddie smiled and took a breath. "I'll see you soon."

As the time grew closer and closer to seven and Maddie moved around preparing for dinner, she found herself growing the slightest bit nervous.

And the nervousness made her feel completely silly.

She had gathered ingredients for dinner. She had chopped a salad. She had tidied up and then she had showered and changed, started a fire and put music on over the system; sending it throughout the entire apartment.

As she walked back through the kitchen, she passed by the small tulip mouthed glasses, washed and dried and sitting on the bar and she slowed to a stop. Her mind drifted to the night before; to the bottle of Scotch and the laughter and the memories.

And she smiled; wide and with an airy sigh.

She was silly for feeling nervous—she knew that. But she did. The night before they had had a reason to get together; to drink the bottle of Scotch and remember the man they both loved.

But this night, they had no reason. None other than that they wanted to spend time together.

And maybe that's what made her nervous.

Her eyes traveled over the bar; the well-stocked masterpiece that Bishop had crafted. She looked past that to the wine room just off the kitchen and she debated opening a bottle; her mind already going through the inventory, mentally selecting a bottle that would go well with what she had planned to cook. A side-effect of being married to Bishop; she had gained considerable knowledge about wine and liquor and she knew she had some of the finest in her collection.

Minus the fifty-thousand dollar bottle of Scotch she had finished off with his former best friend.

Her smile pulled wide and easy as she thought of him. He would have loved to have seen them both that night; would have loved to have been there to watch it happen.

She let her mind linger there for just a moment before she took a deep breath and tore her eyes from the wine room, from the bar. If she started thinking about Bishop she might be stuck there all night and while that was a wonderful place for her to be, she knew she needed to step out of the past. At least a little bit.

The knock on the door came fairly soon, drawing her from her thoughts and the casual dining area off the kitchen where she had been setting up. Sliding the last plate into place, she moved through her home and without stopping to be nervous, she pulled open the door.

And damn it if her heart didn't thump just the tiniest bit.

"Hi," she smiled; bright and easy.

"Hi," he seemed tired; happy but tired.
Maddie's eyes held his for just a beat and then slid just behind him. "Jim, would you like to come in? Do your thing?"

"Yes Ma'am," Jim nodded as he stepped around Harry. "Thank you," he smiled as he passed her, walking into her apartment for a quick sweep.

"I brought a cheesecake," Harry held up a bag in one hand and a bottle in the other. "And wine." Maddie chuckled.

"I'm impressed you feel like drinking again after last night."

"Ha," Harry laughed, his eyes flashing as he remembered. "I spent an entire day working that off."

"Ah yes," Maddie nodded as Jim reappeared.

"Everything's clear," he smiled and stepped by them.

"Thank you Jim," Harry smiled.

"Would you like to join us for dinner?" Maddie asked as he moved out of the door.

"No thank you," he shook his head; polite and kind. "I'll just be downstairs if you need anything." Harry nodded a smile to his long-time protection officer before he turned his attention back to Maddie; following her inside.

"Wow," she joked as she shut the door behind him. "He's really going to leave you up here with me all alone for the second night in a row? Think that's a good idea?"

Harry laughed as he walked further inside. "Apparently you're not a high threat."

"I think your security is slipping," Maddie snickered as she lead him into her place.

"It's quite possible."

"I hope you're okay with pasta," she called out to him as they moved into the kitchen. "It's a homemade sauce and it's not too bad."

"Pasta is perfect," Harry smiled as he followed along, his senses perking up at the smell of what she was cooking. "It smells great in here."

"Thanks," Maddie smiled, reaching for the bag with the cheesecake. "Let me put this in the fridge..." She glanced down at the bottle in his other hand. "You want to open that up?"

"Sure," he nodded, looking down at it and then over to the bar.

"The corkscrew is in the drawer and the glasses are hanging up behind..." She slipped the dessert into the fridge and turned to watch him as he moved through her home. With an easy familiarity about him, he pulled the opener from the drawer and went about opening up bottle. "So..." She moved back to the stove and stirred. "How did today go?"

"Really well," he smiled as he pulled the cork from the bottle and turned around for the glasses. "After breakfast, I was able to sneak in some time at the Veterans' hospital..." He reached out to
take the dressing. "And the afternoon was playing basketball with the kids..." He tucked the bottle under one arm and brought the glasses back into the kitchen. "Here we go."

"Thank you," Maddie grinned as she took a glass from him. "Sounds like a perfect Harry day."

"It was," he nodded, growing more and more relaxed in this space. "It's been an incredible day," he met her eyes as he smiled. "From start to finish."

Holding his gaze, Maddie smiled back, trying not to let how surreal it was to have him there—again—hit her too hard. "Okay...well..." She cleared her throat and reached to turn off the stove. "I'll bring the pasta if you'll grab the salad..." She nodded her head to the bowl on the counter.

"Got it," Harry did as she asked, scooping up the dressing and a plate with sliced garlic bread on it as he did.

Harry followed her over to the small, cozy dining table she had set and though it was cold outside, the fire and the lighting and the music that surrounded them made it warm inside. And even though he was tired, exhausted really—even though he had been nervous about coming—he knew it was the right thing to do. He felt good there; easy and at home.

With Maddie.

Taking a deep breath and shaking his head at this small voice in the back of his mind, he took the seat that was clearly his and he settled in. Knowing this was likely the last time he would see her for quite a while, he was going to enjoy the evening with an old friend.

"So tell me..." Harry swallowed his bite and reached for his drink. "What exactly have you been up to since I last saw you? I think you were...teaching classes at Columbia?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded. When Bishop had died, she had just made the switch. "I was at Columbia...." She smiled as her mind drifted back to how Bishop had encouraged her to make that change in her life.

"Are you still there?" Harry's eyebrows lifted as he took a sip.

"Yes...no..." She laughed. "Kind of." Reaching for her own glass, she shrugged. "I took last fall off and..." She shook her head as her lips curled down for just a moment, an instant they both understood. "And I took the Spring off...but this summer I taught one class."

"And now?"

"No," she shook her head and looked down at her food as she scooped up a bite. "I loved teaching, I really did and had things...been different I would probably still be doing it full time but..." She shrugged her shoulders. "Is it crazy that losing him made me want to be less...tied down?" Her eyes slid back up to his. "Less likely to...settle into the methodical? Into one spot or one thing or..."

"No," his hand stopped midway to his mouth. "I don't think it's crazy."

"Hmmm," she smiled and took a bite, processing it in her mind. "I just can't imagine the routine stuff right now; grading papers and creating lesson plans and assigning chapters and...I don't know...I'll probably continue to pick up classes here and there but I don't know that I'll ever go back to it in that way again."
"Well okay," Harry accepted her explanation without question. She made more sense to him than he imagined she knew.

"Okay," Maddie nodded and reached for her glass.

"So you're not tied down," he continued to eat, watching her as she thought over the last year and a half.

"I'm not," she shook her head. "I spent a lot of time travelling and...soul searching..." She chuckled. "I thought about moving back to Bendal. I thought about buying some unchartered island...hell I thought about building a cabin high in the mountains and becoming a hermit."

"Sure," Harry nodded with a smirk on his face as he imagined her doing all of those things. "But instead..."

"Instead," she continued with a sigh. "Instead I came home and I...I started working for Bishop Industries."

"You did?" He perked up, his eyes flashing wide as he sat down his fork. "You're working for Ian? Doing what?" His eyes narrowed as he tried to place her in some of the real estate transactions he had seen Bishop deal.

"Not what you're thinking," she pointed at him as she took a sip of her drink. "I'm not wheeling and dealing like they do...like he did." She took a breath and smiled. "I'm working on the philanthropic side of things...reading proposals for partnerships with charitable organizations and I just recently started developing an Internship Program."

"An internship program?" Harry's interest and his eyebrows peaked. "Tell me more about that."

"Well," Maddie took a bite and thought for a moment. "It's designed for students in the city who are interested in various aspects of business and real estate. They have to meet certain qualifications and they start with shadowing one of the employees and eventually work into an internship role. I have a few different levels; Graduate, Under-grad, and even High School ready to go for the Spring."

"Wow..." Harry shook his head, impressed. "That's amazing, Maddie. What a great thing to do."

"Well, we'll see how it all unfolds," she blushed just a bit as she shrugged. "Anyway. We're starting that here first. Ian, of course, continues to send me a few things from London and wants to talk about expanding the Internship to the hubs across the pond; London, Paris..." Maddie leaned in and lowered her voice. "I actually think he's trying to lure me closer a little more often but...it allows me to be a part of something that Bishop was a part of and it doesn't tie me down. I'm more about development than every day operations." Her smile tipped higher as her eyes welled up just a bit. "And I can do the work from anywhere...even a well dug hole somewhere..." Glancing away from him, she tried to tame the emotions that surged remembering Bishop's words, Bishop's decision to follow her to New York.

"A hole," Harry snorted as his eyes hazed over, his mind drifting off just a bit before he snapped back. Leaning back in his chair, he looked at her more closely. "Do you like it?"

"I do," she nodded, leaning back in her chair, taking her wine with her. "I would have to say that
these last few months have been...that I'm...ha..." She took a deep breath and smiled, remembering him. "I'm happier these last few months than I have been in quite some time."

"Yeah?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Good," Harry smiled wide, looking content and happy with her answer. "I'm really happy to hear that. And you know...he would be too."

"Yeah," Maddie breathed, feeling her heart clench as she thought of him. "I think you're right. He would."

Harry nodded his head, knowing he was right, and he reached for the bottle to fill their glasses.

"And...how about you?" Maddie looked more pointedly at him. "How have you been? What have you been up to?"

"Ahhh..." The corners of his lips turned down at her question as he adjusted in his chair. "Well. Professionally? I've been wonderful. I left the Army Air Corps for a coordinator position in London."

"Ah yes," Maddie nodded, reaching to refill her glass. "I think I read that somewhere."

"I'm sure," Harry tried to fight the wide smile that pulled at his lips at the thought of her reading up on him.

"They're promoting you to a Major?"

"Not yet," Harry shook his head. "But that's the goal eventually."

"Good," she smiled. "Are you enjoying it?"

"I actually am," she could tell he was surprised by that. "I thought I would hate driving a desk, but it's turned out quite well."

"Good," she smiled; happy to see him happy.

"Good." He met and held her eyes for a moment, amazed at how easy they had fallen back into this; this easy conversation, natural back and forth. "And...I'm sure you've read up on how things have been otherwise."

Maddie's eyes blinked as she thought over the last year. She had read up on how things had been otherwise. She—and everyone else in the world—had watched as Harry's life took hit after hit over this last year. "I read a few things," she admitted with a shrug and then her smile turned down sympathetically, her fingers twisting at the stem of her glass. "I was really sorry to hear about your grandmother."

"Yes," Harry nodded, looking down at his hands as he shifted towards sad. "I was too."

"I watched your father's coronation on TV," she smiled softly. "He handled himself very well; graceful...and regal." She swallowed. "And sad."
"He was...all of those things," Harry nodded, clearing his throat. "He said you sent a card and a note," he gestured to her. "That was sweet of you to do."

"Well...I know what it's like to lose a parent," she smiled sweetly. "And I have always loved your father."

"Yeah," Harry smiled wistfully as memories from years and years ago drifted forward. "He felt the same about you...still does."

"I miss him," she admitted without thinking twice.

"He misses you too," Harry offered. "In fact, the next time Ian lures you to London, you should pop in and say hello."

"Pop in on the King of England?" Maddie snorted into her glass as she said the words. "Can you really just do that?"

"YOU can," Harry nodded, pointing to her with wide eyes. "He'd love to see you."

"Yes well, I'll give it some thought," she shrugged, filing it into her mind for next time.

"You should," Harry laughed, his smile settling easily on his face as they fell into a moment of comfortable quiet. He managed to get in another bite and a couple of sips before he cut into the silence with his standard self-deprecation. "You know you don't have to beat around the bush about it."

"About what?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted and he shook his head, chuckling as he did.

"I'm just saying that we might as well get it out in the open."

"Sorry?" Maddie laughed lightly as Harry reached for the bottle. "Get what out in the open?"

"Surely you've read your fair share of..." Harry shook his head and waved his hand. "The rest of it."

Maddie smiled and shook her head. "I don't know that I have."

"Come on," he smiled lightly, his eyes narrowing on her. "You have a TV, the internet. You managed to avoid the disaster that was Cassandra?"

"Ah," she nodded once, slow nod. "Maybe I saw a little something." Her fingers pinched together in demonstration.

"Maybe?"

"Well, I try not to believe everything I read," Maddie shrugged. "If you remember it wasn't that long ago that those articles were printed about me."

"Fair point," Harry shrugged, feeling sad as he remembered all the bad that had passed between them. "Though this time...they were real."

"Yeah?" She wasn't really sure what to say to that but she felt bad for him.
"Yeah," he laughed. "Incredibly real."

"Well I'm very sorry to hear that."

"Thanks..." Harry chuckled as he shook his head, as his mind went over it all for what felt like the four hundredth time. "Though...if we're fair...I can't really blame her alone. I had a hand in it too."

"A hand in it?" Maddie's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You had a hand in your wife cheating on you? I find that...hard to believe."

"Aw come on," Harry smiled over at her, leaning in and taking another drink. "You know things aren't always that simple, aren't always that black and white..." He looked down into his glass and finished the warm liquid. "I mean...what was I thinking really? What else should I have expected? We were two people who thought that somehow we could enter into a marriage like it was some sort of...business contract," he laughed bitterly as he remembered it all—the beginning of the end. Maddie's lips pressed together as she watched him, as she stayed quiet and watched the way his face grew sad and distant and thoughtful.

"She didn't love me and I..." He trailed off, not sure exactly what he wanted to say, what he should say. "I thought that it would be enough...what I had to offer." He reached for the bottle and refilled his glass. "But. A marriage doesn't really work without heart and when mine wasn't in it...she went somewhere else to find it and..." He laughed, sitting back in his chair as he looked around the room. "And I can't blame her really. Not really." He took a deep breath and shrugged his shoulders. "Even after I found out, I thought that maybe we could still make it work, that maybe I could look the other way and we could have what we had...whatever it was...But..."

"But you couldn't?" Her voice was soft and quiet as she cut into his thoughts.

"But then I lost him," Harry answered her, his eyes meeting hers as it all rushed forward again. "I lost him and I lost his spirit and his guidance and his..." He blinked at the tears in his eyes and smiled over at her. "He knew I didn't love her. He knew that she didn't love me and he knew that what we were trying to do would never be enough, that it would never..." He lost his words for a moment, sucking in his breath to try to bring them back. "And after he died, I just couldn't...I couldn't pretend anymore. I couldn't...what did you say...settle into the methodical? I couldn't do that anymore." He took a drink from his glass and took a moment before he continued. "Anyway...it wasn't much longer after that when the press caught wind of some gossip and then they caught...her. In public..." Harry chuckled as he remembered the day the photos hit the press, the day that what was left of his marriage shattered in front of his eyes. "And it was over."

There was a lot that he wasn't telling her; she knew that for sure. She could see it in the way his eyes shifted away from her, the way his jaw clenched and relaxed. And it was true. The end hadn't been as cut and dry as his explanation was. The end had been a disaster; him yelling and her throwing things. And a whole host of things Cassandra had said that he would never tell Maddie, that he would never want her to know.

"Well," she took a deep breath and smiled. "I'm sorry that that had to happen."

"I am too," Harry's face grew completely serious as he met her eyes. "I'm sorry that all of it had to happen." He took in a shaky breath and let himself relax. "But it's over now and it's for the best, you know?"
"Sure," Maddie nodded. "And..." Her grin pulled higher. "And I'm pretty sure I heard you were dating again."

"Please," Harry rolled his eyes.

"No?"

"No," he laughed, shaking his head.

"I could have sworn I saw a picture of you and...Leo's little sister?" Maddie arched an eyebrow with a smirk.

"Ha!" Harry clapped his hands together. "No, no. We had dinner once—completely platonic—and a picture leaked and a story flew and...no," he shook his head again. "I would never date Leo's little sister. We just happened to both be at the restaurant one night and had dinner together. Nothing to get excited about."

"Fair enough," Maddie shrugged and took another bite.

"But what about you?" Harry raised his eyebrows at her. "I read you were dating. An actor no less."

"Ha!" Maddie's cheeks flushed as she shrugged. "I was dating an actor." she admitted with a happy sigh. "I was."

"Hollywood isn't really your thing?" Harry watched as she thought about it.

"No no, it wasn't that. It was...he was very nice and we had a great time together but..." She frowned and he watched as the emotion washed over her face. "He lives in LA and I live here and it was...just what I needed at the time."

"Good," Harry nodded. "And since then?"

"Since then..." She shook her head. "I think it's probably hard to date a widow, you know?"

"Ah," Harry breathed even though he didn't really know.

Maddie took a slow drink from her glass and, feeling the openness between them, the easy conversation, she continued on. "I remember the first date I went on..." She chuckled, biting at her bottom lip as she thought about it. "It was a friend of a coworker and it was...wow..." She laughed louder. "I was nervous the entire time and at the end of the date when he kissed me..." She shook her head as she remembered. "I came home and crawled in bed and I just cried..."

"Maddie," his heart hurt for her.

"It was too soon," she shrugged. "It was too soon for me. And I should have known better. But I thought I was ready to go out and have fun and...I've gone out a handful of times since then. A coworker, a friend of a friend...the actor. Short and wonderful and...over when it was supposed to be. But it's hard for the men too." She looked up to him with sad, honest eyes. "Because I still love the man I was married to, I would absolutely go back to him if I could and...I don't know, I suppose it's hard. Right? Being with a woman who will always have somebody else in her heart. That's
hard." She seemed lost in thought for just a moment before she snapped back to him. "Even if there's a chance I just might have room for two...that's hard. Right?"

Harry held her gaze as he held his breath, not sure exactly what to say, not sure exactly why his heart was pounding in his ears. "Maybe not...maybe it won't always be hard."

"Maybe not," Maddie blinked slowly, thoughtfully, before she took a deep breath and sat up taller, remembering her time with the actor—he hadn't found it as hard as the others. But that was a different situation altogether. "Anyway..." She let out her breath long and slow, her smile stretching wider. "There's a cheesecake in my fridge."

"There is," Harry's grin matched hers. "And it's a good cheesecake."

"Yeah?" Her eyebrows lifted.

"So I've been told," he nodded. "Want me to go fetch it? We can find out right now."

"Yes," Maddie grinned, moving to stand. "Maybe we can get some dessert and then you can tell me how Will and Kate and Arthur are doing?"

"Done," he agreed easily, rising to his feet and following her back into the kitchen. He would be more than happy to fill her head full of stories of his beloved nephew and he always welcomed a moment to poke a little fun at his older brother.

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Harry didn't stay nearly as late the second night as he did the first. His flight the next day and a lack of Scotch brought the evening to a much earlier conclusion. They had finished the cheesecake and half a bottle of wine when he watched Maddie stifle what was by his count, her third yawn in ninety seconds and decided it was time to go. It had been a great night...a wonderful addition to his final two days in the US—even if he was still having a hard time wrapping his mind around these unexpected evenings.

It seemed so surreal, being there with Maddie in her home after all of these years; catching up and reminiscing. Though he was happy to be there, thrilled in fact, there was a part of him that almost couldn't believe it was real. And as they stood in her entryway, saying good-bye, he couldn't help but confess that to her.

"It was really kind of you to have me over for dinner tonight Maddie," his smile was sheepish, his eyes sleepy but happy. "Thank you for...everything."

"You're welcome," she nodded with a tired grin. "I enjoyed talking with you, remembering with you. It was nice."

"You're welcome," she nodded with a tired grin. "I enjoyed talking with you, remembering with you. It was nice."

"It was," he agreed easily. "And honestly, it was something I never thought would happen again." He looked down at his shoes, feeling just a little nervous under her gaze. "Being in the same room with you, sharing a meal...having conversation like we're old friends..." He looked up into her eyes then, sadness and regret flashing over his face. "I thought I had burned that bridge long ago."

"Yeah," Maddie bit at her bottom lip for a moment as her mind slipped back over their history. And then, with a smile, she shrugged. "I think maybe...losing Bishop put some things into perspective for me." Harry turned away from her, swallowing the lump that always formed in his throat when
he remembered losing his best friend. With a deep breath, Maddie let out a soft laugh, her husband's spirit flooding her memory. "I know that a lot has passed between us Harry....a lot. But..." She shook her head. "I think that life is just too short to hold onto grudges or bitterness or..." She leaned her head to the side, wanting to catch his gaze with her strong, steady one. "I enjoyed talking with you tonight. And last night. I'm glad that we had a chance to remember him together and I'm glad that we had a chance to catch up tonight."

"Good," he smiled, feeling shaky as his fingers played with his gloves. He was happy to hear that, having been slightly worried she might regret it. "I'm glad too."

"Good." Maddie's smile pulled higher. "And hey...who knows, maybe now that I have your number again, I'll give you a call sometime."

"Really?" His eyes flashed wide with surprise, his breath catching as her words settled.

"Sure...next time I'm London or..." She glanced away from him for a second before turning her eyes up to him. "I'm sorry. I don't have to if..."

"No, no, no," Harry cut her off, his hands lifting up in front of him as he shook his head quickly. "Of course you can...of course you can call me Maddie. Next time you're in London. Or anytime really. Anytime at all. I mean it." And he realized that he sounded a bit like a scattered, nervous schoolboy but he didn't care. Never in his wildest dreams had he allowed himself even a sliver of hope that he might be able to salvage any semblance of a friendship with Maddie. And here she was, offering to call and he was so damn thrown he just might end up messing it up. "Any time."

He tamed his pulse and smiled.

"Okay," Maddie's voice was soft as she nodded her head, catching the moment of awkward silence, catching his hard-to-read reaction to her words.

"Okay," Harry breathed, pulling it together enough to put on his gloves. "I suppose I should be going."

"I suppose," she nodded, walking in step with him towards the door. "Thank you for coming tonight Harry."

"Oh no, the pleasure was all mine," he pressed a hand to his chest as he looked down at her. "I mean that. Thank you for having me over."

"You're welcome." She stopped in front of her door and turned to face him and her eyes flashed serious for a moment. "You'll be safe? The flight tomorrow and..."

"Yes," he answered, the sadness in his voice matching hers. "I will."

"Thank you," she blinked at her nervousness and took a step towards him. "Good night Harry."

As she moved into his space, her hands reaching for his shoulders, Harry found himself holding his breath. And then as he remembered the last two nights, the miles and miles they had covered, he let it out and he wrapped his arms around her; hugging her close and tight.

And even though that move would be something that stayed with him for days, even though that moment would haunt his senses—the way she felt, the way she smelt, the way she hugged him back—there wasn't a single ounce of him that regretted it.
He waited for her to step from his arms before he smiled down at her and reached for the doorknob. "Good night Maddie."

And then with a slight wave of his hand and bright, shining eyes, Harry stepped through her door and took leave of their evening.

Closing the door behind her, Maddie returned to her warm, cozy home and, looking over the remnants of her evening, she knew that she had done the right thing; calling him, inviting him over. She had needed what had happened here that night and the night before. And as she walked the hall to her bedroom, turning off lights as she moved, she felt warm and happy and more at ease than she had for a while.
Harry had been prepared to have Maddie make home in his mind even after he left New York. He had known when he went to see her the first night, even more so on the second night, what it would do to him. He had known that he would have a hard time getting her out of his thoughts if he went. But he went anyway and he had been prepared for her to linger...her laughter, her smile, her words.

He had known it would happen but he hadn't thought it would last quite as long as it did.

Even after he left New York, even after he left the United States. Even after he returned home to London, to work, to his life—she was still there in his mind.

And he should have known better.

Seeing her had been great—wonderful in fact. He had never in a million years allowed his mind to go to a place where he would have imagined being able to have a meal with her, to spend two nights over drinks and conversation. But she had invited him into her home—twice—and she had changed his outlook, his spirit.

And he wasn't the only one who noticed. As the days went by, as he went out on Royal duties or with his friends socially, there were comments in the papers about the smile on his face, there were questioning glances from friends.

But he didn't care. He felt better. Lighter. And the smile on his face felt more genuine than it had in a long time. So he didn't care so much that people were noticing, that they were commenting.

"Alright Wales, what gives?" Kiki slid into the bench seat next to Harry, nudging him with her shoulder.

"Sorry?" His lips curled up as he looked to her. It was the end of the week and they were all gathering at Leo's for drinks and unwinding and Kiki had found a moment when it was just the two of them at the table.

"You know what I'm talking about," she lowered her voice with a roll of her eyes. "The pep in your step, the shoulders without all the stress, the eyes without the wrinkles...you seem...happy?"

"Ha! That unbelievable, huh?" He chuckled, leaning back against the booth, his arm stretching along the back of the bench behind her.

"No," she shook her head, leaning into him. "It's just nice to see and I'm wondering if it's really just the fact that enough shit has happened that you're finally starting to see the silver lining or...I don't know...."

"Yeah," Harry sighed, thinking over the shit of which she spoke.

"Did something happen? Or is this just...the new you?" Kiki lifted her eyebrows, chuckling as he laughed at her.

"Well..." He sighed and shrugged and thought it over for a minute. "I guess I hope this is the new
"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he nodded, reaching for his beer.

"And?" She knew that wasn’t the end of the story.

"And..." He took in a deep breath, debating for a moment before he let it out—his smile stretching higher. "I...I saw Maddie."


"Yes..." He didn’t even hesitate as he nodded his head. "Bishop's Maddie."

"What?! When?" Kiki's voice peaked high as she turned to face him.

"Easy," his voice dipped deep in contrast to hers.

"Sorry," she whispered, her hands moving to his arm, her eyes imploring him to continue. "When did you see her? Where did you see her? I mean I thought..." Her eyes widened as she began piecing things together. "You were in New York."

"I was," he nodded his head, taking a sip from his bottle.

"You saw Maddie in New York."

"I did," he looked down at his lap, at his fingers working over the label on the beer he was drinking. "She had..." He cleared his throat. "Bishop had left me something in his will...a bottle of Scotch..." His eyes welled up as his mind drifted back to it all.

"A bottle of Scotch?" She repeated his words, her own emotions stirring. "You mean the one from the estate sale?"

"That would be the one," Harry's smile warmed his face. "Anyway...she had it in New York and when I saw her the day we spread his ashes..." Even now he couldn't say it without the lump in his throat, without the tears in his eyes. "She told me that day that if I were ever in New York again, I should stop by and retrieve it."

"And so you did..." Kiki made the conclusion with a soft smile, a heart full of memories.

"So I did," He nodded, setting his empty beer on the table in front of him.

"How..." Kiki swallowed and looked up at him. "How is she? I haven't seen her in so long and...how is she?"

"She's..." Harry couldn't help the smile that returned, the flash in his eyes. "She's doing really well—all things considered."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "I mean...it's obvious that she misses him, it's abundantly clear that he's...a part
of who she is now. But...she's okay. She's working with Ian in the New York office and she's
starting this new program and she's...she's living. She's smiling and living and...she's okay."

"Good," Kiki blinked at the tears that came with the smile. "Good. I'm really, really happy to hear
that."

"I was too."

"Sure," Kiki nodded, taking a second to pull herself back from that edge of sadness she went to
when she missed Bishop. "So you saw her."

"I did."

"And..." She lifted her eyebrows.

"And?" He matched her expression.

"And you're happier," her voice was quiet as she said it, her smile soft and her eyes sweet.

"Aw come on," Harry shook his head, his hand patting her knee as he smiled. "You know these last
few years have just been..."

"Bad?"

"Not great," he agreed with a light laugh. "It was nice to see her. It was nice to spend some time
remembering Bishop with somebody who...somebody who loved him as much as I did. More than I
did." He shrugged and looked to her with big, wide, emotion-filled eyes. "And it was a relief to see
her still standing and living her life."

"Fair enough," her hand patting his on her knee. "Well whatever the reasons are, I'm happy to see
you back in your stride."

"Is that right?"

"Yes," she nodded emphatically. "Down in the dumps Harry is not much fun."

"Ha!" Harry laughed. "No. No he's not."

"Tell me this," Kiki took a sip from her drink. "Do you think you'll see her again?"

"Maddie?" Harry's eyes went wide as he thought for a second, his head shaking slowly. "Nah.
Probably not. She's in New York and I'm in London and...and that bottle of Scotch is gone. What
reason would I possibly have to see her again?"

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Harry had been prepared to have the memory of Maddie float about his mind for some time after he
saw her—he knew it was only natural. And he had also been prepared to never see her again. Just
as he had told Kiki that night in the bar, there was no real reason for them to cross paths. They had
finished all of their business with each other, they had said good-bye to Bishop together, they had
mourned him together and they had remembered him together. And that was all. That was the end.
So he went on with his life, went about his every day activities; military and royal—the mundane and the unexpected. And he carried with him that smile that had returned after his trip to New York, after putting to bed so many left over heartaches. He walked with the old, new smile; the new spirit that people continued to comment on. And he was ready to do that again, to live again—even if he knew he'd never see her again.

"Congratulations Sir," Anya smiled wide at Harry as he walked by her desk towards his office.

"Thank you," Harry nodded to her, knowing exactly what she was speaking of. The news had dropped that morning. There was an announcement from the Ministry of Defense followed up by an announcement from Clarence House. The promotion was news now; his new rank and file was splashed across media all over the nation along with various photos detailing his military past.

"I have a stack of congratulatory messages for you," she held up the notes she had taken.

"Wow," Harry chuckled, reaching out to take them from her. "I have a few emails to respond to and then I have a meeting with Sir Keith Mills this afternoon."

"Yes Sir," she nodded. "I'll let you know when he's arrived?"

"That would be great, thank you," Harry nodded once more and slipped into his office. Sifting through the messages in his hand, he couldn't help the small smile that took over his face. Everyone had called; family, friends, other military men who knew what this meant to him and for him.

Laying the stack on his desk, he slipped of his suit coat, draping it over the back of his chair before he settled in and turned on the laptop he had left on his desk. As he waited for it to boot up, he made a mental list of calls he had to return; his brother, his father. Both had called with well wishes and promises of celebration upon hearing the news. Rubbing at the back of his neck, he sat up and typed in his password. Feeling his phone vibrate in his pocket, he pulled it out and laid it on his desk. And when he glanced down at the screen, he felt his heart skip in his chest.

It was a text message. From Maddie Bishop.

"Wow," he breathed, not entirely understanding the way his pulse quickened or how just seeing her name threw off his concentration. But it did. With a swipe of his finger, he opened the text.

"I just saw the announcement on the news. Congratulations Major Sussex. Or is it Commander now? Good work soldier."

He read that text message forty-seven times that afternoon.

He checked four times to make sure it was actually her phone number and not a figment of his imagination.

And when he texted her back "Thank you. Very very much," with shaky fingers, he meant it.

The shaky fingers, the way his breath seemed to hold in his lungs as he responded, the way that smile on his face pushed higher, the way his afternoon seemed—happier after being on the receiving end of a text message from Maddie Bishop—he hadn't been prepared for any of that.
When Harry had handed over his number to Maddie for the second time in her life, when he had given her that implied permission to contact him at her will, she had known it was a big moment. She had known that it had taken a lot for each of them to get to a point where that could happen—where he could offer and she could accept. It had taken time and a whole lot of life for each of them to be able to step into this normal, casual, every-day occurrence. And she had expected it to carry in her mind for a short while after he had left New York.

When she had taken his number again, when she had agreed to call sometime—it wasn't just a flip, casual promise. She had meant it. She had had every intention of calling him up sometime in the future. She had truly thought that there would be a day, someday, when she was in London visiting her father-in-law and she would think to call him and maybe, maybe they would meet up for a drink or a meal. The connection they had—their past, their shared love for her late husband—it was too big to just toss aside and she was in a much happier place than she had been since Bishop had left the world. She no longer held grudges, she no longer kept score.

So she had known that, at some point, she would contact him in one way or another.

She hadn't known, however, just how easy it would be. She hadn't imagined it would come as such a quick and simple gesture. Until she read the headlines of his military promotion, she would never have guessed how second-nature it would seem for her to pull out her phone and send out a congratulatory text.

And she had never imagined the smile it would bring to her face when his name popped up on her phone with a response.

She had looked at the screen for a full two minutes, studying the name and noting the way it made her feel to see it.

Happy.

She was happy to see it, happy to be communicating with him, happy that he had replied. And she wasn't sure why she was surprised at the smile on her face. She wasn't sure why it gave her a moment of pause as she recognized it. All she knew, all she really understood, was that it was...easy. It was simple and easy and not at all awkward. And though there were probably miles of reasons why anyone in her life would question her on this new...friendship...she may be starting, she didn't seem to care too much. Living with the Bishop mentality that had taken over part of her spirit, she had long ago decided to do what made her happy.

And, for now, being able to send a text to Harry without guilt or nervousness, that made her happy.

And so it began—this casual friendship between them.

She would send a text or a quick email when she saw something about him on the news, or when a new picture gave her the opportunity to poke light fun. He would send her an update when he read an article that he thought might interest her or when he heard news from any one of the places they had both loved—Bendal, London, Paris. She would ask for an address of a mutual friend so she could send a card and he would ask her if she remembered the name of a contact she had at Doctor's Without Borders when he was working on a relief project that he wanted to partner with them on.
It was easy and natural and didn't push any of the boundaries or walls either of them had put up as a result of their histories—shared or separate. And neither of them questioned it because neither of them saw a reason to.

But that didn't mean that those around them didn't have questions, that they weren't curious. And that curiosity on Harry's end came in the form of his long-time friend Kiki—the only one in his life who knew he had had any kind of contact with Maddie. Kiki who watched him from across the booth late one Friday night as he pulled his phone from his pocket to respond to a text. Kiki who watched his entire posture soften, who watched his smile crinkle his eyes as he swiped a reply across the screen. Kiki who locked her gaze on his eyes as he let out the smallest, quietest sigh and stuffed his phone back into his pocket.

Kiki who noticed the way he caught himself when he saw her watching, who caught the way he straightened up, the way he drew his wandering smile back in line.

Kiki who didn't think twice to call him out. With her arms resting on the table between them, she leaned closer and lowered her voice and with a smirk she asked the question she was ninety-nine percent sure she knew the answer to. "Who was that?"

"My father," Harry answered without blinking.

"Bullshit," she was quick with her reply, not backing down an inch. "You do know that lying about it only makes it more suspicious and..."

"Alright," Harry rolled his eyes with a groan. "It was Maddie."

"Yeah," Kiki smiled. "I know."

"How do you know?"

"Cause I saw the look on your face," she nodded towards him, taking a sip from her drink. "And the only times I've ever seen that look on your face...it's had to do with Maddie. So..."

"So?" Harry could feel his defenses rising, could feel his heart thumping a nervous beat in his chest. "I told you I was talking to Maddie."

"No," Kiki shook her head with a chuckle. "You told me you saw her in New York, that you drank a bottle of Scotch that Bishop left you. You didn't tell me you were talking to her..." Her voice softened. "Are you talking to her?"

"I..." Harry began and stopped, looking down at the bottle in his hand. With a deep breath, he shrugged his shoulders. "We email and text...occasionally. She needed an address, I wanted a name of a contact of hers..." He waved his hand. "It just sort of happened and now it happens every once in a while. It's not a big deal."

His eyes lifted to hers and she stayed silent for a moment, watching him; taking it in. With a kind smile and small nod, she leaned back in her seat. "Okay."

"Okay?" His eyebrows drew together. "That's it?"

"Is there more?" Kiki challenged.
"I...no," he shook his head. "No of course not."

"Well okay then," she answered again with the same smile and nod that made Harry think she wasn't done talking. But he let it go and relaxed into his seat, moving on.

"What are you and Sean going to do for the Christmas holiday? Are you going to his parents or..."

"Mine," she cut him off. "We'll see mine on Christmas Eve and then his on Christmas Day and do you want to talk to her more often?" Harry's drink stopped on its way to his mouth, his eyes blinking, his mouth opening in surprise as Kiki leaned closer and continued. "I mean...the texting and the emails...do you talk on the phone? Do you want to talk on the phone? Are you what...friends now? Acquaintances? Because if you think I buy that that...smile...was about you getting a phone number from her for some business contact, well then...you think I'm pretty fucking stupid." She took a breath and shrugged her shoulders. "And I don't think that you think I'm pretty fucking stupid."

"I..." Harry let out a breath, his mind reeling just a bit from her bluntness. "I don't think you're pretty fucking stupid."

"I didn't think so."

"But..." He shook his head, his hand running back through his hair. "I don't know what you're asking here. No. I don't talk to her on the phone. I...there hasn't been a need to do that and...do I want to?" His voice jumped high as his face twisted up, his pulse pounding in his ears. "I don't know how to answer that."

"Yes you do."

"I don't," he laughed, taken back by how forward she was, curious about why she was so forward.

"Pretty fucking stupid," Kiki muttered, taking a long drink from her glass before she took a different approach, her features softening as she reached across the table to him. "It's...okay if you want to talk to her. It's okay if you want to be friends with her. It's okay if you..."

"Come on," Harry's voice was rough as he shook his head, as he cut her off with a pat to her hand. "Let's not..."

"Let's not?" She lifted her eyebrows. "Come on what? Let's not what Harry?"

"Kiki...you know I love you but..."

"But what?" She pressed, feeling bold and brave and confident. "But what? You don't think you're allowed?" She watched as Harry sucked in a breath, as his jaw clenched and his eyes darted away. "You don't think you're allowed."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

"Listen," he leaned in closer to her. "There is...a lot of history between Maddie and I..."
"I know."

"You don't," he shook his head, his eyes taking on a hint of sadness. "I know you think you do and I know you know the bulk of it but..."

"But what?"

"But I don't want to push this. I don't want to theorize or hypothesize or....or even talk about what I might want...." He laughed and scrubbed a hand over his face. "By all views of this situation, she shouldn't even bother giving me the time of day. But she is. She invited me over and we had a great night...remembering her husband." His voice stressed the word. "And she has reached out a few times and Kiki...that's all it is," he shook his head. "I don't even want to go to a place where I think about more than that. I just want to let this...sit."

"Okay," Kiki nodded, understanding more than he thought she did. "Can I just...can I ask one more question?"

"Well I haven't been able to stop you yet," Harry smirked as he waved his hand to her.

"The reason you don't want to think about it, the reason you don't want to go there...is it because you think you could have feelings for her again? And maybe that scares you?"

Harry felt his heart thud to a stop in his chest, felt his cheeks warm. With a new softness in his smile, he took a breath. "Come on Kiki. That's not really a fair question..."

"Why not?" She whispered, caught off guard by how sweet he seemed, how young and innocent.

"Because," he chuckled with a light shrug. "I never stopped having feelings for her." He didn't blink, didn't waver, didn't flinch. "All of these years, a marriage and a divorce and...I never stopped having feelings for her. Not once. It's as simple as that."
Chapter 4

As far back as Maddie could remember, she had loved the holidays. She loved the decorations and the music. She loved the snow and the sweaters and the way her spirit lifted. Even in the years following her father's death, she had found a way to find that same spirit and community in the heat of Bendal. It had always been one of her most favorite times of year.

And then she had fallen in love with Bishop. The way he lived his life, the happiness and excitement that came with him, had only served to magnify the magic of the season. He just seemed to exude the spirit of it all. She remembered their first Christmas together with bright, vivid detail; the sunrise in Paris, the beautiful couches—which were still in her living room. She remembered the way he had come to her without batting an eye, how he had taken the Chunnel and rescued her from her solitary Christmas at Collins and Khenda's home. She remembered stuffing herself with food and champagne and so much laughter.

Even now, even when she remembered that he was gone, remembering that Christmas made her smile. He had been in love with her then, though neither of them really knew it. But she had given him that painting that he had kept and he had given her more than she could have ever asked for—he had sent her home to her family. She would never have guessed at that time that the very next year, their second Christmas together, would find him going home with her; meeting her family, making pancakes in the morning, and then jetting off to their new home with their own tree and their own celebration.

And then there was the year they were married; their first and last Christmas as husband and wife. To use the words warm and intimate and cozy and romantic and magical were a drastic understatement. Maddie wasn't sure there was a word in the English language to describe how special that time in her life was. She hadn't thought there was a way to make the holiday season brighter, but he had done it. Her husband...Jamie.

The first Christmas without him, mere days after what would have been their first anniversary, was dark and dreary and devoid of everything that had made this time of year her favorite.

When she had told her family that she wanted to be alone that first year, that she wanted to head up into the mountains and hole up in a cabin and be absolutely alone—there had been a tiny bit of pushback. Kyle was concerned, offering to come with her. Gary was upset, worried that by letting her go they were giving her permission to sink into a depression that made him afraid for her. Jenna shed tears; for Maddie and for Bishop. Ian had called and asked her to come to London. Michael had suggested they go somewhere tropical together. It wasn't that they didn't understand, it wasn't that they didn't get it. She had married Bishop so close to the holidays and she hadn't even been granted one anniversary before he was taken. They were just worried for her; they loved her.

Everyone had had something to say, everyone's emotions stirred as they thought of Maddie alone in a cabin in the woods for Christmas.

Everyone except her mother. Hannah—who would be alone on Christmas morning—gave her permission, gave her blessing, and then, in a show of solidarity and support, she handled each and every one of the questions and concerns—putting herself between Maddie and the rest of the family.
She understood. More than she ever really wanted to, she understood the low place that Maddie had sunk to. They were both members of the same, horrible club now. So she made sure her daughter had what she needed, cold weather gear, food, directions and then she hugged her tight, kissed her twice and she let her go.

It had been a year of such great lows; times of great concern. So when the holidays approached again, it felt like everyone collectively held their breath, waiting to see what Maddie would decide. And when she easily and happily agreed that normal holiday celebrations should commence, they all seemed to let out the same collective breath. She was excited to see her cousins on Christmas, excited to take part in the revelry that always came when they got together. She was ready to be merry and try to recapture that spirit she had always loved so much, that spirit that her husband had magnified. But before the merriment began, she was faced with what would have been her second anniversary. And for that at least, the mood was softer; quieter.

"Thank you for doing this with me tonight," Maddie smiled softly at her mother as she pulled on a sweater and reached for a bottle.

Hannah looked up from the items she was collecting in her hands; the glasses, the blanket. "Oh honey, of course," her eyes welled up as she looked over her daughter, swallowing back the tears that came when she thought of it all. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded, taking a deep breath as they made their way out onto the deck. Settling into the outdoor couch, they arranged the blankets around their legs and Maddie opened the bottle of Scotch. Hannah handed her the glasses, one after the other, as she poured drinks for the both of them. Handing one back, Maddie sat the bottle aside and sighed; leaning back into the cushion.

"Do you want to say something?" Hannah's voice was soft and low as she looked over to her daughter; too young to be handling something like this.

"What do I say?" Maddie laughed lightly and shrugged her shoulders. "I can't believe it's been over a year and a half since he..." She stopped, shaking her head and taking a deep breath. In her mind was visions of him, of his smile, of his laughter, of his voice; of all the things he would be saying to her if he could step into this moment. "Okay. Okay." She whispered, knowing fully well he wouldn't want her to wallow for too long. "Okay." She blinked at the tears that slipped from her eyes and lifted a smile, and her glass, to her mother. "To Bishop."

"To Bishop," her mother repeated, clinking her glass to Maddie's before they drank and settled into the silence there next to each other. Maddie leaned back and looked up at the stars, taking another sip as she let her mind wander over the handful of months she was married to Bishop, over their life together.

And this year, unlike last year, the smile pulled slow and wide across her face. Though there were tears, they were nothing like they had been the previous year. Though there was sadness, it was nothing like the heavy weight she had carried last year. Though the memories were fast and full, they brought with them not only sadness and grief and loss—they brought happiness and contentment and the same spirit of life Bishop had brought to her.

"One of my favorite memories of him..." Hannah's voice was quiet as she cut into the moment. "Was that first Christmas you brought him home."

"Yeah?" Maddie smiled as she drifted back with her mother.
"Yeah," Hannah nodded, moving to take her daughter's hand in hers. "He was so...in love with you." Maddie felt the lump in her throat grow. "And he was so obvious." The tone in her voice made them both laugh. "And he knew that coming here would be a big thing, knew that your family would be a little leery. But he came and he stood tall to Kyle..."

"Jesus," Maddie rolled her eyes as she remembered the back and forth between them.

"And he answered all of the questions without flinching and he was so charming and sweet and then he...he let you sneak right into his room after I went to sleep."

"What?!" Maddie turned wide eyes to her mother.

"Please," Hannah narrowed hers. "You think I don't know what happens in this house. You think you're sooooo sneaky."

"I..." Maddie stammered, her cheeks flushing; completely caught. "I don't know what to...I don't think it's fair that I have to answer to this without him here." The words slipped from her mouth and as they settled in her mind, she felt her tears sneak back.

"I don't either," Hannah voice cracked as her emotions got the best of her. Each of them took a moment to feel it, a moment to miss him. And then Hannah took a deep breath and pulled on her daughter's hand, bringing her closer to her. "And that next morning, he came down before you did and he put on that apron and helped me make breakfast and he just...he made sure your mother knew enough about him to love him. He made sure I knew how much he loved you. And God Madeline...he loved you."

"I know," Maddie whispered, nodding her head as she took a deep breath and wiped at her eyes. "I know he did."

"And he would be...incredibly proud with the way you're continuing on with your life," Hannah smiled, knowing she was right. "He would be beyond proud with how you've picked yourself up and carried on and he would just...he would love how much of his spirit still lives with you."

Tears slipped down Maddie's cheeks as she took in her mother's words, as she felt them in her heart. She tried to swallow back the emotion and then, finding it pointless to fight it, she let it go. With a smile, she cried. And that's how it was now; she was spending what would have been their second anniversary, remembering him with a glass of Scotch and a smile and crying for the man she missed.

There was really only one way that the moment could have been any more perfect. Turning to her mother with a small smile, she whispered, "Did you bring the cigars?"

"I did," Hannah wiped at her own tears and leaned to kiss her daughter's shoulder. "Are you ready for them?"

"I think so," Maddie nodded. As their tears began to settle, Hannah reached for the cigars while Maddie found the lighter. They were going to remember her father too.

"You do know..." Hannah smiled at her daughter as she lit her own cigar and passed back the lighter. "You could have invited Ian and Michael to Colorado for Christmas."

"I know," Maddie nodded as she lit her cigar and took a long puff. "But they are going to Mustique
over the holidays. I'm going to see them in London after the New Year and we'll celebrate together then."

"Oh good," Hannah took a drag and settled further back into the couch. "I'm really happy you'll get to see them. And I'm sure they're happy to see you."

"They are," Maddie sighed, taking a sip from her Scotch. "They tried to get me to go with them to the island but I told them..." Maddie leaned in to kiss her mother's shoulder. "I told them it was time I return to snowy Colorado."

"Well," Hannah's smile pulled higher. "Speaking on behalf of the rest of the family...we're incredibly happy to have you back."

Maddie met her mother's eyes and understood that she was talking about more than just Christmas. She understood the greater meaning to her words. "And I'm really happy to be back." With a smile and a deep breath, she settled in closer to her mother's side and there they sat; for hours. Drinking Scotch, smoking cigars, and remembering the men who they had loved and lost. Together.

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"So listen..." Maddie's voice was light and easy when she called out to her mother as they decorated the tree in preparation for Christmas. "There's something I wanted to tell you."

"Oh?" Hannah smiled, humming to the music while she placed ornaments.

"I saw Harry," Maddie adjusted an ornament while she watched her mother out of the corner of her eye; waiting for her reaction.

"Harry?" Her voice held confusion for a beat before her eyes moved from the ornament in front of her to look up at her daughter. "You mean..."

"Harry," Maddie nodded with a smile. She moved around the tree, closer to her mother who was watching her with slightly widened eyes. "He was in New York at the end of October on an official visit and...and Bishop had left him a bottle of Scotch in his will," Maddie explained. "I had told him to let me know when he was in town next and...when he was, he came over."

"Wow..." Hannah blinked, taking in the information as she studied her daughter's expression, listening to the tone of her voice. "He came over to your place?"

"He did," Maddie reached for her drink.

"What was that like?"

"It was..." Maddie's words let off as her mind drifted back; her lips curling higher as she smiled. With a shrug, she answered, "nice. It was nice. We drank the Scotch and told stories about Bishop and...it was really nice."

"Wow..." Hannah repeated, this time with a shake of her head. "Was it strange to see him?"

"You know it wasn't," Maddie laughed. "I thought it would be but...it wasn't. It was...easy. Familiar. And the next night when he came to dinner..."
"To dinner?" Hannah smiled, surprised at what she was hearing.

"Yes," Maddie met her mother's eyes. "I invited him over for dinner. We had a great conversation and then he left." Her attention shifted back to the decorating. "We've texted a few times; emailed here and there....anyway..." She shrugged. "I just wanted you to know."

"Okay...okay."

"That's it?" Maddie chuckled. "That's all?"

"Did you want me to say more than that?"

"No. Yes? I don't know. I thought you might have something to say."

"Ah Maddie," Hannah took in a deep breath and let it out. "You are a bright, strong, wonderful young woman." She spoke the truth with a warm smile and caring eyes. "I trust that you do what's right and best for you. And...long ago I learned that it was just a lot easier to support that." She shrugged—even though there were questions, even though she was a tiny bit curious—she let it pass. "If you want to talk to Harry, then...okay. That's really all I have to say."

As the Christmas celebrations kicked off with the Forrester family, Hannah was not the only one overjoyed to have Maddie back in the mix. One by one her cousins filed into the house, finding her with wide smiles and great big hugs. All of them were delighted to have the group back together, even as all of them felt the absence of Bishop. Maddie could see that he was on their minds as the festivities began.

Kyle hugged her extra long, kissing her cheek before pulling her back to him for another.

Amy squeezed her hand and told her how happy she was to have her back.

And Jenna, Jenna did what Maddie had grown to love her for the most, she moved them all forward with her amazing humor and just a dash of fangirl.

"So..." She slid up next to Maddie at the bar as they poured drinks. "Is Charlie coming this year?" Her smile curled up, her eyes dancing as she watched Maddie laugh.

"Ha! No," Maddie shook her head with an apologetic smile. "We haven't seen each other for a few months, remember?"

"I thought that maybe the Christmas spirit overtook you and you used that phone number I know he left you and you rekindled just in time for the holidays." Jenna's eyes narrowed pointedly.

"Well I didn't..." Maddie's smile warmed her face as she remembered him. "I'm sorry Jenna."

"You should be," she sighed dramatically. "That was really the only reason I dressed up this year," with a wink and a kiss to Maddie's cheek, she picked up her drink. "Merry Christmas Maddie. I'm happy you're smiling."

"Thank you. I am too." She glanced around the room and squeezed Jenna's hand. "I am too."
And that smile, that Christmas spirit that had always been a part of her, that had always held place inside of her—that stayed throughout the holiday.

Maddie had stepped into the kitchen to retrieve more ice for her drink when her phone buzzed in her pocket. With lingering laughter in her voice, she sat down her drink and reached into her pocket, her cousins' silliness echoing in from the living room.

"Hold on, hold on," she sighed as she pulled out the phone and looked down at her screen. Her breath sucked into her lungs and her already pink cheeks flushed just a shade bit darker. "Harry."

She didn't really know why she felt compelled to step outside, but she did. Slipping through the sliding glass doors out onto the deck, she took a deep breath and slid her finger across the screen. "Hello?" She smiled as she walked to the railing, looking out at the clear sky.

"Maddie," Harry's voice was bright and lively and held onto just the slightest waver. "I'm sorry to bother you..."

"You're not bothering me," she interrupted with a shake of her head.

"And I hope it's okay that I called..." He continued on.

"Of course it is," she cut in with a grin.

"Good..." He let out a breath of relief. "Good. I...I called to wish you a Merry Christmas."

"Ah," Maddie nodded, her teeth biting at the corner of her lip. "That's very sweet of you Harry. Merry Christmas to you."

"Thank you," he answered, wondering if she could tell that he was smiling like a fool, wondering if she could tell that he was blushing in his grandfather's study at Sandringham. "Are you...are you in Colorado this year? Or out to Mustique with Ian and Michael?"

"I'm in Colorado," Maddie's smile pulled higher as she looked back at the house, seeing her family alive with laughter and conversation through the big windows. "Though Mustique was tempting, I...I missed last year with the family and I couldn't miss another."

"Sure," Harry swallowed, guessing the reason she had missed last year. "How is everyone?"

"They're..." Maddie watched them all for a minute, her eyes squinting as she took in this crazy bunch of people who she loved dearly. "They're wonderful." She sighed and blinked and looked back out at the blanket of snow that covered the lawn. "And you? You're all still at Sandringham?"

"Yes," Harry answered, clearing his throat. "I don't know that my father will always continue on with it but it was something my grandmother loved and as long as my grandfather is with us..."

"Of course," Maddie understood. "Are things going well?"

"They are," Harry chuckled. "Arthur is overwhelmed with all of the gifts...and all of the wrapping paper." Maddie laughed along with him, only imagining what that must be like.
"Good. Good..." Maddie let the moment settle between them, her eyes closing as she smiled. "It's nice to hear your voice Harry. I suppose we haven't spoken in quite some time."

"I suppose we haven't," he agreed quietly. "It's nice to hear yours too."

"Hmmmm..." Maddie breathed.

"Anyway," he inhaled. "I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas. Will you be heading into the mountains with your cousins for the New Year?"

"I will be," Maddie nodded excitedly. "And then I'll actually be headed your way."

"Sorry?" Harry's voice lifted just as his eyebrows did.

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "I'm coming to London after the New Year, to spend some time with Ian and Michael, to celebrate the holidays with them."

"Ah yes," Harry let out a breath. "That makes perfect sense. Good. Great. That's...that's great that you do that, that you are able to see them."

"Yes, well, they're important to me," Maddie smiled and shrugged and even as her pulse quickened, she went right ahead and put it out there. "Maybe...ahem...sorry. Maybe I'll see you while I'm out that way?"

Though Maddie had no way of knowing it, on the other end of the phone, all the way in Sandringham, Harry's world seemed to pause. His eyes blinked and his heart thudded and he actually had to pinch himself to make sure he was still awake. "Sorry...you want to see me while you're here in London?"

"No!" Harry called out louder than he had expected, his hand slapping against his own forehead as his eyes rolled back. "Jesus. I'm sorry." He shook his head at himself. "I meant...yes. I would...I would love to see you when you're in London after the New Year."

"Yeah?"

"Yes," he chuckled at himself, pulling it together. "Yes. Absolutely."

"Great," Maddie smiled, not entirely sure how to read his hesitation, his recovery. "Can I call you when it gets closer?"

"Of course," he answered quickly, sounding more certain. "Please do."

"Okay," Maddie looked back through the windows at her family. "Okay. I'm going to get back to the party now but...I'll call you soon."

"I can't wait."

"Good," her grin pushed higher. "Merry Christmas Harry. And...thank you. For calling."
"Merry Christmas Maddie," his voice was soft over the phone; genuine. "Thank you for answering." A quiet, moment of pause passed between them. "Good night."

"Good night," Maddie replied and then, with a swipe of her finger, he was gone.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

A/N: Just a reminder that the use of actual people is just for fun. I don't know any of these people...I'm just fond of them. All ties to reality are lost here folks.

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Maddie's relationship with air travel had changed drastically since the accident that had taken Bishop. For quite some time after his death, she wouldn't fly. She couldn't. Even the thought of the airport or a terminal would send her into an anxious fit. But eventually she came around, she worked through the lingering fear she felt, the sadness, and she was able to take to the air again. She could remember the first time she boarded the new Bishop jet, she could remember how drastically different the interior was, how Ian must have done that with great purpose. Flying still held nervousness for her—probably always would. She wasn't sure if it was a fear of what might happen to her or if it was sadness and upset she still felt about losing Bishop, about what his last moments must have been like.

So even though she could fly, even though she boarded the Bishop jet that cold, crisp January morning with every intention on flying to London to see her in-laws, she still felt the lump in her throat, still felt the flutter in her stomach. But she took her deep breaths, she closed her eyes, and she did her very best to center herself.

Taking her seat, she buckled her belt and smiled up at the flight attendant who handed over her standard flight requests; a comfy blanket, a glass of champagne and a stack of magazines with mostly fluffy, lightweight, insignificant stories to read during the flight. She had found it all to be easier when she allowed her mind to escape—even just a little. So Maddie arranged the blanket around her legs, leaned back in her chair and took a sip from glass. Reaching for the magazine at the top of the stack, she was ready to kick back and lose herself just a bit.

The plane taxied down the runway, speeding up before it launched into the air. As they flew higher and higher, Maddie flipped through the slick pages easily, barely paying much attention as she glanced over the "Nail Colors for the New Year" and the "Much Anticipated Spring Line". It wasn't long after they reached altitude, not long after the worry in her stomach seemed to ease just a little—when she flipped over one of the pages and saw the picture that would send her mind drifting back a few months, into warm, wonderful memories that had helped her to heal a part of herself.

There on the pages, bundled up in warm winter clothing was a picture of him—the man who had given her six weeks of his life, all while giving her back a piece of hers.

Charlie Hunnam; big bright blue eyes and that damn smile that had drawn her in from the beginning.
Sinking back further into her chair, her lips curled up and her eyes drifted closed and memories of her time with him grew brighter, more vivid. It had been a truly remarkable six weeks; a time she would cherish forever.

Maddie's relationship with the charming, beautiful actor lasted just a day under six weeks. It was warm and bright and short. It was just light enough and just heavy enough and at just the right time. The way it had come together, the way it had molded and shifted and warmed her heart in a way she so desperately needed—it was like the universe had set it all out in front of her. Like it was fated to happen exactly the way it did.

Even the way it had ultimately come to an end, it had left her more healed than she had been, more ready to continue living this life without Bishop.

And though she hadn't been completely sure of it all when she walked into it, though she invested more of her emotions than she had intended while she was in it, though she felt sadness and loss at the end—it was a beautiful time of her life. And she would never find a moment where she regretted any single bit of it.

Meeting him had been a happy accident. Her assistant Jillian had been dating a Production Coordinator for a little over three months and was absolutely smitten. He seemed to be just as enamored with her as she was with him and would often have flowers and gifts sent to the office. When he would stop by to bring her lunch or pick her up at the end of the day to head out to dinner, he was always friendly and kind to Maddie and she found that she actually really liked him.

Which is probably why she said yes when, one warm September afternoon, he called Jillian and asked her to join him at a Production Party to kick off his newest film. He promised great weather, wonderful food and free drinks. And then he had suggested she bring along her boss—it would be good for Jillian to have somebody there she knew and it would be good for Maddie to get out.

So Jillian had asked and Maddie had agreed and before she knew it, she was dressing for a night out in the city.

"Okay baby," she spoke out into the open air of her apartment, imaging Bishop listening as she put on her finishing touches. "I'm going to go out tonight. I'm going to drink champagne and I'm going to meet new people. I'm going to have fun." With a smile to her reflection and a swipe of lip gloss, she grabbed her clutch and headed out; down to the car that was waiting with her dear friend—and assistant—smiling wide in the back seat.

The party had been exactly what was promised. Scores of producer types mixing with director types, most often talking in a language Maddie was sure she didn't understand. They were friendly—and loud—and a tad bit crazy as they drank and ate and talked about all of the upcoming work.

Nearing on half way through the night, as the music played loudly and the laughter even louder, Maddie was having a good time. The food had been great; satisfying her hunger and her pallet and she had had two glasses of remarkable champagne when she had decided to take a break from the music and the impromptu dancing that was threatening to break out into something of a dance party.

Taking her third glass of champagne in her fingers, Maddie stepped outside for some air, to take in the view. The door slid shut behind her as she stepped out on the balcony, quickly glancing around
for a place that would allow her a breath or two. As she moved towards the North end of the building, her eyes caught something—or more rightly, someone—off to the side, leaning against the railing. Alone.

When his eyes lifted to see her walking by, his lips turned into a smile that honestly could have lit up the room.

"Good evening," he nodded his hello to her as she moved past, his eyes dancing in the clear night sky.

"Good evening," Maddie nodded a smile in return and turned to look out at the horizon; loving the way it took so much longer there for the night to find them. But as she turned to look, as she brought her glass to her lips, out of the corner of her eyes she was watching him. And she could see that he was still watching her.

There was something about him, something other than that captivating smile that made her think maybe she knew him from somewhere. She couldn't quite place it but he seemed so familiar. Her eyes caught his watching her and his smile stretched higher and the dimples in his cheeks deepened.

And just as she opened her mouth to ask if they had met before, it registered. She got it.

"Holy shit," she chuckled as she turned to him. "You're him."

"Sorry?" His eyebrows lifted and Maddie's cheeks flushed.

"No," she shook her head sheepishly. "I'm sorry. That was terribly rude." She took a few steps closer, wanting the conversation to be just between them. "I thought you looked familiar and I couldn't quite place you but...you're the actor. The lead in the film," she waved her hand towards the party that was alive inside.

"Ah yes," his head bobbed in a deep nod. "I suppose I am."

"Sorry for the..." Her voice lowered. "The holy shit."

"Ha!" He laughed. "It's quite alright—wouldn't be the first time. My name is Charlie," his hand extended to her, his eyes studying her smile.

"Good to meet you," she recovered from her embarrassment and reached for his hand. "I'm Maddie Bishop."

"Maddie Bishop," he repeated as his fingers took hers. His eyes taking on the same thoughtful look hers had just held. "Maddie..." He drew her name out slow and then she watched as a realization dawned over him. "Oh wow." He laughed. "Holy shit."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed loudly, slightly confused but very much intrigued.

"I'm sorry," his hand pressed to his chest as he leaned closer. "But I think I just realized who you are."

"Me?" Her surprise was genuine.
"Yes," he nodded, his lips twisting into something of a smirk. "Aren't you the same Maddie who nearly became our Duchess?"

"Oh wow," Maddie laughed. "That was...a long time ago. How do you even know that?"

"I'm British," he shrugged. "And well-read and...your smile." His eyes slid up to hers. "It's quite memorable."

"Ah," her cheeks flushed under his gaze. "Thank you?"

"Can I ask..." He leaned against the railing next to her. "What are you doing at this party?"

"My assistant is dating Cliff, a Production Coordinator," Maddie explained and Charlie nodded. "He invited the two of us."

"Lovely. And are you enjoying yourself?"

"Mostly," she smiled. "And you? Is there a reason you're out here in the corner tucked away and hidden?"

"Not much of a party man, I suppose. Trying to lay low," he turned soft, sweet, almost puppy-dog eyes up to her. "Don't tell?"

"Your secret is safe with me."

"Thank you," he smiled and watched her for a moment. "Listen. Would you care to join me for a drink?" He nodded over to the table he had been occupying.

With her lip pulling into her teeth, Maddie took a moment to take in her surroundings, her senses registering what was happening. Then, with a shrug and a smile that was more Bishop than Forrester, she nodded. "Sure. Why not."

And that was how it all began.

Seven drinks and an hour of laughter later, that's exactly where Jillian found her; sitting at the table next to Charlie Hunnam. The two of them tucked away outside as the party continued on inside.

Jillian watched with a slack jaw as Charlie asked Maddie for her number. And then she watched with wide eyes as Maddie thought only for a second before she handed it over. She waited until they were safe and secure in the back of a cab before she cleared her throat and raised her eyebrows—wanting answers. Maddie, tipsy and still caught up in laughter, giggled, shrugged her shoulders and insisted he would probably never call.

But he did call. In fact, he called the next morning; sufficiently surprising Maddie. But when he asked her to meet him the next morning for brunch at one of his favorite places, she surprised herself even more and said yes.

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That morning as she readied for her first date with Charlie, the nervousness that Maddie felt was in a sharp contrast to the nervousness she had felt on any of the previous disastrous first dates she had attempted. When she thought about it rationally, objectively, she knew it must have been about the
timing. Bishop had been gone for a year and over that year she had worked really hard to get to a point where she could say his name without crying, where she didn't defer to thoughts of him whenever she had down time. She had worked hard to get to a point where she accepted that moving forwards wasn't an option—it was a necessity. So when she separated herself from the scenario, she knew that this time, this first date had to go better than the others—because it was already starting out at an advantage.

But when she let her feelings take over the moment, when she drew up Charlie's smile, his easy, relaxed nature, the way he had laughed with her the night before—she felt her cheeks flush just a bit, felt her stomach stir just enough. And she knew that it might be a little more than timing.

It might be the man; this easygoing, peaceful, free-spirited personality that drew her in.

"Ha," she laughed at herself as she finished her preparations. "It's probably the promise of food."

Snickering at herself, she reached for a light sweater and headed out of her apartment, out onto the streets of the city. The summer had just began to give way to the fall and she loved this time of year; warm, but not too warm. Crisp, but not chilled. It was a great time to be in the city. The place Charlie had suggested was a new one to her and she was excited to try it out. As she drew nearer, her eyes turned up; reading the signs.

And when she found it, when her feet stopped on the walk, she felt the nervous lump catch in her throat.

And she smiled.

"Oh for God's sake," she groaned quietly, rolling her eyes at herself, at the giddy nervous feeling in her stomach. "Would you pull it together? It's just brunch." With another calming breath, she glanced up and down the block, searching for the blonde man with the amazing smile.

"Madeline," she heard his voice just a split second before she saw his smile as he stepped forward from where he had been waiting. And the way he spoke her name made the feeling in her stomach swirl.

"Charlie," she grinned as she took him in; casual but nice—crisp and clean cut with a mile wide smile.

"Good Morning," his eyes seemed to dance as he leaned in to greet her; his cheek pressing against hers quickly, easily. "Thank you for coming to meet me here."

"Of course," Maddie nodded, trying to control the way her pulse picked up speed. "You know, I have lived in New York for years—both now and when I was in college—but I've actually never been here," she nodded her head towards the door to the restaurant.

"It's one of my favorites," he explained. "The food is impeccable and the service is fantastic."

"Well, I came hungry, so..." Her smile was sweet, adorable. "I would love to find out why it's your favorite."

"Wonderful," he smiled wider, clapping his hands together. "Shall we?" He held out a hand in a silent 'after you'.
"Absolutely," Maddie agreed easily. In that next step she took past him towards the restaurant, she was taking a step out of her past—at least a little bit. She was taking a step closer to her future. And the pounding of her pulse in her ears told her that this was big—long before she knew it for sure.

She was there for well over two hours. Over the best eggs benedict she had tasted in years, she fell deep into conversation with this magnetic man across from her. She laughed as he told her of his first days in the US. She listened with genuine interest as he talked about some of his more difficult roles, asking questions about his line of work which he happily and easily, answered. And she sighed and took a leap and let him in—answering questions he had of her.

He, like she, was struck by how easy it was to sit in those seats, how simple it flowed, how right it felt. He was taken by how un-taken she was with his celebrity, how un-phased she seemed by the fame. But when he stopped to think about her past, when he remembered who she had been engaged to, it made more sense. The popularity didn't psych her out, the lingering stares of strangers on the street didn't put her off. And perhaps his most favorite part of it all—she seemed to be completely real with him. No airs, no pretenses, no desire to show off and no intuitive survival tactic to shut down out of nerves.

It was just what it was—a man and a woman enjoying brunch.

And it made him happier than he had felt in a long time. So much so that he didn't even blink before he asked to see her again.

"You know, I know I should wait at least a day before I ask to see you again, but I'm going to say 'fuck it' and ask anyway," his eyes caught hers across the table as he signed the bill and tucked his wallet back into his pocket. "Can I see you again? I would love to take you to dinner or lunch or...really anything," he laughed, knowing he should be at least a little embarrassed by his boldness. But he wasn't. "I would love to see you again."

Maddie's mind seemed to be moving a mile a minute as she looked over at him, her lips curled into the same smile that had been on her face since the moment she had sat down; her cheeks sore from laughing. And though there was a twitch of nervousness in her stomach, there was also a load of excitement. Holding his gaze, she leaned on the table and in a low voice, she chuckled. "You know...I know that I should at least pretend to look at a planner or mull it over for a moment but...fuck it," she shrugged and sat taller. "I would like that too."

"Yeah?" His eyebrows lifted and his dimples deepened.

"Yeah." With a sigh and a nod, she didn't back down, she didn't pull away.

And they made plans to see each other that Wednesday for a second date.

Her first second date since Bishop had died.

Even now, even on this flight to London after the New Year, months after things had ended, she still felt warm and happy when she thought about that second date. It had been a great big moment for her, from start to finish. And she had had no idea at the time just how big it would be, how important he would become—even if it were only for a short burst of time.
All she had known that night was that it felt good to be getting dressed up for another night out, it felt good to be thinking of the conversations they would have at dinner, of the music they would hear at the show they were going to afterwards. It all just felt...good.

"I have another date tonight," she had spoken with amusement out into her apartment as she moved around finishing up makeup and hair. "With Charlie." She smiled as she said his name. "He's an actor...you would probably hate that," she laughed. "But he's not French. So I'm sure you'd be a fan." She sighed as she thought of him, of Bishop. She closed her eyes for a second, allowed herself a moment to bring him to life in her memory. She remembered the moments after he had learned of Matt, she remembered the way he had hated hearing his name, the way he had held absolute disdain for Frenchy. And instead of making her sad, instead of making her want to curl up—it made her smile.

"I'm going on a second date tonight Bishop," she whispered, swiping on some lip gloss and looking over her outfit once more. "I'm living."

Before she could cry, before she could get stuck in the fact that he wasn't—she stepped into her shoes, turned off the light and left her room. And she kept right on stepping forward.

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The night had been a smashing success. It seemed that Charlie had a particular knack for making Maddie laugh, for making her feel at ease and happy. They talked animatedly over dinner, they split a remarkable dessert.

And when Maddie jokingly asked him how he managed to have the body he did when he knew all of the best places to eat—he shrugged and answered, "I like to run."

To which she groaned and rolled her eyes and told him they should just end the date there.

But they didn't end the date there. They were having too much fun. So they finished dessert and left the restaurant. The night was young and the weather was perfect and neither of them were ready to call it over. So when Charlie suggested they have a few drinks at a bar a few blocks away where they had live music, Maddie agreed without hesitation.

When she suggested they walk, he didn't even think before he nodded and moved in that direction.

And when he reached out and took her hand, she didn't even flinch as she wrapped her fingers up in his, her cheeks flushing as she did.

They walked along the streets of New York, continuing their conversation about the city—what it had been like for her to go to college there, what it had been like for him to move there from LA. Arriving at the bar in time to catch the band's first set, they found a booth tucked into the corner and slid in, ordering drinks and easing into the rest of the night.

It was quite a night for Maddie, being out on the town with a man who was this attractive, this charming and this easy to be with—and not feeling an ounce of nervousness or upset or guilt. Later in life she would remember that night with a warm smile; the way they had flowed so smoothly into conversation, the way she had begun to gain back a fraction of the frivolity she had shared with Bishop, and the way he had handled that one moment of deep seriousness that they had stumbled upon as the band finished up their first break, returning to the stage to ready for their
Charlie, with that disarming smile of his, had adjusted in the booth, his arm moving around the back of their seat as he leaned closer to her as he let her in on how he was feeling, "Can I be honest with you?"

"Of course," Maddie nodded as she sipped her drink.

His eyes danced as they stayed steady with hers, "I really enjoy spending time with you."

Catching the look in his eyes, Maddie had no control over the smile that spread across her face. Despite herself, it felt good to hear that. She tried to keep her cool, tried to stay on her game even when her stomach was full of butterflies. He was clearly flirting with her and though she hadn't been able to imagine being okay with somebody other than Bishop flirting with her—she was. That night she was. "Is that so?"

"It is," he nodded, leaning in closer. "And if it's okay, I would like to continue to do that...spend time with you."

With her smile still in place, Maddie could hear the voice in her head, could feel the weight that now came with her slip heavier. Moving to set her drink on the table, she turned her attention completely to him, moving even closer as her hand reached out to touch his. "Can I be honest with you?" Her eyes were wide and sweet and innocent—and had him completely captivated.

"Of course," he nodded, watching her carefully as a flash of seriousness crossed her face.

Swallowing back the lump that had worked its way into her throat, Maddie took a deep breath. "I like spending time with you too. I really do. You're easy to talk to, you're funny and smart and...tonight has been...some of the most fun I've had in quite a while."

With a bit of a smirk, he pulled back to study her from a different angle. "Am I sensing a but?"

"Ha..." She laughed lightly, her head nodding. "You're not totally off base."

"You know, if you're about to brush me off, you can just tell me, I won't be entirely offended or..."

"No, no," she shook her head, her fingers wrapping around his forearm resting on the table, wanting to keep him there with her. "No. It's nothing like that. I just...there's something you should know about me."

"Okay..." His smile slipped a bit, his eyes taking on the seriousness that seemed to be taking over the table. "What is it?" The corner of his mouth curled up in half a smile. "You're not married are you?" That had never been his thing, never would be.

"No," she whispered with a soft, slow shake of her head. "But I was."

"You were?" He exhaled a bit. "Are you divorced now? Separated?"

"No," she lifted a teary-eyed smile to him and he felt his heart clench just a bit. With a shrug and a breath of air, she let him in. "I'm a widow."

And there it was, there it sat—her big secret, hanging dark and heavy over what had just moments
ago been light and easy.

"Wow..." He was stunned, having guessed nothing even close to that. "Maddie..." His heart broke for her, his hand sliding from the back of the booth to her shoulder, down her arm to her hand, in a move that was meant to comfort.

"His name was Jamie," she met his eyes, held his gaze. "It was...it was a plane crash on a trip from France to England and...we had only been married barely eight months and...and it's been a little over a year since..."

"My God," his forehead creased as he worked this over in his mind, as he tried to wrap his brain around somebody as young as her, as bright and lively as her, having faced something so terrible. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you," she smiled, swallowing back the emotions that swirled inside. "I'm doing...better. I am. I'm doing better now. It took a long time to even get to a point where I wanted to go on a first date, much less a second date..." She laughed. "Much less to a point where I wanted to spend time with anyone..." Her hand smoothed up his arm.

"Hey..."

"And I do," she cut him off. "I do want to spend time with you. I'm ready for that. I have had a great time with you and you make me laugh and I think we have fun together." She smiled. "I think we could have a lot of fun together."

"I think that too," he agreed.

"I just really need you to know that...God, this is so presumptuous," she laughed at herself but forged right ahead, even with blushed cheeks. "But I can't do...big. I can't do serious. I can't. I'm not ready for...long term or...or love. I know myself enough to know that and even though I can't imagine your mind is anywhere close to that yet, I only think it's fair to be as honest and upfront as possible." She smiled as her eyes turned soft and she took a breath. "And I just really hope that's okay."

"Wow..." Charlie blinked his eyes, taking a minute to let that settle in his head while Maddie waited to hear his thoughts. Holding her eyes, his lips curled up and his hand moved to gather hers. "Okay."

"Okay?" Her forehead creased.

"Yeah," he nodded, sucking a deep breath as he bent his head, bringing her hand to his lips. "I mean...God Maddie. I can understand why you wouldn't want to...Jesus. I'm sorry that you've had to go through that. I really am."

"I know," she whispered.

"Do you want to talk about it or..."

"No," she shook her head, her smile slowly rematerializing. "I just wanted you to know, to understand where I'm at."

"I do," he cut in. "I understand...I get it. You aren't ready and..." He laughed lightly as his fingers
held onto hers, his thumb smoothing over her soft skin. "And in all honesty, if it makes it any
easier, I normally live in L.A. And I'm here for less than six weeks and...I'm not really in a place
where I want to do long-distance or..."

"You know," Maddie tried for humor, the corner of her mouth curving up into a half smile. "If
you're trying to brush me off..."

"Not at all," he chuckled as he shook his head. "I think we can have fun together," he smiled up at
her, his eyes creasing at the corners, his shoulders shrugging. "Even if that's all we have together."

"Yeah?" Maddie felt a new feeling of hope sweep over her. "Fun? I can do fun."

"I believe that," he laughed.

"Can it be just that?"

"It can for me," he nodded, touched by the way she was looking out for his feelings. "Can it be just
that for you?"

"Yes," she sighed, tension easing from her shoulders.

"Can the fun include more dinners?"

"Of course," she laughed.

"Lunches? Brunches?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Really any meal," she rolled her eyes. "Really anything that involves food."

"Ha! Nice," he laughed along with her. "Can it include maybe some movies? More music? A
museum or two?"

"Yes it can," she nodded, her smile widening with every question.

With his teeth biting at his lip slightly, his smile turned flirtatious and his eyes twinkled. "And
kissing you?" His dimples deepened as the heat between them shifted. "Can it include that?"

Maddie felt her skin flush and her lungs catch. And then, without dwelling any longer on their
conversation, she pulled up a smirk of her own and shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I suppose that
depends."

"Oh?" His eyes flashed wide, curious. "On what?"

Feeling braver and bolder than she thought she should, she held his gaze and answered in a low,
throaty voice. "How good you are at it."

His laughter was wide and loud and full of the same spirit that had drawn her to him, his head
tipping back against the seat of the booth. When his eyes pulled back to hers, there was something
new in them; something heavier, something sexier. "Well it just so happens..." He leaned in closer
to her, ready to step into the fun she had offered. "That I'm very good at it."

"Ah...." Maddie's cheeks warmed as she smiled up at him through lowered lashes. "I think maybe I
should be the judge of that."

"God," he shook his head. "I was hoping you would say that."

"Were you?" Maddie was close to smug as one eyebrow arched, her eyes watching him intently as he moved in. She had given him the okay; the okay to move forward, the okay to step into this fun relationship that was ahead of them, the okay to kiss her. And he was going to take it.

"I was," he nodded as he leaned in, his hands moving up from her hands, his fingers warming the skin of her arms.

In those few seconds that it took for Charlie to move in on her all she could remember feeling is heat. Heat from the intensity of his eyes as they held the gaze with hers. Heat from his fingers as they moved across her jaw, as they curved around into her hair. Heat from his body as he closed the distance between them.

And then his lips pressed to hers...and all she could remember was...nothing.

She could remember nothing.

His soft, sweet, warm lips moved against hers and everything slipped away from her; the conversation they had just had, the disastrous kisses that had come before this—even Bishop had managed to slip from her mind.

All she could think of, all she could feel was the way he was kissing her, the way his hands were firm and gentle as they pulled her mouth up to his. All she could feel were his lips curving over hers again and again. All she could feel was the softness of his tongue as it slipped out and smoothed over top lip, daring her to let him in.

And she did. Without thinking, her lips parted and his tongue tipped in, dancing over hers, teasing her senses before he pulled back.

All at once, his tongue, his lips, his mouth left hers and her eyes fluttered open. She knew that he could see the pink in her cheeks, the stun in her eyes, the breathless way she watched him as her fingers reached out to collect his shirt, not wanting him to move too far.

"So?" He tried to tame the smirk on his lips, his eyebrows lifting in question, his thumbs stroking over her jaw as he held her face in his hands.

Her lips curled up, her head nodding quickly as her eyes focused on that amazing mouth that had made her forget so many things—including herself.

"Yes..." She laughed lightly. "Yes. That can absolutely be part of the fun..." As his laughter filled the space between them, she tugged on the fabric in her fingers and brought that smiling mouth of his right back to hers.

And he went; with all of his warmth and ease and lightness. He went right back to her.

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"Yes?" Maddie smiled up at her, her fingers pressing to her lips as if the heat from that first kiss still lingered.

"I'm sorry Ma'am," she was polite as she nodded to Maddie's empty glass. "Would you like some more champagne?"

"Ah," Maddie sat up in her chair, handing it off to her. "Yes. That would be great. Thank you."

"I'll be right back," the young woman took the glass and slipped away.

Clearing her throat, Maddie stretched her arms up over her head and smiled down at the picture of Charlie in the magazine. With a sigh she let her mind run over the course of their relationship; brief and warm and much more important than even that kiss had been.

It had been absolutely everything she had needed at just the time she had needed it—it had been so perfectly timed and so wonderfully executed that in her wilder moments, she wondered if maybe, just maybe, Bishop had had some cosmic hand in laying it out in front of her.

But then she thought of the way Charlie had kissed her, the way their relationship had unfolded—the heat and the laughter and the passion—and she had to laugh. No way would Bishop have been okay with all that had unfolded at the tips of Charlie's fingers.

But he would have been proud—and so was she. Proud of the way she had taken a breath, taken a leap and jumped into that wonderful six weeks with Charlie.

"Here you are Ma'am," the flight attendant returned with another glass of the bubbly champagne.

"Thank you," Maddie took the glass and leaned back into her seat and, as she stretched her legs out in front of her, she let her mind slip back to those six weeks, to the way they had helped her heal. And her cheeks flushed a light pink as those memories made her smile.

To Be Continued...
Chapter 6

Maddie and Charlie's relationship had unfolded much like that first kiss. Warm and fun and full of excitement. And even though the relationship was forced to run its course in less than six weeks, it proved no less satisfying, no less poignant.

Where the second date had been casual and relaxed, the third date brought more formality. A suit and tie, expensive champagne—but it ended in the same sort of casual relaxed nature. In a bar with guitars strumming in the background, Maddie laughed and sighed and gave in to this magnetic pull she had to him—kissing Charlie until her lips felt hot.

With regret, he had told her of a busy week ahead, he had warned of crazy hours. Early morning call times, shooting late into the night. But after the warning, he offered up a proposition for her, a weekend reprieve—an offer she simply couldn't refuse.

"You're going upstate?" She looked up at him through her sunglasses. "On the bike?"

"Yeah," he nodded again, his lips curling into that easy smile he had. "For the weekend. My friend has a beautiful home up there that's empty most of the time. It's a nice chance to get away from the city and the weather's going to be amazing, so the bike ride will be well worth it..." He shrugged his shoulders and looked down at her. "I'm going to leave Friday afternoon and come back Sunday. It'll be relaxed, easy...you know, you should come."

She thought about it—only for a second—and then she let her instincts kick in. "You have a helmet for me?"

"I do," his eyes danced as his grin deepened. "Does that mean you're coming?"

With mostly good intentions and just a dash of this pent up lust she was feeling, she agreed. "You know what, I think it does."

"Excellent," he stood taller, smiled wider; clearly pleased with her decision. "Excellent. I'll pick you up on Friday."

"I can't wait," Maddie took a deep breath, calming her nerves already alive with excitement and anticipation. "It should be fun."

"It will be," he agreed easily. "I promise."

Maddie thought about that weekend trip all week long. She ran it over in her mind again and again; what it meant to go away with a man—this man—for a weekend. And she was surprised at which feelings were stirring. For the first time in a year she was feeling desires she had feared she may never feel again, she had needs that were resurfacing.

The need to be held.

To be kissed.

To be wanted.
To be touched.

Needs she guessed—or more rightly, hoped—Charlie would be able to meet.

So as the weekend neared, she prepared, she packed. She knew exactly what she was walking into and for as much thought as she had given it, she was ready. When Charlie called up that Friday afternoon to tell her he was there with the motorcycle, she took a shot of tequila, grabbed her bag and with a bubble of nervousness, she called out to Bishop, "Don't wait up."

When she saw the sexy man waiting for her outside, standing tall next to the bike, dressed for the trip, she knew she was making the right decision. Even if she was nervous. And when he looked up to her with those smoldering eyes and that wide smile, she knew that the weekend was going to be a memorable one.

With a helmet strapped to her head, she climbed on behind him and held on tight. With her arms wrapped around his amazing body, she breathed him in and held on as he drove them out of the city.

Maddie had many needs met that weekend spent upstate with Charlie. In fact, they were met with a great steadiness, an impressive endurance and a skill that had drawn his name from her lips over and over again.

She still laughed, still sighed when she remembered their first time together. She had been so overly charged, from their drive up, from the fantasies that danced in her mind. She had initiated things mere moments after they had stepped inside the beautiful home that would be their weekend oasis. Kissing him hungrily, her hands worked feverishly at his clothes. He responded first with equal passion, equal greed as he held her body tight to his. And then he had pulled it together, slowed it down and made sure to make it a moment they could savor.

He had been wonderful with her; slow and patient and loving as he checked in with her only once to make sure she was ready, to make sure she was certain.

And then he had made her feel alive.

He had carried her up the stairs to the bedroom with a swiftness that impressed her.

He had made her feel safe and at ease and incredibly, incredibly sexy.

As he peeled off her clothes, he had chuckled at the tattoo on her hip, smirking as he asked her if it was there to help her remember her last name.

And she had smiled back smugly and challenged him to do his best to make her forget it.

Yes. Her needs were met that weekend.

Satisfyingly and frequently.

There were moments when she thought maybe she should have felt more guilty about all the time they spent indoors—eating, relaxing and discovering each other's bodies. Moments when she thought she should have regretted not enjoying the town more, the scenery. But she just couldn't do it. She had enjoyed herself too much.
It had been an amazing weekend. It had been a big weekend, a big moment—in a wonderfully simple sort of way.

And so it was true for their relationship.

When they returned to the city, they continued to spend as much of their free time as they could together. She would go by the set, meet him in his trailer. He would stop by her office and distract the staff. They would go out, they would stay in and above all—they enjoyed each other.

And God how she laughed. If there was one thing, one quality that described her time with Charlie overall—it was just how much, and how loudly, and how often she laughed.

The press found them out pretty quickly, as neither of them cared to try to hide it. Before long, photos were circulating; holding hands, dancing, laughing, eating. Even one with a kiss they had both thought was private.

Then there was the moment when he was asked about her during an interview with Ellen. She had flashed up a few photos taken of the two of them together—out and about, nothing scandalous. And she had asked, point blank, what was going on.

But as with everything else, he had handled it with his trademark, cheeky charm.

With that damn smile of his and a coy shake of his head, he answered, "I do know her."

"Well clearly you know her."

"Clearly," he nodded into a shrug. "And she's great. She is a lovely person. Lovely."

"I've heard that about her—from people who've met her or known her."

"She is," he agreed without reservation. "But I think...I think that's really all I'm going to say about her."

But even as the conversation moved on to his film, his upcoming projects, the buzz about the two of them continued.

When her family found out, the reactions were mixed and true to form.

Her mother reiterated her trust in, and love for, her daughter and remained silent.

Jenna groaned through her own sexual frustration and sighed, "Matt. Charlie. Seriously. Do you know how to pick a fling or what?"

And Kyle shook his head with a low chuckle. "You really do have a thing for British men, don't you."

To which Maddie shrugged and grinned. "Maybe British men really have a thing for me."

But no matter the responses, no matter the rumors that ran rampant, neither of them were bothered. They were having too much fun.

That's what it was; through and through.

All except for one night.

One night around week four when Maddie called and cancelled their plans with an abundance of apologies and a shake in her voice that caused Charlie pause. He had heard tears, he had heard sadness and though she had said she didn't want to go out, that she needed to be at home—she hadn't said she wanted to be alone and he was concerned. So in casual clothes and bearing gifts, he went to check on her.

When the doorman rang up to tell her she had a visitor, Maddie was surprised. And when she pulled open her door to find him standing in front of her, humble and sweet, she was just a tiny bit relieved.

"You came." Despite her mood, despite the day she was having, the corners of her mouth turned up as she took him in.

"Yes," he nodded with a sweet smile. "And you can tell me to leave if you want to."

"Charlie..." She looked down at her hands, trying to reign in her emotions that had been running wild that day.

"And I will," he held up a hand in surrender. "I know you didn't invite me here and I'll go if you want me to, no problem. Or..." He lifted up the bags in his right hand and wagged his eyebrows. "I brought comfort food."

"What kind of comfort food?" Blinking, her eyes shifted to the bags in his hand, her interest peaked instantly.

Charlie grinned, knowing he had gotten through at least a little. "Macaroni and Cheese."

"From the place we went to with the bad lighting?" Her eyes shifted back to his, the excitement stirring in her stomach.

"Yes," he nodded. "Also some ice cream for later. And a bottle of wine just in case this is a drown-your-sorrows kind of thing."

With a smile, her teary-eyes turned apologetic. "My mind is really wrapped up in my husband tonight, Charlie. I...I found some photos and I just sort of spiraled..." She sighed, swallowed and looked down at her hands again. "I won't be much fun at all."

"Hey," he took a small step forward, talking to her with a low, comforting voice. "It doesn't have to be only fun between us. I can...be a friend too, can't I? He watched her closely, letting that sit for a moment, waiting until her eyes lifted to his, wanting to gauge her reaction. And when he saw her eyes, he smiled and continued. "You can talk to me Maddie. You can tell me what's going on, you can cry if you want to. I wasn't going to do anything else tonight, so if—if you wanted me too—I could come in, eat wonderfully fatty food, have a drink and be here while you're sad about your husband...can't I?" When she looked up at him, his eyes were wide and his smile was genuine and in all honestly it made her want to cry even more.
"I don't deserve this," she shook her head. "I don't deserve you."

"Come on," he shook his, dismissing her words. "Let me in? Just a little?"

Maddie watched him for a moment, in awe of his ability to be there for her, even at a time when everything inside of her was caught in the past, in another man. "Okay," she smiled and stood aside, wanting to take what he was offering, wanting him to be there more than she had ever thought she would. "Okay. Come on in."

Holding onto the bags, Charlie followed her into the apartment to the kitchen. Lifting the bags onto the counter, he looked around the place as Maddie took the ice cream to the freezer. "Wow," he smiled, unloading the to-go containers of macaroni and cheese, setting the wine on the counter. "This is an amazing apartment," he turned around to face her and before he could say anything else, she stepped right up to him—wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her face into his chest.

"Thank you for coming," her voice was muffled in his sweatshirt. He was so warm and comfortable; jogging pants and a t-shirt with an unzipped sweatshirt. She kind of wanted to just snuggle in, already feeling better now that he was there.

"Oh hey..." He hugged her tight, his hands smoothing over her back, strong and supportive.

"And thank you for bringing food," she turned a smile up to him—her chin resting on his chest.

With a hearty chuckle, he pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose, "no problem." He hugged her again. "So tell me. What do you want to do? Do you want to eat? Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

"How about...how about both?" Her nose crinkled up and he nodded. "Okay." She pulled back from him then, more than a bit reluctant, as her hands slid down to hold onto his for a moment. "Let's go out to the couch." She nodded her head towards the living room. "If you bring the mac and cheese, I'll bring the forks and drinks."

"You got it," he squeezed her hands once before releasing them to reach for the containers of food.

"Beer?" Maddie asked as she moved to the fridge.

"Yes please."

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They were settled next to each other on the couch, legs tucked under blankets, food in their laps. And finally, after a long pull from her bottle of beer, Maddie took a deep breath and confessed.

"I found some photos."

Charlie's eyebrows inched up as he looked to her. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," she nodded, her fingers playing with the corner of the label on her bottle, a chuckle building in her chest. "And when I say it out loud...it sounds ridiculous. That I let some photos throw me off my day? That I let them send me to tears for..." She shook her head and let out a puff of a breath. "It sounds ridiculous."
Maddie would always remember the way he sat next to her, quiet and contemplative and not jumping in to tap down her emotions or to save her. He just sat and watched her, letting her feel it for a moment before he spoke. "Do you want to tell me what they were of? The photos I mean."

She felt tears well in her eyes and she had to take a minute, take a breath, before she could nod. "They were from our honeymoon..." She whispered, wiping at her eyes as she looked down at the half empty container in her lap. "He... Ha! He had this crazy need to take pictures of me from his point of view...when I didn't know he was watching," she laughed as she remembered. "And then there were some of him that I had taken and they just..." She sniffed and looked up at him with a shrug of her shoulders. "They aren't anything special. They weren't from a big moment or anything like that but I saw them and..." She laughed and waved a hand at her teary eyes, at her sad appearance.

"Had you seen them before?" He didn't move to hold her hand, didn't move to pull her into him. Though she could feel his leg next to hers, could feel the heat from his body, he made no advances. He was being a friend and listening.

"Yes," she nodded. "But when I saw them today, I thought about the last time I saw them and then I thought about the last time I sat down and thought about him, the last time I missed him and..." Her eyes filled with tears and she looked out into her living room. "And it's been a few days and...it's never been a few days..." She shook her head. "What if I'm forgetting him?" And then, without much ability to control it, she started crying, her face falling into her hands.

Charlie sat quietly next to her for a moment, holding the space for her to cry. After a moment, he reached out, his hand landing softly on her back and in a voice that was low and soft and the warmest thing Maddie had ever heard, he brought her back from the edge. "Hey...why don't you tell me about him?"

"What?" Maddie's face pulled up from her hands, her eyes looking back to him.

"Yeah," he nodded with a light shrug. "I know very little about him and I promise you...it's not going to make me feel bad. In fact...it might be nice to know a bit more about the man who managed to marry you," his smile was sweet, his hand smoothing over her back.

"You...I..." She shook her head, laughing lightly as she wiped at her tears. "You want me to tell you about Bishop."

"I do," he nodded. And he did. She could see it in his face, in his smile and his eyes and the way he sat next to her so open and at ease.

"I...I don't know what to say," she sat back against the cushions, pulling her blanket with her, still struggling with the reality of this situation, with how great this man next to her was being.

"Well," he smiled, setting their food on the table in front of them and reaching to pat her hand. "You could start at the beginning...how did you meet him?"

"Ha!" Maddie's eyes lit up, her teeth biting at her bottom lip as she smiled. "Well. When I met him I was dating Harry...his best friend."

"Oh really!" Charlie's eyebrows shot up, his lips curling higher. "You married your ex-fiance's best friend?"
"I did," Maddie grinned as she nodded, blinking at the tears as her mind drifted back. "God, I really did."

"Wow..." Charlie laughed, loving the way she was smiling, the way she was easing up on herself. "It's always quite scandalous with you, isn't it?"

"Ha!" Maddie's laughter filled the room around them and warmed his heart, even as her eyes narrowed at him. "Yes. Yes I suppose it is."

"I suppose it is," he grinned back. "Don't stop there..." He encouraged. "Tell me. How did you end up with the best friend?"

"God," she groaned. "Are you really sure you want to hear this? You could be out on the town or with the guys on the bike or..."

"Stop," he cut in softly. "I'm where I want to be. I want to hear this..." He held her eyes for a heavy, serious beat, and then he shrugged. "And if you won't tell me, I'm just going to read it on the internet later so..."

With a wide smile and thankful eyes, Maddie nodded. "Well...we can't have that..." Nudging his shoulder with hers, she squeezed his hand.

"No," he shook his head. "We can't."

And so she began. Sitting right next to Charlie on her couch, their legs stretched out in front of them under the blankets, she told him about Bishop. She told him how they had been friends, how he had been there for her when things ended with Harry. She told him how he had saved her, how he had injected this amazing spirit into her life. She talked about the big move, about the proposal, about their wedding. And then, with half opened eyes and sleep tugging at both of them, in a quiet voice, she told him about losing him.

With her head on his shoulder and her hand held in his as his fingers stroked softly over it, Charlie turned to kiss the top of her head. "I'm very sorry that you lost him. He sounds like a really great man."

"He was," Maddie nodded with a small smile.

"And you know..." He moved so that his arm wrapped around her shoulders, letting her snuggle in closer. "It doesn't sound to me like you're forgetting him at all."

"No," she smiled against the soft fabric of his shirt as her eyes grew heavier and heavier. "No it doesn't."

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It was just past three in the morning when Maddie stirred again. As her eyes drifted open, it took her a moment to pull in her surroundings, to make sense of it all. She was still on the couch, still in the living room. She was tangled up in blankets and...Charlie.

There he was, snuggled into her couch with his arm tucked up underneath her shoulders, his other draped loosely around her, around the blankets that kept them warm and cozy. They were so close,
so comfortable and he was so peaceful sleeping next to her. Maddie smiled as she thought over the night, remembering the way he had just come over to her house, how he had brought reinforcements in the form of comfort food and wine. But when she thought of the way he had been there for her, the way he had sat next to her while she cried, the way he had asked question after question about Bishop—wanting to help her remember, wanting to help her see that she was remembering. When she thought of the way he had been there for her—so selflessly, so easily—it brought a whole new kind of emotional lump to her throat.

He was an amazing man—this man laying next to her.

And she wanted nothing more in that moment than to be closer to him.

Her hand slid over his stomach, her legs moved so that one of them wiggled its way in between the two of his and her nose nuzzled into the softness of his t-shirt, her head tucking into that wonderful warm, protective crook of his shoulder. With a big sigh, she snuggled in happily; beyond thrilled that he had decided to come over, beyond thrilled that he was still there.

With all of her movements, with the weight of her sighs, Charlie stirred next to her on the couch. His hands tightened around her as he woke, his natural instincts were to draw her in and when his eyes opened to see her next to him, she was greeted with a sleepy smile.

"Hey..." His voice was low and rough from sleep.

"Hi," she smiled back up at him. "We fell asleep on the couch."

"I guess we did," he chuckled as he hugged her again, his hands running over her arms as he held her. "What time is it?"

"I don't know," she shook her head, not wanting to turn her eyes or her attentions away from him. "My phone is in my purse over there on the end table but...I don't want to move."

"Mmm..." He let out a small, innocent moan as he adjusted just a bit, squinting at the clock on the wall. "It's late love. You should go to sleep."

"I was asleep," she grinned.

"Ha...I meant to bed," he kissed her forehead. "I have an early call time in the morning. You should go back to your room...I can head home and..." And as he began to release his hold on her, as his hands left her arms, as his legs pulled from the way hers hugged around him, Maddie felt something close to loss. Her breath sucked into her lungs and she reacted on instinct.

"Wait," she reached out to him then, her hands pressing to his chest, reaching for his arms. "Wait..." She shook her head. "Stay? Please?" Her eyes were wide as she looked up at him, as her limbs moved back around him, keeping him there. "I know you have to leave early and I know this is the couch but...I'm incredibly comfortable and warm and...and you were just...so wonderful to me tonight." She blinked back the emotions that bubbled up—this time for him. "Please stay here with me tonight? Would you?"

"Ah Maddie," he exhaled, his body settling back into its spot, his arms wrapping around her again—settling into their homes. "You know I can't say no to that."

"You could..." She lifted her eyebrows, not wanting to guilt him into it.
"But I won't," he shook his head as he pulled her close to him, closer than she was before. His arms wrapping all the way around her, he hugged her tight. As one hand smoothed over her shoulder, the other slipped into her hair. "If you want me to stay...I'll stay."

"Yay!" Her voice was soft as she lifted her hands in victory for just a second before returning to the warmth and steadiness that was him.

He chuckled as he gathered her up in his arms and let out a long breath, his eyes closing as he relished in just how comfortable he was, just how warm and peaceful he felt.

"Hey Charlie..." Maddie whispered, her face so close to his that he could feel her breath on his jaw.

"Hmm?" He opened his eyes, looking down at her as she looked up at him.

She watched him for a minute, her fingers lifting to smooth over the slope of his nose, to stroke over his cheek, to rub over his chin. She knew that he had come over that night to be there for her as a friend, she knew that he had sat next to her on that couch and listened to her tell the tale of Bishop and she knew—more than anything else she knew in that moment—that this man tangled up with her on that couch was a most amazing gift into her life. She knew that as much as Bishop had occupied her heart and her mind that day—Charlie was occupying them that night.

And her desire to be near him, her need to connect with him, to show him what that meant to her—it was nearly all consuming.

As her fingers curled around into his hair, she leaned up and she kissed him; soft and slow and sweet. And when she pulled back, she blinked and she smiled and she whispered, "thank you. For everything you did here tonight. Thank you."

"Hmmm," he smiled, his heart thumping in his chest, his pulse speeding up at her closeness, at the way she was looking at him, at the way she made him feel. "You're welcome."

"I just..." She stalled, unable to find the right words, the right sentiment. Nothing seemed to be right, seemed to be enough for what she was trying to say. So she stopped speaking and she found a better use for her lips.

As they moved over his again, this time with a little more heat, a little more insistence, her hands wound their way hotly up his chest, over his shoulders. And before he could catch his thoughts, before he could catch a breath, Maddie was pulling him to her; her arms wrapping around his neck, wanting him closer. And he went. When she pulled, he went, moving over her as her mouth opened under his, as her tongue teased out against his, as she moaned into his mouth.

And he wanted her. He always wanted her. So when her legs adjusted around him, wrapping around him the same way her arms were, he pressed his body down against hers. And when she gasped against his lips, he smiled and kissed her again.

And again.

And again.

But when her hot hands slid up under his t-shirt against the skin of his back, when she arched up against him and kissed his lips in a slow, passionate, meaningful way, he was puddy in her hands.
He would do anything she asked.

So when she pulled her lips from his, when she opened her eyes and waited for him to do the same, when she smiled and sighed and said, "Please Charlie...I want to be with you..."

Oh how he wanted that too. So he didn't think twice when her hands slid higher, taking his shirt with them. He didn't think at all when she drew him back down to her, when the kisses she had for him seemed slower. And when he saw the look in her eyes, when he felt the tug in his chest, he knew that this moment, this time...it wasn't just about sex.

And it wasn't; not for him and certainly not for her.

As she opened herself up to him, there in her home she had shared with Bishop, she was letting him into a part of her that she thought would remain shut down...but that had been how it was with him. He had opened her up to so many things in so many different ways—that it seemed only right that he open her up to this too.

Though no words of love were ever spoken between them, though any feelings of love were certainly kept close to themselves; that night, on that couch—Maddie made love with Charlie.

And it was absolutely everything her first time after Bishop was supposed to be.

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The end came too soon for both of them. Even though they had known it would happen, even though they had both gone into this knowing that it would end, that knowledge didn't make it any less difficult. It didn't make the six weeks any less significant.

As the last week wound down, Charlie tied up things with the film and Maddie began to process the fact that he was leaving, the fact that she had to say good-bye. It was all a little surreal, when she spent time thinking about it.

He never met her mother—or even a cousin.

She never called him her boyfriend—though if pressed he probably would have owned the label.

It was never meant to go past fun.

But when week six drew near and the end was upon them, Maddie was a different person than she had been at the beginning.

Boys don't change you. But relationships should. And this one had. Profoundly.

So on their last night together, Maddie packed her overnight bag with purpose, tucking in a bit of a gift for him, and she left her home to go to his. They had gone to a big wrap party the night before, but this...this was his last night in New York. Though he was clearly happy to see her when she arrived, there was a tint of sadness in his eyes, a slight dip in his smile. He was going to miss her too.

They spent their last night together much like they had spent their weekend upstate—eating takeout in various stages of undress, drinking champagne and loving each other's bodies into the night. Though it wasn't all about frivolity, there were a few serious moments.
Like sometime late into the night, early morning, when Maddie slipped from his bed to retrieve something from her bag. He watched with a tired smile as she climbed back in holding onto an envelope.

"There's something I wanted to show you," she smiled over at him, her fingers working over the worn envelope in her hands.

"What is it?" His eyebrows lifted, his hand moving to smooth over her back.

"Here..." She handed it over with a soft look in her eyes. "I...I wanted you to read it. It was from..." She let out a soft laugh and bit at her bottom lip for a second. "It was from my husband. He had written it and left it in his will." Her eyes caught his and she could see that he knew this was a big deal for her. "There's a part in there..." She took a breath and laughed. "Would you mind reading it?"

"You're sure?" He took the envelope from her with questioning eyes.

"I am," she nodded. And she was. She had read it over and over that day and she was sure. She wanted him to know why she was about to tell him what she was about to tell him.

So he did. He opened the envelope and pulled out the paper with Bishop's last message to her scrawled out in his own handwriting. Maddie sat quietly, watching as his eyes bounced over the words, watching the emotion catch up with him. And when he finished, he folded the paper carefully and slid it back into the envelope.

"Wow..." He breathed. "That's really something special that you have this from him..."

"Yes," she agreed, knowing how lucky she was. "The reason I wanted you to read it..." She took a deep breath in and let it out slowly. "That last part...about living, about continuing shine and be happy and live."

"Yeah?"

Her eyes locked with his and she smiled; wide and happy and with slightly teary eyes. "That part was about you." Her words struck him in the chest like a freight train and she could see the emotion rise to his face, filling up his eyes. And she knew they had agreed to leave this at fun, but there was just one more thing she had to say before she let it all go. "You...this last six weeks...have been some of the most wonderful, the most important I've had. You helped me feel young and happy and wanted and...alive. You helped me feel alive in a way I wasn't able to do on my own. And I know that we agreed that this would be...what it is. But I can't let you go back to LA, I can't let you leave here without knowing just how...important this has been to me; how important you have been to me." She smiled as she pressed a hand to her chest. "You will always, always have a place in my heart Charlie."

At a loss for words, he swallowed at the lump in his throat and nodded. Leaning forward, his hands reached out to her, his fingers tangling into her hair as he brought her to him, as he kissed her. Soft and full and warm—just like she made him feel. And when he pulled back, when he took a beat to take a breath, he pressed his forehead to hers and made a confession of his own.

"You should know that I've spent the better part of the last twenty-four hours trying to figure out how a bi-costal relationship might work..."
Maddie blinked at the tears that rose to her eyes as she willed herself not to cry. "Only twenty-four?" She tried to insert humor into the moment, tried to make it light.

And it worked. He laughed, pulling his head from hers and bringing her into his arms. "Probably more than that," he sighed as the snuggled back into the bed together. "I'm going to miss you Maddie."

"Oh I'm going to miss you too," she pressed a kiss to his chest as she tucked into his side.

"Can I call you when I'm in New York again?"

"Please do," she turned serious eyes up to him. "And if I ever make it out to LA..."

"I would love to show you around," he leaned to kiss her. "And you know...the film will have a premiere here in the city. If you're free...I would love it if you would join me?"

"A big film premiere?" Maddie's eyes twinkled as she grinned. "I suppose I should check that off my list."

"I suppose so," he nodded and sighed, letting the part of him that wanted to push for more fall quiet. This was how it was supposed to be—as much as saying good-bye was difficult, as much as he wanted to hold on—this was how this was supposed to go.

Maddie, feeling a moment of doubt, of uncertainty, tightened her hold around his waist and turned a shaky voice up to him. "It would never work...right?" She whispered with sad eyes. "A bi-costal relationship...it would never work?"

And though he wanted to tell her that it might, that it could; though he wanted to tell her the plans he had made in his mind when he had allowed himself time to daydream. Though he wanted to nod and say yes and take her with him—he knew that it wouldn't be fair.

"No," he whispered, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "It would never work. Not like we would want it to."

With a sad nod and a surrender of her hopes to the moment of reality, Maddie hugged him tighter and kissed him again knowing that these moments were going to be mere memories in less than a day.

Saying good-bye to him was hard. She had pulled him back to kiss her at least three times. And when her eyes filled with tears, his did too. But in the end, they smiled and they hugged tight and they did it. They said good-bye, just as they had planned; just as they had promised.

She had given him an amazing six weeks and he had given her a chance to feel again.

As the flight attendant made another round, letting Maddie know they were nearing their descent into London, Maddie smiled her thanks and finished off her glass of champagne. Looking down at Charlie's smiling face in the magazine, she closed it and tucked it into her travel bag and she sighed—thankful for her decisions.
In the end, it had all been about these decisions she had made; to go to the party, to give him her number, to say yes to the first date and the second. She made these decisions so easily, with full faith and confidence in herself. These little decisions were simply indicative of the bigger decision she had made, the one to trust herself again, to allow herself to live and feel and be. The decision to move on without Bishop, even though she had loved him, even though she had missed him terribly—even if she'd give anything to have him back.

It was all of these decisions that had built her up, that had lead her to this place in her life, having had a fulfilling, wonderful relationship with Charlie—and just on the precipice of being handed an enormous, emotional decision.

One that she hadn't seen coming.

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When Maddie stepped off the private jet, they were already there waiting for her; Ian and Michael with wide, open arms and great big smiles. She was down the stairs in a flash, hugging them both tightly, kissing their cheeks. Her mind wanderings completely slipping away as her focus shifted entirely, to the now, to the future.

"Come on now darling," Ian smiled that unique Bishop smile as his arm wrapped around her shoulders. "Are you ready to celebrate the holidays with two old men?"

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, tucking her arm around his waist. "Two of my favorite old men," she eyed him, reaching her hand out to take Michael's. "Absolutely."

As the three of them slipped into the car, as her luggage and gifts were loaded into the trunk, the celebratory nature continued. They were family—they had been since Bishop had brought her into mix and, as far as any of them were concerned, they would always, always be.

"Welcome to London," Ian squeezed her hand in the backseat.

With bright eyes and an even brighter smile, she squeezed back. "Thank you..." She sighed, settling into her spot. "Thank you."
"Kiki my darling," Harry's eyes were bright and happy as he slid into a chair next to his longtime friend's.

"Well if it isn't the Duke himself," she winked at him with a giggle of a laugh. The holidays were over and they had all returned to London and this was really the first time any of them had been able to get together. As the music played overhead and drinks passed in rounds, the group of friends assembled in the back of Leo's bar and celebrated.

"How was the anniversary trip to New Zealand?" Harry reached for a drink and shifted closer to her so he could hear her over the muffled chaos that surrounded him.

"Wonderful," she grinned. "And short." Her lips turned down for a quick frown before she shrugged and rebounded. "I wish we could have stayed longer."

"You couldn't?" He raised his eyebrows, waving hello to Leo who was taking care of something at the bar.

"No," she shook her head. "Sean had to return to work."

"Jerk," Harry joked, making her laugh in agreement.

"My thoughts exactly," she took a long drink and nodded to him. "How was your holiday?"

"Good," he smiled; a wide, open grin that drew her own a little higher. "We were out at Sandringham for Christmas and then I spent the New Year with the cousins up at Zara's," he shrugged and took another drink. "It was nice."

"Good, good," she nodded, her lips curling into a smile as she leaned closer to him. "And tomorrow we get to see Maddie."

"Ha," he laughed at the wide-eyed excitement on her face. "Yes we do." It wasn't lost on her, the way Harry's eyes took on a bit of a shine.

"You know," Kiki warmed at his expression. "When I talked to her this afternoon, she said you were going out to Ian and Michael's for dinner."

"I am," he nodded quickly, taking another drink from his bottle, trying to stave off the heat he felt flush through him. "When Maddie told them we were going to meet up, they invited me out to the house. And you know that I couldn't say no."

"Sure," Kiki shrugged with amusement in her eyes, her voice. "Couldn't say no to who? Maddie?"

"To Ian," Harry corrected her quickly, a soft, playful, glare shifting into his eyes. "Anyway..."

"Anyway," she giggled, noticing his smile as he reached for his drink. "You're going to bring her over to our place after dinner?"
"She said that was the plan," he nodded.

"I can't wait to see her," Kiki sighed, sitting back into her chair. "It's been such a long time and I know it must be strange for her to be back here and see everyone but honestly," she looked up to Harry with a sweet smile, no hint of sarcasm. "It's going to be great to see her, especially with a smile on her face."

"Yes," Harry returned her smile, returned her sincerity. "Yes it is."

And it was. Since he had spoken to her on Christmas, since she had suggested they meet up while she was in England, he had been excited to see her. He had been smiling more, he had been walking lighter and his mood had lifted. Though he would never admit it—even if he had been able to recognize it.

All he knew was that very next afternoon, he was due for dinner at the Bishop Estate, after which he would take Maddie into the city to Sean and Kiki's for drinks with their group of friends.

That was all he knew. That—and he couldn't stop smiling.

Maddie was nearly ready when she heard the doorbell ring and she knew it was him. Glancing at her watch, she looked back up at the mirror and ran her hands over her hair. She could see her smile reflected back at her and as she felt her stomach flutter just a tad bit nervously, she met her own eyes and shook her head. She didn't know why she was nervous; she had known Harry forever, she had already seen him twice in New York. Maybe it was because they were going to go see everyone else later that evening. Maybe she was nervous about hanging out with Bishop's friends for the first time since his funeral. Swallowing back a lump of nerves, she stood tall and took a deep breath.

"You're going to be fine," she muttered to her reflection before turning off the light and heading towards the action.

Maddie could hear their voices as she rounded the corner towards the stairs. Their muffled accents and laughter drifted up towards her bringing a smile to her face. She had known Ian and Michael would be fine with her inviting Harry out for a bit while she was in town. But she hadn't expected them to be so quick to have him for dinner, to be so open about entertaining the two of them. But it made her heart warm nonetheless.

The three men looked up as they heard her joining them, smiles from all three. "There she is," Ian nodded his head in her direction first.

"Sorry," she smiled sheepishly. "I took a little longer than expected."

"No problem dear," Ian shook his head as he patted Harry's shoulder. "Henry was just letting us in on his next big project."

"Oh he was?" She turned her smile to him as she stepped up to the group, feeling the easiness between them, the familiarity. "Good to see you."

"It's good to see you too," Harry's eyes flickered in amusement as he leaned in to kiss her cheek in a very easy, standard hello—even if it did fill his senses with her.
"What's this next big project?" She asked as she turned to open the conversation back to the group.

"Some very secret intel from London," Michael winked at Maddie. "Something called The...Invictus Games."

"Invictus?" Maddie turned to look at Harry. "From the Henley poem?"

"You know it?" Harry's smile deepened.

"I do," she nodded. "Are you going to let me in on the secret or..."

"Of course," Harry laughed, nodding his head as Ian spoke up.

"How about the four of us head in to dinner? Henry can fill us in?"

"Sounds great," Harry nodded, turning back to the elder Bishop though he could still feel Maddie's eyes on him, studying him with her natural curiosity.

"Fantastic," Ian clapped his hands together and turned to Michael, his voice lowering as his smile turned more personal. "Join me for dinner?"

"Absolutely," Michael nodded, falling into step with Ian as the two men led the way to dinner; Maddie and Harry stepping in behind them.

"The Invictus Games?" Maddie whispered as she walked next to him.

With a chuckle Harry looked down at her, his eyes meeting hers with laughter. "You're worried I've taken up poetry?"

"A little," she snickered, letting it go for a moment—knowing they would get back to it over dinner. "Thank you for coming out Harry."

"Thank you for inviting me," his smile was sweet and small and completely genuine. "It's really good to see you again."

So it's essentially an...Olympics...for wounded veterans?" Maddie's smile was wide, her eyes watching him closely as he explained it all to her. They had spent dinner catching up with Ian and Michael, chatting about their recent holidays, reminiscing. And as they finished up at the table, Harry used the opportunity to bring her up to speed on his newest initiative.

"Essentially," Harry nodded, grinning into his glass as he leaned back. "Yes."

"My goodness Harry..." Maddie shook her head with a smile; impressed. "You've really started something quite special."

"Yeah well," he shrugged his shoulders, his eyes casting downward.

"Don't do that," Maddie's hand slid forward on the table, almost as though she were reaching out to him. "Don't shake it off like it's no big deal. It sounds important and really incredibly thoughtful."
"It is important," he agreed easily. "Though I can't take all the credit."

"Yes well, you can certainly take a big chunk of it," Ian's smile was sweet and kind. "I honestly can't wait to see it come to fruition."

"Yeah?" Harry turned his attention from Maddie to his best friend's father. "You think you'd stop by?"

"I think I would," he nodded, looking to Michael who nodded and then to Maddie. "What about you darling?"

"Oh I don't know," she grinned at her father-in-law and then met Harry's eyes with a hint of smugness on her lips. "You think that I might be able to get in?"

"I think we might be able to make some sort of arrangement." He chuckled as he tried to keep his excitement under control, as he tried to hold back the mile wide grin that came with the thought of her being there when this all unfolded. Blinking his eyes and forcing his smile to the other two men at the table, he took a sip of his drink. "I would be honored to have you there. I can send tickets to the house?"

"That would be wonderful," Ian nodded his head. "And maybe I'll talk to my Assistant about setting up a meeting about some sponsorship opportunities?"

"Oh wow," Harry's smile turned sheepish. "That's not why I told you about the Games."

"No, I know it wasn't," Ian assured him. "But it sounds like something we might be interested in. In fact...I have this new employee who's been heading up philanthropic decisions in our New York office. It might be something she would be interested in."

"It might be," Maddie met Ian's gaze with a big, warm smile.

"Good," Ian nodded, reaching for his own drink.

"Good," Maddie repeated, not even thinking twice as she cocked an eyebrow across the table at Harry.

"Good." He echoed, not even blinking as he set his eyes on her.

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Harry knocked on the door to Sean and Kiki's, chuckling at the nervous way that Maddie bobbed next to him. Fidgeting fingers and tapping toes, he knew that when he looked to her, she would have her bottom lip between her teeth.

"You okay?" He turned to her, finding he was right.

"Ha!" Her head tipped back slightly as she laughed. "I'm nervous. I know it's ridiculous but I just...I haven't seen them since the funeral and..." She caught his eyes, caught his steady gaze and when he smiled, it eased her anxiety. But before she could get caught up in that, she blinked and took a breath. "I'm being crazy. Right?" She lifted her eyebrows.
"A little bit," he held up two fingers to show her. "You have no reason to be. Kiki has been over the moon excited to see you and..." And before he could finish, the door in front of them pulled open with a rush and there she was.

"Oh my GOD!" Kiki exclaimed, clapping her hands together at the sight of Maddie; the excitement mixing with a quick burst of lingering sadness and grief for their late friend, bringing tears to her eyes and a wide smile to her lips. "I can't believe you're here..."

"I know," Maddie felt her own waves of emotion, unbelievably happy that she had called, that she had been invited over; that she was there. "I know."

"So..." Harry stepped forward as he looked between the two of them. "Any plans to let us inside?"

"Oh God," Kiki groaned, rolling her eyes as she snapped back to the moment. "Of course! Of course!" She moved aside and waved them in. "Get in here."

"Thank you," Harry smiled and stepped out of the way so Maddie could pass, followed by Jim who would do a quick sweep. And then he watched. With a warm, wide smile and this feeling of...contentment...he watched Kiki wrap Maddie up in her arms and hug her tight. And then he watched the two women walk further into the house, already talking, already catching up. As soon as Jim returned, slipping past him with a pat to his shoulder and a promise to wait outside, Harry was following them in; the rest of their friends calling out hellos and greetings as they all saw Maddie for the first time in a long time.

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It was a lovely night, reminiscent of the one Maddie and Harry had spent in New York, getting drunk on Scotch and remembering this man that had meant so much to all of them. As they sat, scattered around Sean and Kiki's living room, they laughed and sighed and even cried a little. And they swapped stories about Bishop, about their time since.

Harry had taken a chair across from Maddie's, watching as they all fell into the spirit of things. And occasionally, when a particular story would come up or when a memory sparked something familiar, Maddie would look up, her eyes searching for him. And when she found him, she would smile.

And he would be lying if he said that didn't hit him; hard.

"Okay so..." Kiki's voice was light and giggly as the evening had worn on. Leaning from her spot on the couch to be closer to Maddie, she motioned for her to lean in too. And Maddie did. "Can I ask you a question of the more...personal nature?"

"Sure," Maddie's eyes widened as she took a sip from her glass.

"Okay," Kiki moved even closer, her voice lowering in a dramatically hushed whisper. "Did you really date that actor?"

"Oh for Christ sake, Kiki," Sean groaned next to his wife, bringing a light chuckle from around the room when he smacked her ass.

"You mean Charlie?" Maddie smiled wide as she thought of him, chuckling at the reaction of the people around her. "Yes. Yes...I dated him."
"Oh God...." She sighed. "I knew it," she turned to nudge her husband in the ribs. "She dated the actor."

"I did," Maddie's cheeks flushed just a little as she remembered, her eyes darting over to Harry for a split second—just long enough to see that he was watching her. "His name was Charlie," she turned her smile back to Kiki. "And we weren't together very long but it was...really nice." The far off look in her eyes drew curiosity from the man across from her and the pink on her cheeks drew a wide smile from Kiki.

"Was it serious?" Her curiosity came from the sweetest of places; a desire for this friend of hers to have found a way to move on from a great big loss.

Maddie looked down at her drink with a soft shake of her head before she shrugged and looked back up at Kiki. "I don't think so. It was...it was short lived and it was...a lot of fun and it was just...really what I needed at the time."

"Good," Kiki nodded, happiness building in her chest, even as her emotions swayed. "Was it crazy sometimes? Since he was an actor I mean. With the fans and the autographs and the photos and the attention? Everyone wanting a piece of him?"

Stifling a laugh, Maddie shrugged her shoulders. "There were moments where it was a little bit crazy but you're forgetting..." She took a deep breath and swung her eyes across the room to Harry, taking a leap of faith that it had been long enough that she could poke at their past. "When it comes to the attention and the fans..." She cleared her throat and lifted her eyebrows to Harry. "Charlie was hardly my most high maintenance relationship. Not by a long shot. If you know what I mean."

As all eyes shifted to Harry, his shifted up to meet Maddie's and when he laughed, the room laughed with him. It was true; nothing Maddie had experienced with Charlie had come even close to what it had been like to be with Harry. And he knew it too. As their friends laughed around them, he met her eyes and when she smiled wide, he smiled back and just like that, a connection was made.

Enough time had passed, enough words had been spoken—they could laugh at it all as if old friends. And that meant the world to both of them.

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When Maddie slipped inside the door to the Bishop home hours later, she made it point to keep it down; not wanting to wake Ian and Michael. But when she locked the door and turned into the house, she stopped and smiled when she saw him. Ian Bishop in a long robe and pajamas sitting in the dimly lit den off to the side, lifting his hand to wave at her as she joined him in the room.

"I swear to you it's not how it looks," his voice was soft as he sat up, holding his hands up in show of surrender.

"Hmmm..." She crossed her arms over her chest and looked down at him, trying unsuccessfully to suppress her grin. "And just how do you think it looks?"

"Like I'm waiting up for you." He cleared the newspaper from the spot next to him.

"You're not?" She sighed happily as she sank next to him on the couch.
"Not really," he shook his head. "Not in the overbearing, protective, father-like way."

"You know," she leaned closer to him, nudging him lightly with her shoulder as she turned sweet eyes to him. "It would be okay if you were."

His eyes met hers for a moment and he nodded, resolved. Leaning back, his arm moved around the back of the couch and he smiled down at her. "How was your night?"

"It was..." She took a deep breath and let it out. "Really, really wonderful." Her smiled pulled wider as she remembered. "You should have come with us. I think you would have loved to have heard some of the stories I heard tonight."

"You think so?"

"I do," she nodded, drawing her shoeless feet up underneath her as she turned to face him. "In fact, the boys...they were talking about a fort they said was here on the property and they used to play out there for hours. Harry said once he and Bishop were out past dark and had to find their way back and Bishop had convinced him he used celestial navigation to find the house..." She chuckled and sighed. "He's pretty sure now that he could just see the lights of the house..."

Looking up at the elder Bishop, she could see the memories playing in his mind, his eyes drifting someplace far off, his smile warm and reminiscent. "I remember the fort," he chuckled. "They all spent a lot of time out there as children. Though I'm not sure how much of a fort it was."

"Harry said he would come out tomorrow and show me where it was..." She adjusted next to him. "If that's okay with you."

"Of course it is," he nodded easily, his hand moving to pat her knee. "I'm sure that old fort would be something to see."

"Would you like to come with us?"

"No," he shook his head. "Thank you but no. You kids should go out. I'm sure Henry will enjoy showing it to you."

"I'm very excited to see it," she blinked back the emotions that had been building just below the surface all night, her hand taking hold of his. "And imagine a young Bishop running around, laughing..."

"It's quite an image," Ian squeezed her fingers. "Okay my darling. You're home safe. I'm going to go to bed now. Good night," he leaned to press a kiss to her cheek and, releasing her hand, he rose from the couch.

"Good night," she called up to him, watching him take a few steps before she grinned. "And thank you for waiting up for me."

"Of course," he chuckled. "I love you Madeline."

"I love you too Ian," she returned the words, returned the sentiment.

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When Harry had promised to go out to the house to show Maddie the fort, he had been motivated by a handful of things; nostalgia, responsibility, the way her eyes lit up when he said he would—and quite a bit of Scotch. But that next afternoon as he drove out to the house, turning down the familiar roads, he didn't feel as certain, he didn't feel as sure. The memory of his conversation with Kiki the night before, after Maddie had left in a cab, had been playing over and over in his mind, toying with his emotions and his nerves.

The Night Before:

"That was really nice..." Kiki's voice was soft as she collected bottles and glasses from the table in the living room.

"Here let me help," Harry rose from his chair, gathering up a few plates and a couple of bottles, following her to the kitchen.

"To see Maddie," Kiki continued her thoughts as they moved to the counter, unloading their arms. "It was really nice."

"It was," he nodded in easy agreement, his smile softening his face.

Kiki watched him for a moment, taking in his smile, his eyes, and though there was something inside of her that warned her against it, she couldn't help but ask. "Hey...is there something going on?"

"What do you mean?" Harry's eyebrows knotted together but he didn't look up from the dishes he was sorting; some to the sink, bottles to the recycling.

"With..." She almost couldn't say it, almost didn't dare. "With you and Maddie."

"What?" Harry's eyes snapped up to hers, the glass in his hands slipping into the sink with a crash.

"Easy," she moved towards him, looking to see if anything had broken.

"Why would you ask that?" He looked down at the sink, seeing that nothing had cracked. Shaking his head, he tried to shake off the way his emotions had stirred with Kiki's words.

"I don't know," she smiled, watching him thoughtfully. "You two seemed to have a nice time tonight."

"So did you," he pointed out, reaching for a towel to wipe off his wet hands. "So did your husband. So did Leo. So did..."

"Okay," she held up her hand, a giggle pressing to her lips. "You just seemed...I don't know Harry. You seemed...connected. When we were all talking, there seemed to be...something between you. I just thought..."

"Don't," he shook his head again, his posture straightening, his shoulders squaring.

"Easy," she laughed, reaching out to rub his shoulder. "You don't need to be defensive. It's just you and me in here and I was only asking if..."
"The answer is no," He met her eyes as his smile pulled into a straight line across his face. "To your question...the answer is no. There is nothing, absolutely nothing going on." He shook his head and turned away from her, moving his shoulder out from under her hand. "I can't believe you would even ask such a thing."

"What?" She laughed lightly, her forehead scrunching up as she followed him around the kitchen counter to the table on the other side. "It's not that crazy, you know."

"Yes it is."  

"You..." She puffed out a laugh. "You have been with her before, remember? You and Maddie. You were engaged and everything. It's not that crazy to think that maybe something has..."

Her words fell from her mind when he spun around to face her, his jaw taught and his eyes dark. He moved closer to her and when he spoke, his voice was low and serious. "She's Bishop's wife, Kiki. She's his...wife."

Blinking at the tears that rushed to her eyes, swallowing at the lump that formed in her throat, Kiki nodded. "I know," she whispered. "I know that." With a deep, shaky breath, she forced her eyes to stay locked with his. "But he's...gone."

The air between them grew heavier, the look in his eyes sadder, as the words settled between them. "Kiki..." His voice held warning, even if he didn't really know why.

"He is," she tried to smile. "And so much has happened, I just thought..."

"Well don't," Harry shook his head and there was something in his voice, something in his eyes that made him look scared—something that made her feel sad for him. Whatever it was she was seeing, it made her pause in the way she was pushing him. Her head nodded as she swallowed, as she took a breath. Together in the dark, in the silence, they stood looking at each other, each of them trying to control the way their minds were wandering away from them. And she didn't know what to do, what to say, now that this was out between them.

Harry was the first to speak, quiet and soft and sad. "Do you know what she said? When she left me?"

"I...." Kiki shook her head, confused at this sudden shift. "Are we talking about Maddie or..."

"Cassandra." Her name sounded harsh in the room. "Do you know what she said to me when she walked out?" He leaned back against the counter, his arms crossing over his chest in a way that seemed protective.

"No," Kiki shook her head. "I don't. And honestly does she get to weigh in on this?"

"Lucky You," Harry repeated in a low, deep, hurt voice. "She said...Lucky you."

"I...I don't understand." Her eyes blinked as she watched him, not sure she wanted to understand.

"I...I don't understand." Her eyes blinked as she watched him, not sure she wanted to understand.

"She looked me right in the eyes and said 'You must be thrilled that these pictures came out. You must be over the moon because now you can finally have a chance at her again. Your wife is a tramp and her husband is...dead. Everything's lined up just perfectly.' Just feeling the words come out of his mouth, just hearing them in the room made both of them feel sick to their stomach.
"Lucky you."

"Harry..." Kiki reached out to his arm, her hatred for that woman growing exponentially. "She's horrible for saying something like that to you."

"But..."

"No buts," she shook her head. "No. Nobody believes that you feel that way. Not for a second, not for one second Harry."

"She wouldn't be the only one that thought that," he looked down at the floor as his brain ran wild with her words from before, with his memory of his last day with Cassandra. "She wouldn't be the only one to draw that conclusion."

"Stop," Kiki felt tears start to fill her eyes. "It's an awful thing to say, a horrible thing to think and..."

"People would say it though. People would think it!"

"Not the people who matter!" She countered, her voice rising with his. "Nobody who knows you thinks for a second that you wouldn't do anything to bring him back! Nobody thinks that you don't love him, that you didn't love him with everything you had, that he wasn't your best friend and..."

"I can't," his voice was hoarse as he battled against the tears that were building. Looking up to her with pleading eyes, he shook his head. "I just..." He gulped and tried to shake it off. "He was my best friend Kiki, my absolute best friend in the entire world. I would have done...anything. I would have done anything for him and when things ended between us," he blinked at the tears, turning his face from hers. "She's his wife. She's..." He chuckled as he thought of her. "She's Maddie Bishop now and despite anything that may have happened between us in the past, she is and will always be—his wife." He turned back to Kiki who was battling with her own teary eyes, her own choked up emotions.

"Okay," she whispered, nodding sadly. "But..."

"No buts," he shook his head again.

"You do know that he would want you to..."

"No," Harry cut into her words with a bitter laugh. "You have no idea what he would want, what he would say."

"Harry..."

"Kiki," his voice turned sharp with her as his mind drifted back over everything. "I was...I was the worst kind of asshole when he came to me."

"I know," she whispered.

"I said things to him that I shouldn't have said, things I did not mean."

"I know," she repeated.
"I hit him and I pushed him out."

"I know."

"You don't!" He stood tall then, pushing away from the counter. "I know you think you do, Kiki. But you don't. I...I was awful to him."

"But..."

"But nothing," he shook his head as something inside of him resolved. "But nothing. Kiki...I love you very much. I really do. But...anything you noticed tonight, any connection you thought you saw...it was all about two old friends reminiscing. It was about..." He had to take a breath, had to gather it together. "It was about my best friend's wife. And that's truly all it ever could be." The resolve in his voice, in his eyes, told Kiki that he absolutely believed what he was saying. And he did. He knew in his heart of hearts that even the potential hint at anything more than that was not a possibility—from him or from Maddie. What they had shared years ago had stayed there in the past and now—if he was lucky—he had the chance to be her friend, an acquaintance; somebody who had loved her husband just as she had.

"Okay," Kiki nodded, giving in, not wanting to push. "Okay. I'm sorry I brought it up. I..."

"It's okay," Harry smiled, reaching out to pull her into a hug. "I appreciate you looking out for me."

"Ha..." She laughed as she hugged him back. "Somebody's got to."

Present time

Turning up the last stretch of road to the Bishop home, Harry took several deep breaths, collecting his wits, calming his nerves. He had meant every single word he had said to Kiki that night. There wasn't a part of him that didn't believe it.

But that didn't explain why he was nervous.

That didn't explain why he had stewed over what shirt to put on, why he had showered and changed after work instead of just coming out in his suit from the day.

That didn't explain why he had thought about calling to cancel, why he had worried about seeing her, about being in the same place with her.

He had meant what he had said—there was nothing between them; no connection, no lingering feelings, no hope for anything more than a casual friendship.

But that didn't mean that when he pulled up to the house and stepped from the car and knocked on the door and saw her eyes—that didn't mean that his heart didn't jump into his throat.

And it sure as hell didn't mean that he wasn't over-the-moon thrilled to see her again.

"Maddie..." He exhaled her name, feeling the pit of his stomach swirl.

"Harry..." She grinned, standing back and waving him in. "I've been waiting all day for you to get here!"
With a deep breath and a wide, genuine smile, he stepped inside and somewhere in the way back corner of his mind, he could hear Kiki’s voice, he could feel her objections growing louder.

He knew better, he really did. But he had promised to be there, promised to take her out to the fort and there was no way he was going to back out—not for anything in the world. Even his own crazy, mashed up feelings.
Chapter 8

As Maddie and Harry made their way through the thick bank of trees at the far end of the lawn at the Bishop Estate, their feet crunched the leftover snow beneath them and their breath came out in white puffs from their lips.

"Watch your step over here..." Harry nodded ahead of them as they moved around a few fallen trees. "It's not much further."

Maddie chuckled as she followed along, her hand reaching out to steady herself on the tall trunk of a tree as she stepped. "Did you two build it yourselves?"

"Kind of," Harry chuckled as he remembered. "Ian helped us get all the supplies and get them out here. We hammered a few nails but I have a suspicion there was a bit more behind the scenes work."

"Sure," Maddie smiled, her cheeks pink from the frosty air. "I can just imagine you two with hammers and nails."

"Scary?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, tossing a smirk in her direction as they stepped out of the trees into a bit of a clearing.

"Yes," she laughed, her head nodding as she caught up with him; coming to a stop right next to him.

With bright eyes and a soft smile, Harry nodded his head off in front of them. "There it is."

Maddie turned in the direction he was looking, her eyes squinting to bring it into focus. "The fort." She whispered the words as her lips curled higher.

"The fort," Harry echoed, clapping his gloved hands together. "Shall we take a look? Find out what kind of shape it's in after all of these years?"

"Oh absolutely," Maddie agreed easily, taking a step out in front of him, leading the way to the wooden structure that sat nestled in the tall sturdy branches of a great tree on the edge of the next cluster of forest.

Harry stood still for a long moment, taking in a deep breath and schooling his emotions as his mind was flooded with childhood memories, with thoughts of Bishop. Watching Maddie for a few beats, he cleared his throat and followed along; ready for whatever came along with this particular walk down memory lane.

When he caught up, Maddie was standing at the base of the tree, testing out the makeshift ladder rungs that had been hammered into the trunk of the tree. "Are forts typically built up in trees?" She called out to him without turning around.

"Well, it helps if your fort has higher ground," Harry explained with a shrug. "That way you can see your attackers and you take away their element of surprise."
"Sure," Maddie laughed, setting one of her feet on the bottom rung, testing it out. "Think it's safe to go up there?"

"I don't know," Harry frowned lightly, looking up at the fort he remembered so well, his hand working over the rungs, checking for stability. "I mean, we once had four rowdy boys up there but that was quite a few years ago."

"Well..." Maddie thought about it for only one more second before she decided; embracing the spirit of the moment. "I'm going up."

"Okay..." Harry wasn't surprised in the least. But before he could offer to go up first to check it out, Maddie was already climbing the rungs, her hands stretching up over her head as she moved. With a warm chuckle, he stood back, watching and waiting as she pulled herself up onto the bit of a deck that wrapped around the fort.

"Are you coming?" She called down.

"Right behind you," he answered, already climbing. When he reached the platform with her, he looked around, taking it in, looking out over the clearing, past that into the trees.

"Was this the lookout?" Maddie glanced around the small open space.

"It was," Harry nodded, watching her as she turned towards the door, ducking down to go through the low opening.

"Oh my goodness," she laughed as she stood upright inside, her eyes adjusting to the dimmer light. "This is...amazing..."

"Yes. Yes, it is," Harry chuckled as he stood tall, looking around the long-forgotten fort. "Well, well, well, would you look at that." He pointed to something just behind Maddie's head.

Turning to look, she laughed. "No Girls Allowed?" She read the sign with amusement. "And in great big red letters, no less?"

"Pretty serious," he laughed. "You should know I'm breaking a cardinal rule by having you in here."

"I guess so," she turned back around, these remnants of Bishop's childhood. There were drawings on the wall, mostly childlike renditions of artillery. "Look at all of this..." She shook her head. "Thank you for bringing me here."

"Of course, of course," he leaned back against the wall and watched her for a moment. "He really never brought you up here?" Harry was surprised.

"No," she grinned. "Maybe he thought he had already broken enough rules when it came to me?" She arched an eyebrow and met his eyes.

With a chuckle, he nodded. "Maybe."

"You two played up here a lot?"

"Sure," he shrugged. "Me, Bishop, Leo, Sean. Though Sean disappeared a bit when he met Kiki."
"Well sure," Maddie laughed. "What with the bright red rules and all."

"Exactly," Harry grinned.

"But not you and Bishop?" Maddie was curious about them as children, loving the images in her mind.

"Nah," Harry shook his head, his arms crossing over his chest. "We loved this WAY more than we loved girls..." His eyes met hers with a smile. "At least for a while."

"It was really great to see everyone last night," Maddie offered, moving around the fort, checking out the details more closely. "It felt good to be together laughing this time."

"I agree."

"And hearing all the stories and catching up..." She sighed and turned to look at him. "It was kind of like it used to be...normal. You know?"

"I do know," Harry nodded.

"And this...This reminds me so much of..." Her voice trailed off as her smile slipped higher and Harry could swear that he saw her cheeks flush just a bit. "Do remember that time we were out at Highgrove? It was my first time out there and we took your motorcycle to Tetbury?"

"I do remember," he nodded his head, his heart thumping in his chest as his mind drifted back.

"And when we came back, we went out to..."

"The treehouse," Harry finished her sentence with a wide smile and bright eyes.

"Yes." She pointed her finger at him. "This reminds me of that." She took a breath and looked around. "How wonderful that you both had such great places to play as children."

"Yes," Harry agreed with a bob of his head.

"Yes," Maddie echoed, leaning back against the wall as her eyes moved about the fort, making their way over to Harry, a thoughtful look on her face. "That was a really great night, you know."

Harry blinked, caught off guard by the direction her words were taking them. "The treehouse?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Yes," she chuckled lightly. "The treehouse. That was a really great night."

"Yes," he whispered, swallowing back a lump of nerves in his throat, confused by its appearance. "It was. It...wow...it feels like a long time ago."

"It was," Maddie laughed, her mind drifting further back in their history. "But we had some fun together...a long time ago," there was a smug smirk on her lips as her eyes danced over to his. "Didn't we?"

"I..." He stammered, his thoughts moving about a mile a minute as he tried to keep up, as he tried to
hang on. Never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined they would be talking about this. "Yes," he felt his emotions stir as he looked over to her; emotions that had been tucked away.

"Yes," she repeated more to herself than anything. "Do you still have it?"

"It?" He shook his head, not following her train of thought.

"The bike?" She met his gaze and tried for a teasing tone. "You didn't lose that in the divorce or anything?"

"Ha!" Harry laughed. "No, no. I still have the bike and..." He sighed. "Thanks to the cheating clause in the pre-nup...I didn't lose much in the divorce."

"There was a cheating clause in your prenup?" Maddie's eyes narrowed, her forehead pinching together over her nose.

"There was," Harry chuckled softly, almost sadly as he shrugged. "She and her attorneys negotiated it." His eyes swung up to meet Maddie's. "She thought I would be the one to..." He waved his hand. "But when it was her, the agreement left her with nearly nothing. So when I met her in the middle...she left pretty easily."

"Jesus Harry," Maddie shook her head as she thought it over, unable to really bring the image to life in her mind.

"Yeah. She walked away with some money, the ability to hire private protection if she needed it," he took a breath and frowned. "She left the house, the name..."

"The title," Maddie offered without even thinking about it, having remembered the news stories at the time.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "Which, honestly, I think, is the only thing she misses."

"Harry..."

"What can you do?" He smiled; tired and resolute. "It's over. Lesson learned. I won't make the same mistake again."

"Which mistake is that?" Maddie was sweet with him, her smile soft as her eyebrows rose in question.

"Thinking that anything other than absolute love and devotion is an acceptable reason to marry," he answered so easily, as though he had told the same story over and over, but his words hit Maddie and she blinked against the impact. "He warned me you know..."

"Bishop?" Maddie whispered his name.

Harry nodded. "He knew I was being stupid, knew I was making a mistake. He warned me..." He laughed as he shook his head. "So many times."

"He was a smart man," Maddie smiled as she thought of him.

"He was," Harry nodded. "He knew I was making a mistake, he knew it from the very beginning. I
should have listened to him." His head hung down as he rubbed at the back of his neck.

"Yeah..." Maddie sighed. "But sometimes, most of the time...we have to experience things to learn the lesson. If we just do what others tell us, the lesson doesn't resonate the way it was supposed to, we don't learn as much from it as we should."

"Fair enough," Harry smiled. "Well we can rest assured that I've learned my lesson."

"Nothing but absolute love and devotion?" Maddie offered lightly.

"At least," Harry nodded and shrugged his shoulders as he pushed away from the wall and stood. "I hope that it doesn't make things uncomfortable for you when I say this..." He took a deep breath and waited for a beat before he continued. "I should never have walked away from you. I knew that. Bishop knew that. Hell, the fates knew that. But I thought I was smarter than all of them, than myself...I thought I could out-wit the world. And Cassandra, she was put in my path to teach me a lesson. 'So you think you can do this without that kind of love?' Here you go smart man," Harry laughed as he looked out one of the small windows. "Give this a try."

"You really think that's how it works?" Maddie watched him thoughtfully. "The world? God? The fates?"

"Sure," Harry shrugged, turning back to her. "Don't you think there's a chance people are put into our lives to teach us lessons?"

"Yes, but..."

"But only good ones?" He smiled, lifting his eyebrows in a bit of a challenge. "We learn lessons from bad ones too, don't we?"

"I suppose we do," Maddie worked it over in her mind.

"You learned one from me...didn't you?" Despite the heaviness in his words, in his voice, he seemed almost at peace with it.

"I..." Her words fell short, stalling in her throat as her eyes widened. "I...I don't know what to say. I..."

"I hate to think of the lessons you learned from me," his eyes grew darker, his lips turning down in a frown as he remembered all he had handed her. "I was one of the bad ones for you." With a heavy nod that matched the weight of his shoulders, he leaned back against the wall.

Maddie took a deep breath, wanting to settle the lump in her throat as their history floated forward. "Not all of it was bad, Harry," her voice wavered only a little as she met his eyes. "There were...a lot of great lessons that were learned before the end."

"But none as big as that," he nodded more to himself than to her.

"Hey, listen..." Maddie took a step towards him.

"No, no," he cut her off with a shake of his head, a wave of his hand. "I didn't bring it up so that you would try to make me feel better about it. There's really no...way. Or need. I'm just saying. I was one of the bad ones for you. And, in return, in the great reciprocity of the universe...Cassandra
"Harry..."

"Please," he smiled, his head tipping softly to the side. "Please don't try to...please just say 'okay' and let me own this?"

Maddie held his gaze for a beat, watching as he stayed tall and steady. He was serious, he meant his words. So she nodded and took a breath. "Okay."

"Okay."

"Thank you," there was nothing but sincerity in his eyes as he smiled at her. "Thank you."

There was a long moment of silence between them, soft smiles on their faces as his words sat there, as her acceptance settled in. And then in a soft voice, she continued. "It wasn't all bad Harry and...for what it's worth, I wouldn't change a single bit of it."

"Yeah?" He seemed almost tired as he looked up to her. "Because I would think you would go right back to that day in Bendal and...I don't know," he laughed a low, soft chuckle. "Never have asked me to help unload that truck."

"Hey..." She moved towards him, adjusting her gaze to meet his eyes. "Hey. I wouldn't." She gulped and moved closer. "I wouldn't wish away meeting you Harry. For all the good and the bad, for all the...lessons...I wouldn't wish that away."

"Well maybe you're crazier than I thought."

"Would you?" She didn't acknowledge his attempt at levity, at humor. "Would you go back and take that day away?"

In a voice that sounded bolder and braver than he felt, he held her eyes and answered. "Not for anything in the world."

The feeling that washed over her when he said it, the way her heart jumped, the way her stomach swirled—it surprised her and confused her. "Even if it meant that you wouldn't have had to go through Cassandra? Even if it meant that you and Bishop would have..."

"Even if it meant those things," he answered before she could finish. "There are...wow...there are a handful of days I would take back if I could, but that is absolutely not one of them. It never was."

"Well there you go," she whispered.

Blinking his eyes, Harry tried to pull himself from the moment, from the almost trancelike feeling that had taken over him. Turning his eyes from hers, he looked down at his shoes and nodded his head. "Well there you go."

The room was silent for the longest of moments as each of them tried to gain footing, to figure out the weird shift that seemed to have happened. Maddie watched him intently, waiting for him to look up at her, waiting to see the look in his eyes, the smile on his face. Waiting—and curious.

And when his eyes swung back up to her, when his lips lifted in a smile that seemed almost tired
and resolved and maybe just slightly uncertain, Maddie swore she felt a tug in her chest. "Hey Harry?" She spoke softly, quietly; almost as if she were worried her words might crack the air between them.

"Hmm?" He swallowed back the anxious way her gaze made him feel; nervous and unsettled.

"Would you..." She trailed off for a second, almost as though her voice was afraid to continue on. But there was another part of her that could do nothing but continue on. "I was wondering..." She cleared her throat and stood tall, walking around as her mind began to process. "You talked about these lessons you learned from Cassandra and lessons you think I learned from you and..." She stopped and smiled across the space at him. "And I can't help but wonder...what lesson did you take away from us?"

He didn't know why but her words hit him like a blow to the chest, his eyes blinking as he hurried to recover his surprise. "Sorry?"

Maddie smiled at how fumbled he appeared. "I'm wondering what lesson you learned from me?"

"Maddie..." He shook his head as something in him warned him away from this conversation.

"Come on," she encouraged him with a smile. "Give it to me straight. How bad was it?"

"It wasn't bad at all," he met her eyes and matched her smile. "And you know that."

"Then what was it? Big picture lesson?"

He held her gaze for a long moment, watching her eyes dance as she watched him, wondering what in the hell was going on in that head of hers, wondering why she was smiling so much when talking about their past—wondering why in the world all of that made him feel nervous, made him feel like he couldn't breathe. His smile wavered under his sudden nerves, under his emotions, but he answered. "You already know."

"No I don't..." She shook her head, finding that she was holding her breath, that she was waiting—and wondering exactly what she was waiting for.

With a great big breath and an enormous leap, Harry answered. "Nothing but absolute love and devotion. That's what I learned from you."

"But...you learned that from Cassandra..."

"No," he shook his head. "Being with Cassandra only highlighted what I was missing with her...what I had had with you..." Suddenly feeling like he might cry, or run, he bit his lip and forced the words again. "Absolute love and devotion. That's what I had with you, that's what I took away. That was the big lesson for me."

"Harry..."

Suddenly he felt nothing but nervous; shaky and unsure. He could see the look in her eyes, the way she was watching him. He could see her mind processing it all and it made him afraid and he had no idea why but he was compelled to stop her before she said anything else. So he said the first thing that came to mind, the only other thing that was on his mind. "Bishop."
And he could see her pause in thought as her eyebrows pulled together. "What?"

Clearing his throat, Harry tried to pull it together. "You must have...had a big lesson from Bishop, right?" He took a breath and felt himself relaxing. If they talked about her husband, that surely meant they wouldn't talk about whatever it was she was thinking about.

"I...I," she blinked back her confusion that was consuming her—confusion at his words, at his nervousness, at her own mind. "Yes, I mean. Of course I did."

"What was it?" Harry pressed on. "The big take away lesson from your...husband."

That was easy; so simple. Without blinking, without thought, she smiled and answered. "To be happy. To...live big and without regret or reservation and to...to not be afraid."

Though everything in him told him to look away, he couldn't pull his eyes from her for anything. "That sounds exactly like him."

"Yes it does;" she nodded, taking that last step to stand just in front of him. "Harry..."

"He was a phenomenal man," his focus zoned in on his best friend.

"He was," Maddie agreed easily. "But I..."

"A great friend," Harry continued, standing tall and taking a step away from her. "And I would imagine he was...an amazing husband." The last word rang out into the room, stopping Maddie in her push.

"He was," she whispered, blinking as she looked down at her hands. "He was." It grew quiet there in the fort, the air between them heavy with something that Maddie couldn't quite identify, something Harry was unexplainably afraid to name. Taking a breath, Maddie's voice cut into the silence. "I also learned that there are very, very few absolutes; very little that comes down to a black and white, right or wrong answer."

"Yeah?" He questioned, not sure where this was going.

"Mmmm," she nodded and looked up to him, finding him watching her, finding his eyes looking right back at her. "Can I confess something?"

"I..." He shook his head on reflex, not really sure why he wanted to say no.

But Maddie was stubborn and fast. Reaching out to his arm, wanting to stop him before he moved away from her. "Harry," she smiled as her fingers reached him and when they did, both of them felt the energy that had been building there in the fort. His skin warmed, even under his coat, melting away at this exterior he was trying to harden. And she softened; her smile, her heart. She softened at this connection they were making.

"Maddie..." His voice was hoarse as he looked down to where her fingers still rested.

"I just want you to know..." She could feel the heat in her cheeks; despite the cold air. She shifted just a bit, wanting him to meet her eyes as she told him. "I'm really very happy to have you back in my life." Her words were soft and low and completely sincere.
And they cut straight to his heart, bringing out a soft, groan from his lips. He knew he should move away, take his arm from under her hand, his eyes from her gaze. He knew he should ignore her words and step away. But he couldn't. He was grounded there and she was holding him up. "Yeah?" He whispered, his eyebrows lifting over his wide, nervous eyes.

"Yes," she answered with a warm smile.

Harry gulped at the way that smile made him feel. "Lessons and all?"

Without blinking, she nodded. "Lessons and all." Though she thought about taking her hand away from him, she found that she didn't really want to. "I mean...did you ever think that we would be able to do this again?"

"No," he answered quickly, his head shaking in the disbelief that still sat with him. "I truly never imagined a time when I would be able to do this...to be in the same place as you? Sharing stories and laughing and...I thought that..." His eyes caught hers and inside his chest he felt a swell of emotions and nerves; so many things twisting up in his mind and his heart. "I guess I don't know what I thought." His eyes shifted down as his voice dropped. "Though I'm absolutely certain I don't deserve it."

"Hey..." She moved forward then, taking a step to him as her hand lifted from his arm, moving with ease to his chin, wanting to tip his eyes back up to her. But when her skin met his, his eyes shot back up to hers; surprise etched across his brow. "Maybe..." She smiled through the shaky way she suddenly felt. "Maybe it isn't about deserving..." She watched as his eyes seemed to well up, as he held his breath. And she realized she was holding hers. "Maybe we were supposed to be in each other's lives again. Maybe...I don't know," she shook her head and swallowed. "Maybe there's a lesson left to learn?"

And then, as Maddie watched him, as her fingers moved against the skin of his chin, the wave of feelings that washed over her nearly knocked her sideways. Quite suddenly, her stomach flipped, her breath sucked in and her heartbeat pounded wildly in her ears. With his eyes focused on her, Harry saw it happen, he saw the shift. Though he wouldn't be able to think clearly enough to name it, he watched it hit her, he saw it in her eyes. And he knew he had maybe seconds to shift them back on track before whatever it was that was going on in Maddie's mind took over the room.

In an effort to pull her from this moment, in effort to pull her fingers from his face, his hand lifted and his fingers wrapped around hers. And in one quick, blink of an instant, it all rushed forward; the feelings they had left behind years ago. Maddie felt the breath suck into her lungs as it struck her again; this pull she had felt towards him in another life, in another time. As gone and forgotten as it was, it suddenly became clear.

And he felt it too, she knew he did. She could tell. His lip pulled into his teeth in nervous, excited habit and his eyes shaded over. It was a look she had known well once upon a time, back when their love had been the story.

She was afraid to blink, afraid to breathe, afraid to move.

But his fears were far more powerful and in the same blink of an instant, he was standing tall and pulling her hand away from him, away from the moment. Pulling himself away from her.

All at once he felt caught off guard with this sudden onslaught of feeling and all at once he felt ridiculous for not having known this would happen, for not having guessed that all of this time
spent with her, spent reacquainting himself with her life, would lead him right back to this. This heart thudding, breath catching moment where he just wanted to be with her.

"Harry..." Her eyes were wide and laced with confusion and a tint of excitement as she looked up at him. And his heart tugged in his chest.

But as much as he wanted this, as much as his mind reeled at this, there was something far more powerful brewing inside of him. And that part of him held up a hand to stop her before she could speak again. "I..." His voice cracked and he coughed to bring it back, to clear his mind. "I should be going."

"Go...going?" Maddie blinked as her mind snapped back to this moment, fuzzy and confused. "What do you mean you should be going?"

"I..." He shook his head. "I should be going. It's getting late and the sun is going down and...and it's cold."

"But..." Maddie whispered, confusion running over her face.

"I should get you back to the house," when his eyes met hers, they were wide and pleading and almost...scared. "Please? Please let me take you back to the house?"

"Harry," her voice dropped low and warm and though she was confused and thrown, she was smiling. "Just now...I..." She didn't know how to complete that thought, how to complete the sentence. She could barely understand what was happening inside of her, much less find a way to articulate it to a man who seemed hell bent on leaving, on avoiding it.

"Maddie," he spoke her name with great gravity, calling her attention to him. And the way her eyes danced when she looked up at him nearly broke him. But he stayed strong and steady and he brought up the only lifeline he had. "Your husband was..." He tripped over his memories, over his sadness and regret. "When he came to see me about you, he..." Harry took a breath and watched as her features softened, as she remembered him. "He was a different man because of you and when he came to see me about you, I...I said terrible things to him. I hit him and forced him out and cut him off and..." Harry looked down at his hands ashamed of his long ago actions. "And if he knew I was here with you, at his father's house, in his fort with his wife and even entertaining the fleeting thought of...."

"The fleeting thought of what Harry?" She wasn't sure either of them knew the answer to that.

"I can't," he shook his head, steeling himself to whatever she could possibly throw at him. "I can't. I loved him too much to...I can't talk about it. I can't think about it and I surely cannot stay here with you and..." His eyes lifted to hers, begging her to understand. "I know I owe you...so much..."

"You owe me nothing but..."

"I owed him more; more than I gave him and this is...this is how I honor that. Maddie..." His hand pressed into his chest as his eyes welled up. "I'm sorry. I have to go. I can't...I can't."

"But..."

"No," he shook his head and before he could get swallowed up by his desire to be in her presence, before he could surrender to his own feelings, he stood tall and forced the feeling from his face.
"Please. Please let me take you back to the house."

"I..." She was so confused and so shaken by what was happening inside of her, what was happening between them, that she couldn't quite find the words she wanted. But she could see the look on Harry's face, could see the desperation in his eyes, and she couldn't fight that—certainly not when she didn't even know what was going on in her own mind. So in that moment she went against her better instincts, went against the ways Bishop had shaped her spirit, and she gave in. With a sad, heavy nod, she gave in. "Okay." She couldn't bring her eyes to his as she whispered the words. "Okay. We can go."

"Thank you," he breathed in relief, his eyes welling up as he turned towards the door, knowing he needed to move before he gave in.

They were quiet as they climbed out of the fort, finding the ground quickly and soberly. Maddie stayed silent as they walked back through the thick trees towards the house. And though Harry's pace was decidedly faster than their trip out, he made sure to keep with her. He was torn; his heart, his mind, his will—he was torn. And he knew it showed on his face, in his eyes and all he wanted to do was run away—even though everything inside of him was screaming at him to stop. Even though one of those screaming voices seemed to be Bishop's.

Both of them were relieved to reach the edge of the yard, even more so when they saw Ian Bishop heading their way, bundled up and waving. This made it easier, having him there to break up whatever this new tension was.

"Henry!" He called out as they approached. "Madeline!" His smile was wide as he stepped up to them, moving to kiss Maddie's cheek. "I'm so glad I caught you both. Were you out at the fort?"

"We were," Maddie nodded, blinking and taking a deep breath.

"Was it everything you remembered?" He turned a grin to Harry, leaning in to greet him as well.

"It was Sir," Harry nodded, hugging him back. "Still standing strong."

"Well the two of you worked very hard to build it," Ian chuckled as he remembered them as children. "I'm not surprised it's survived all of this time."

"Yes," Harry nodded, his heart and his mind full of his best friend.

Ian looked between the two of them, reading something a little off but continuing on. "We were just going to get dressed for dinner," he looked to Harry. "It's Maddie's last night in England, son. Would you like to join us?"

"No," Harry shook his head, his voice soft as he struggled internally. "No thank you Sir. I need to get back and you two should..." He gulped and forced his eyes to hers. "You should really have tonight as a family."

"Are you sure?" Maddie asked one question, though her eyes were asking so many more.

"Yes," he smiled to her; sad and happy and torn. "Yes. I'm sure." And before Maddie could say anything else, before he could crumble, he turned his smile and his eyes to Ian. "Thank you very much for the invitation. But I really should be going."
"Of course," Ian hugged the young man again, patting his back as he pulled away.

"Maddie," Harry looked to her, holding his breath as he did. "It was great to see you again. Truly." He risked a glance to her eyes before he moved in to hug her.

"You too Harry," she whispered as she stepped into his arms. "I mean it." And as she kissed his cheek, as she felt his warmth so close to hers, Maddie's heart thumped in her chest and all at once she was keenly aware of so many things—not the least of which was just how close her lips were to his.

And how much that made her pulse race, how much it made her breath catch.

And then, just as quickly as it had washed over her, it was gone—along with him. Stepping from her arms and putting distance between them with two long strides, Harry was leaving.

"Good-bye," he looked from Ian to Maddie and she couldn't help but wonder if this might be the last time she saw him, if whatever had just happened had driven space between them.

"Good-bye," she tried for a smile and managed a wave. As Harry turned away from them and started towards the front of the house, Ian stepped closer to her, his arm moving around her shoulders in a warm, comforting way.

He waited until Harry had disappeared from their view before he spoke up, his fingers squeezing her arm. "Is everything okay?"

And it took her a minute, a breath, a gulp, a blink, before she turned her eyes up to his. With a nod and a smile, she did something she had never done with him. She lied. "Yes. Yes of course. Everything's fine."

When Maddie arrived back in New York, it was cold and rainy and when she stepped back into her home, she couldn't seem to shake the chill she felt. She moved about on instinct, unpacking, settling in. She turned on the fireplace, she made hot tea and she slipped into her warm, comfy pajamas. But even as she sank into the couch in front of the fire, cuddled up in a blanket with her tea, she still felt it. Chilled and shaken and more than slightly off center.

With a deep breath in and a slow breath out, she tipped her head back against the couch and pressed her eyes closed. And she did what she had been doing for nearly the last two years to pull herself back to center. She thought of Bishop. She drew forth his smile, listened for his laugh. She tried to remember the warmth he walked with, the spirit he lived with. But when her mind drifted, it drifted to Harry.

Her eyes flew open, her head snapping back up.

"Oh my God," she groaned, rubbing a hand over her face as she sighed and sat up. "I don't know what happened Bishop..." She spoke out into her home, spoke out to him. "I don't know what happened and I don't know what to do and I don't...God...I just don't know." She leaned to place her cup of tea on the table in front of her and she ran both of her hands back into her hair and she stood up. Walking around her living room, she could feel her mind begin to process, her thoughts drifting from Harry to Bishop and back again; her heart thumping in her chest at all of these newfound emotions that she seemed to be juggling.
The soft ring of her phone pulled her from the wandering trip she was taking in her mind. She was quick to find it, swiping her finger across the screen as she answered. "Mom!"

"Madeline," she was smiling. "You're on the ground."

"I am!" Maddie's mind finally snapped forward. "God, I'm so sorry. I forgot to call. It was late and I just unpacked and...I'm sorry. I should have called."

"It's okay," Hannah replied. "How was England? How are Michael and Ian?"

"England was..." Maddie chuckled softly. "England was wonderful. Ian and Michael are doing really well. They send their love and they wanted me to be sure to extend another invitation for you to visit anytime you like."

"Ha!" Hannah laughed. "I really should go visit sometime."

"You really should," Maddie sighed as she sank back onto the couch. "You really should."

"And you?" Her mother caught on to something in her daughter's voice. "Are you doing okay?"

"I am," Maddie answered thoughtfully. "I...I'm a little tired and..." She exhaled and chuckled. "And I don't know..."

"Maddie?" Hannah's voice was sweet, her love and sympathy for her daughter apparent over the line. "Is there something on your mind?"

"No," she shook her head. "Yes..." She groaned.

"You want to tell me about it?"

"I don't know." And she didn't. She didn't know what to say or really how to say it. "I was just...I was thinking about Bishop."

"Sure..." Hannah encouraged softly.

"I was thinking about...what he would think, what he would want...what he would say..."

"About what darling?"

"About anything really," Maddie bit her lip and looked up to the horrible painting that hung over their mantle, her eyes welling up with emotion.

"Ah," Hannah took a breath. "Well, give it a minute honey."

"Sorry?"

"I think that if anyone knows what he might have said, or done, about...anything...then it was probably you." Hannah smiled as she remembered them together. "I think you knew him well enough to know the answer to all of those questions."

"You think so?" Maddie's voice was soft as his voice, his words flooded her mind.
"I do," Hannah was smiling as she thought of him, as she thought of her daughter. "Just take a minute, take a breath. You'll know what to do, you'll know what he would have wanted you to do."

"Wow..." Maddie sighed, blinking at the tears that gathered in her eyes. "I don't know what to say. I hope you're right."

"Aw honey..." Hannah wished she could hug her daughter, wished she could help her over whatever hurdle was laying in front of her. "Maybe you should get a little sleep. You sound tired..."

"I am tired," Maddie agreed.

"And I'm sure that whatever it is you're battling with...it'll make more sense with a clear head."

"You're absolutely right," Maddie took a breath and rose to her feet.

"And maybe in the morning, it'll come to you—what Bishop would have to say." She smiled and added on, almost as an afterthought. "In all reality, he probably told you what he would want you to do...in some way or another."

"What?" Maddie stopped in her path to their bedroom. "What did you..."

"Sorry, I just meant that, in the way he lived, the way he did things. I think he probably showed you, or told you in his actions—or even maybe actually told you how he felt about all kinds of things." Hannah explained her thoughts. "It wasn't like he shied away from those sorts of things."

"No," Maddie whispered, shaking her head. "He didn't."

"No..." Hannah paused for a moment. "Get some sleep Madeline. Call me in the morning?"

"Of course," Maddie nodded, her heart racing in her chest as she let her mother's words find home in her mind. "Goodnight mom. And...thank you."

"Of course. Of course. Goodnight Maddie."

As the line went dead, everything else around her came alive; her thoughts, her heart, her soul. She moved around the living room slowly, her mind running with her mother's words. In reality, he probably told you what he would want you to do.

"He did," Maddie whispered, her hand rising to her throat as she looked around the room. "Oh my God. He did."

And he had. In the way he lived, in the way he loved—in everything that was Bishop, he had told her exactly what to do in this moment.

And then, just in case that weren't enough, he had written it down and had it waiting for her even after he was gone.

"Oh my God," she felt her heart catch in her throat as her eyes welled up. "Bishop, I..." She trailed off as her mind finished the sentence 'don't know what to do.' But she shook her head, her eyes searching for a picture of him. Finding it, her lips curled into a smile.
Because she did know what to do. She knew exactly what to do.

Moving across the room, she went first to his photo, smiling down at his bright face. She let a moment of silence sit there in that space as she looked to him, as she closed her eyes and remembered him. "I love you so much," she whispered to him, to her memories.

And when her eyes opened, her feet were quick as they headed down the hall, glancing at the painting she had given him as she walked by, her fingers reaching out to pat the little French man in a box he had given her.

Her mother had been right. She did know what Bishop would want her to do about all of this. And the first step in that was to stop ignoring her feelings, to stop avoiding her emotions. So she didn't stop the smile on her face as she stepped into her room and found her suitcase. And she didn't stop the way her heart pattered in her chest as she began to re-pack, as she found her phone and called the airport.

She had no idea what awaited her on the other end of this flight, had no idea what he would say or do—no idea if she was going to find herself right back where she started. But as her thoughts moved to London, to the fort, to Harry—she decided it didn't matter. She wasn't going to be afraid, she wasn't going to shy away, she wasn't going to let the unknown or the uncertain dictate how she lived. She had way too much Bishop in her for that.

So she stood tall and she jumped. She didn't allow her mind to second guess herself as she left her apartment, left New York. And with every step, with every mile travelled back across the ocean, she didn't look back.

Instead, she reached out with both hands. She was going after what she wanted. And what she wanted had finally—with the help of her late husband's spirit and his wonderful words—become glaringly clear.

She wasn't going to shy away from this. She wasn't going to run or be afraid or bow to the confusion and the obvious complications that came with it all. She was reaching out with both hands.

She was living this life.
Harry's day had already been hectic, a non-stop schedule of organized chaos. He had taken meeting after meeting after meeting as he worked to pull together the team he wanted for this new venture of his. And it wasn't even lunch time yet.

Leaving Thomas in the large meeting room down the hall, Harry had excused himself for only a few minutes—needing the quiet solitude of his office, even if it was only for five minutes. For all that he had been trying to do to get this off the ground, for all of the planning and the work—his mind was tired and preoccupied and he wished there was something he could do to just clear it.

His eyes scanned the agenda for the next meeting as he dropped off a stack of papers for his assistant Anya when she returned to her desk. Tugging at the knot on his tie, he stepped into his office, pushing the door shut behind him as he let out a breath he had been holding for God only knows how long.

He was nearly to his desk when he caught it; something was off. At first it was just a difference in color out of the corner of his eye. But as he blinked and glanced up from his agenda, it was something—or someone—so much bigger than that. For a split second, everything in the room stopped moving; his feet, his heart, his lungs.

Maddie

And then she smiled. That wide, warm, beautiful smile that nearly knocked him sideways.

Her hand lifted in a small, almost shy wave, but all he could do was stand there and look at her. In truth he wasn't all that convinced that she was actually there, that this wasn't some sleep deprived trick his mind was playing on him. But when his eyes locked with hers, he knew it was real, knew she was real.

And his heart began to beat, his lungs began to breathe and though he was confused, even thrown, by her presence, he couldn't deny that he was happy.

Just as his jaw opened to say something, to try to say something, the door behind him opened and his assistant walked in, a warm cup of tea in her hand. On instinct Harry turned his gaze to her.

"Sir," she smiled, clearly surprised to see him standing there. "I'm sorry Sir. I didn't expect you to be back so soon." She moved over to Maddie, handing her the cup of tea.

"Thank you," Maddie's voice was soft and sweet and hearing it made Harry very nervous.

Anyah turned back to Harry with an easy way about her, as though she had no idea how odd this situation was, how unlikely, how monumental. "I had told Mrs. Bishop that you were in a meeting for another twenty minutes and allowed her to wait in here. I hope that's okay?"

"I..." Harry's voice croaked as he tried to respond and he could have sworn he saw a smirk on Maddie's lips as she sipped her tea. "Yes," he cleared his throat. "Yes of course." He shook his head, fighting for clarity. "And it's Doctor," he found his voice, found his footing; his eyes moving to look directly at her. "Doctor Bishop."
"Of course," Anya nodded, turning to Maddie. "My apologies ma'am."

"It's quite alright," Maddie shook her head, her eyes shifting away from Harry for only a split second; just enough time to offer a reassuring smile to the young woman.

"Can I get you anything Sir?" Anya spoke to Harry.

"No, thank you," he shook his head with a smile, half of his mind wanting her to go, the other half wanting to beg her to stay. But she knew none of that as she offered a quick, smile to the both of them and stepped out of his office, closing the door behind her.

Harry stood absolutely still in the middle of his office, his eyes trained on the beautiful woman whose presence seemed to be real, seemed to be more than a figment of his imagination—though he could barely get that realization to settle. Because he knew that her standing there meant something big. His heart was pounding so loud in his ears, in his throat. He coughed lightly, swallowing as he smiled, as he tried to gather himself. And when he spoke, his voice was quiet and nervous. "What are you..." He couldn't quite finish his thought, couldn't quite get his brain to function correctly.

But Maddie could.

Setting her tea onto the table in front of her, she took a step towards him with an assured confidence, with resolution and guts, she smiled wide as she cut right to the chase. "When we were in that fort..."

Harry felt his breath catch again, felt a panic wash over him. "Maddie..." His voice held warning as he held up his hand, needing to stop her.

But she wouldn't be stopped. Not that easily. "When we were in that fort..." She started again, taking another step towards him.

"Stop," he shook his head, his eyes wide and his heart pounding in his chest. "Just stop. I..."

"I wanted to kiss you." Her words rang out into the room, the sincerity in her voice, in her eyes, drew the chaos inside of him to a quiet.

And his eyes welled with emotion. "Maddie..." He was pleading with her as he shook his head; slowly and unassured. Whatever it was about her, it was unravelling him.

But she had flown a long way and she wasn't going to be quite so easily swayed. "And I think..." She swallowed at the lump in her throat, feeling shaky despite her strong stance. "I think you wanted to kiss me too."

"No," he whispered; weak and without conviction.

"No?" She whispered back, her eyebrows lifting over her wide, vulnerable eyes. "You didn't want to kiss me too?" She was soft as she moved in closer, watching him closely as she tried to read him.

"Maddie..." He pressed a hand to his chest as he built up what was left of his resolve. "We cannot have this conversation."

"Why?" She asked the question with a sweet, innocent way about her that made Harry weak in the
knees. And she could see it in his eyes, she could see it in the way he was watching her—she hadn't misread what had happened between them.

"You know why."

"Enlighten me."

"Bishop," Harry said his name with great reverence. "We should...you should think about Bishop..."

"I have been thinking about Bishop," her smile stretched higher, her eyes dancing as she held his gaze. "I thought about Bishop the entire flight to New York and I thought about Bishop nearly the entire flight back. And I know you think that you knew him..."

"I did know him," Harry insisted, his shoulders squaring as he stood taller.

"If you did, if you really did, you would know why bringing him up as a reason not to want to kiss me is just..." She shook her head with a light laugh, taking a breath and meeting his eyes. "I know you think you knew him better than me."

"It's not about better, Maddie," Harry began to make his argument, but Maddie wasn't ready to cede the floor.

"But you didn't," she was certain. "You may have known him longer but I knew him better, particularly when it comes to this and..." She stood tall and proud, knowing without a doubt that Bishop would stand behind her words. "Life is short..." She let out a breath of a laugh. "That's what Bishop would tell you Harry. Life is short."

Harry's heart pulsed in his chest at her mention of his best friend, of her late husband. He opened his mouth to say something but she pressed forward.

"Life is short and...and you think that you have a lifetime with somebody and then you don't. You have a handful of years," she shook her head as she took a few more steps in his direction. "He would tell you that. He would tell you that it's too short to be afraid, it's too short to get caught up in your head, in the cognitive dissonance. He would tell you that any opportunity you see...every opportunity you see...to be happy, to live...to jump in; to take it like it's yours and to never regret it..." She stepped right up to him then and he swore she could hear his heartbeat, swore she could see him holding his breath. Her voice dropped then as she looked up to him with soft eyes and a sweet smile. "He would tell you not to be scared. He would tell you to stop being a chicken shit and own your feelings..." They both laughed at that. And he could feel himself giving in to her, to this. "He would tell you that something like this comes along rarely; sometimes only once and never ever twice and he would tell you...he would tell you to be happy. To be happy. To reach out and hold on and be happy..." She took a deep breath and held it as her hands lifted, as they rested on his chest; rising and falling as he took in what she was saying, what she was doing. "Stop being an idiot, Harry. That's what he would tell you."

"He would," Harry agreed, even as his mind was reeling, even as his heart was pounding under her hands; he knew she was right. "He would tell me all of those things."

"Yes he would," she inched closer, hearing the shake in his voice, seeing the scatter in his eyes.

"But he..." He tried to remember his reasons why, tried to remember his weak disagreements. He
tried in vain.

"You want to know how you honor the memory of your best friend?" She sucked in a breath and smiled. "You stop being an idiot. You live without regret or fear. You reach out for what makes you happy. And...and you tell me the truth."

"The truth?" His whispered the words, his chest rising and falling under her hands, with every breath he took.

"In that fort...I wanted to kiss you..." For the first time since she walked into his office she felt nervous and worried. "Did you really not want to kiss me too?" And the way she smiled up at him, sweet and nervous—if he hadn't already been in love with her, that would have done him in. It was all but over for him.

And she saw it, the want in his eyes, the struggle in his heart. She saw the truth. Harry had lost, or won, whatever battle had been brewing inside of him. Gulping back his fears, he did what she asked, what she said would honor Bishop the most. "Of course I did Maddie...of course I did." And that was all she needed.

Before Harry could say anything else, before his brain could muster up a sentence, a word, before he could blink, Maddie leaned in. Her fingers wrapped around his shirt and pulled him to her and without a second thought she pressed her lips to his.

And his mind went hazy.
Chapter 10

Maddie was kissing him. Maddie was kissing him.

An overwhelming surprise was clouding every corner of his conscience. When she had taken that step, when she had drawn him in and kissed him, it nearly knocked him over. And his world shifted completely off center.

There was a part of him that was nervous, a part that was scared. A part that kept his hands at his sides, afraid that if he touched her she would disappear like the illusion he was still half certain she was.

And there was a part of him, a great big part of him that he had managed to silence for years, that wanted to jump for joy. Here it was, this moment he had thought of, a moment he had wished for, for a very long time. And it was happening; right there in his office. She was standing in front of him and kissing him.

And it was so much better than any of those memories, than any of those daydreams. She had thrown him; Maddie and her stubborn spirit, her beautiful smile. She had brought everything he thought he knew to this new place where he knew nothing.

Except that he was completely at her mercy.

Maddie was kissing him. And he had finally given in to the arguments that had lined up in his mind, he had surrendered to her. And it felt amazing.

As her lips moved soft and slow against his, he was happy to follow her lead. When her hands moved up his chest and around his neck, pulling him closer, he followed her lead and went. Stepping into her space, his arms moved around her. When her tongue teased out against his lips, he followed her lead and opened his mouth; groaning as she deepened their kiss. And it felt so amazing to have her wrapped up in him—it felt warm and sweet and dizzying.

It felt like home.

And when she didn't pull back, when she didn't draw their kiss to an end, he stayed right there, rooted in that spot and he kissed her back. Because nothing was going to move him from her before she was ready; not the meeting down the hall, not the General who was waiting.

Nothing was going to pull Harry from her arms, nothing was going to end this kiss before she wanted it to end. As familiar as this was, as easy as it felt, this was a whole new ballgame for Harry and Maddie was one hundred percent, undoubtedly, in charge.

When they finally pulled apart, when Maddie finally found the strength to step back, Harry's eyes were wide with a blissful sort of amazement. His fingers stroked at her cheeks, his lungs drawing his breath slower as his heart thumped in his chest. "Wow..." He shook his head as he smiled down at her. "I never...I can't. I..."

Maddie laughed at the way he was tripping over his words, the look on his face. "Are you okay?"

"I honestly don't know," his eyes danced as he shook his head.
She leaned in to kiss him once more, a soft, quick gesture that made his heart swell. "You're acting like you've never been kissed before."

"I haven't," he breathed. "It feels like I haven't..." He laughed at himself, taking a deep breath. "I can't believe you're here. I...thought you were back in New York."

"I was," she nodded, her cheeks flushed pink, making no effort to extricate herself from his arms. "But I got home and all I could think about was...you." Her smile pulled wide as she admitted it out loud. "So I battled it out and I thought about him and I got on a plane..."

"To come to London," Harry could feel the hope growing in his chest, warming his body; almost afraid to let his mind run with her words.

"To come to London," she nodded.

"How long have you been here?" He couldn't stop touching her; his fingers wanting to memorize the softness of her skin.

"Less than an hour. I came straight here," she leaned into his hand, seeking his warmth; the feel of him.

"Yeah?" His eyebrows lifted, his voice barely audible as his feelings over took him.

"Yes," she grinned. "I figured I had my work cut out for me..."

"Ha..." Harry's grin pulled up; his eyes crinkling at the corners, his cheeks stretching. "I just...God. Is this really happening? Are you really here? Are you really..."

"Yes," she nodded as his fingers moved higher into her hair, his thumbs stroking at her temples. "When I left London, when I left that fort, things just felt...unfinished. Unanswered...in limbo and I just...I don't want to live in unfinished Harry. I want to..." She took a deep breath and moved in, her hands moving up over his. "I'm going to have lunch with my father-in-law..."

"Yeah?" His eyebrows lifted.

"Mmm..." She nodded, stepping further into his space. "I was hoping to have dinner with you."

"I would really like that," he whispered, his smile pulling even higher as she continued.

"I want to have dinner with you and I want to let this...whatever it is between us smolder and...I want to kiss you." Her eyes flashed to his lips. "I want to kiss you; a lot."

"Well when you put it that way," Harry chuckled and, as he pulled her lips back to his, he let it sink in.

This was happening; finally, thankfully, incredibly. This was happening. When she sighed into his mouth, he had to pull away, had to rein himself in. His arms moved around her, holding her close. "Where are you staying?"

"At the Bishop Hotel," she answered matter-of-factly. "I'm sure Ian would be happy to have me out at the house, but...I don't know," she grinned. "I thought it might be better if I stayed in the city."
"Mmmm..." Harry nodded, thrilled that she had decided on that—even more so that he might be part of that decision.

"So what do you say..." She bit her bottom lip as she looked up to him under heavy lashes. "Can we have dinner? Can we see what this is all about?"

"Yes," his voice was heavy as he agreed. "Yes we can...we..." He laughed at himself then, at how tripped up he was. Taking a breath, he asked, "would you like to come over? For dinner? I mean, we can go out if you want or..."

"I would love to come over," Maddie cut in with a grin. "I would like that very much."

"Perfect." His pulse sped up in anticipation even though there were hours left of his day.

"What time would you like me there?"

"Now," Harry answered immediately, laughing along as she did. "I'm serious. I would."

"But."

"But I have a meeting I have to take. With a General."

"You have work to do," she held her hands up. "No need to explain."

"How about seven?" He bit his lip, still unable to fully grasp that he was making plans—a date—with Maddie.

"Seven is perfect."

"I can send a car," he offered. "That way you don't have to worry about the gate and explaining to a cab driver."

"That would be helpful," Maddie snickered. "Can I bring anything? Wine? Scotch? An overnight bag?" She wavered only a tiny bit at her last words, knowing she was pushing but willing to take the gamble.

"Sorry?" His voice went high, eyes wide with surprise.

"Reach out, hold on, be happy," Maddie repeated her words from earlier. When she had boarded that plane to bring her back to London, she had decided to push all of her chips to the middle of the table. If she was going to jump in with Harry, she was going to jump. But she knew he might need a little more time to get there. So she took a breath and backed up with an easy smile. "Sorry. If you're not ready to jump then..."

"No no," he cut in quickly. "I'm....wow...I'm trying to decide when exactly I'm going to wake up from this amazing daydream...in a pool of my own drool I'm sure. I just...."

"I know," she agreed with a small smile. She understood. "But it's real. It's...I'm right here in front of you...asking if I should bring an overnight bag or if I should plan on a car taking me back to my room after dinner or..."
"Stay," he cut her off. "If you want to stay Maddie, there is no way in the world I'm not letting you stay. No way. I'm done being an idiot when it comes to you. Bring a bag. I'll see you at seven."

"I'll see you at seven," she repeated, her smile turning smug before she pulled him back to her for one last kiss.

Maddie was ready when the car arrived, at ease as it drove through town. As they pulled through the familiar gates at Kensington, she couldn't help the wave of nostalgia that hit her. This had been home for her once; this had been her life. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, allowing the memories a moment before she brought herself to the present.

When the car pulled to a stop outside of Diana's old place, the home she and Harry had been in the middle of remodeling before they split, she was a little surprised. Though it made complete sense that he was there now, she hadn't even thought of it until just then. Of course he was living there, she smiled as she reached for her bag. The driver was quick at the door, smiling as she stepped out; watching as she made her way up the short walk.

Maddie took her time, taking it all in; the cool, dewy air, the dark sky, the lights that shone from Harry's place, the knowledge that he was in there; that he was waiting for her.

It made her warm, it made her smile; it made her sigh. There would be time for her to think back over the tinge of sadness that came with it all. But this wasn't that time. This was the time for the happy.

She laughed at herself as she stepped up to the door, feeling more and more like a younger, sillier version of herself. She loved that she felt a little nervous, loved that after all these years, after all that had gone down between them, she felt nervous to be having dinner with him, to be going on their best version of a date at this point.

Even as she knocked, even as she heard him shuffle around on his way to answer—she held her breath and bit her lip and when the door swung open, her entire face lit up. He had changed into jeans and a plaid button down with the sleeves rolled up. Wearing nothing but socks on his feet he looked relaxed and casual and that damned smile of his made her knees feel weak.

"Hi," she breathed.

"Hi," he echoed, his face lighting up as he took her in; still unable to believe that it was her standing there. Nodding his head to the side. "Come on in. I'm just finishing up dinner."

"Sorry?" Maddie laughed as she stepped inside. "Did you say YOU are finishing up dinner?"

"Yes," he grinned as he shut the door behind her.

"Since when do you cook?"

"I've had a lot of time for soul searching Madeline," he leaned in to take her bag from her. "I took up cooking."

"Well, well..." She watched him set her bag on a bench that ran along the side of the stairs. "Are you any good?"
"Well they aren't contracting me out for tea at the palace, if that's what you mean," he joked and turned back to her. "But I'm not bad."

"Okay..." She nodded, her eyes travelling around the space, taking it in. He had followed through with their original plan for the remodel. Though it was clearly HIS place with darker colors and a masculine tone, she could see remnants of her; of them. "You finished the place."

"I did," he nodded, his stance softening, giving her space to adjust to being there. "I thought I wouldn't. I thought it would be too much...you." He smiled at her, knowing it must be strange to be standing there again after all of this time. "But in truth the other place held more memories..."

"Sure," Maddie agreed.

"And you did an amazing job with the plans."

"Ha!" She laughed. "Well I would love to see it all."

"You are in luck then," he clapped his hands together, moving closer. "Because I'm an excellent tour guide."

"Is that so?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted, watching as he closed the distance between them.

"It is," he nodded, smiling down at her as he came to a stop in front of her. "Thank you for coming over Maddie."

"Thank you for inviting me," she tilted her face up to his, unable to take her eyes from his.

"Of course," he smiled. "I'm not sure that you left me much choice...showing up in my office, kissing me like you did."

"Is that so?" Her head tipping to the side, amused at the fact that they were flirting with each other.

"Mmmm..." His smile slipped higher and then, without another word, without hesitation or an ounce of the nervousness she had seen in his office, he bent his head and he kissed her.

His lips were soft and warm and wonderful as they moved over hers; his hands sliding up her neck as she kissed him back. And when her lips parted, his tongue slipped inside her mouth, pulling hers into a slow dance with his before he pulled back; opening his eyes and smiling wide.

"Hi..." Maddie breathed, her fingers pressing to her pink lips.

"I'm done being an idiot Maddie..." He shook his head, leaning to kiss her once more. "Come with me? I need to check on the food and I can show you around as we go..." His hand slid down her arm to her hand, holding it in his as he pulled her into the next room with him—as he pulled her into this new place, into this new chapter—into this night with him.
Chapter 11

As they moved from the tall entry way into the living room, Maddie's smile stretched out. It looked amazing; big and bright, even though it was dark outside. He had clearly made a few changes to her designs from so many years ago, but she could still see hints of her. As surreal as it was, it was also settling, it made her feel welcome. Her eyes scanned over the portraits on the wall, looking closely at what he had chosen, recognizing his taste. When her gaze landed on the large built-in shelves along the far wall, framing the fireplace and mantle, she could see framed photos and grew curious.

"Do you mind if I look?" She nodded in that direction.

"Not at all," Harry encouraged her with a smile as he released her hand. "I'm going to step into the kitchen and check on the food. I'll be right back." Before he stepped from the room, he stopped in the archway and took a moment to watch her, to commit this to memory; Maddie in his home.

Moving over to the shelves, Maddie took her time looking through the framed photos, glancing at the book titles on the shelves; working her way across the mantle. Making quick work of checking on the food, not wanting to be apart from her for long, Harry returned to the living room. Leaning against the doorway, he watched her as she moved; content to watch her take it all in.

"God Harry," her voice was soft as she called out to him, knowing he was there without turning around to look. "There are some amazing photos up here."

"There are," he agreed with a nod and a smile; his mind still catching up with itself, still reeling a bit at the image of her standing there.

"Oh wow!" She stopped suddenly, reaching out for a particular frame. Spinning around to face him with a wide smile, she held up the frame. "Is this you and Arthur?"

"Let me see," he squinted as he looked closer, a smile washing over his face as he recognized the picture. "It is." He smiled wider. "We were in Mustique last year and he wanted a hat just like mine so..." He shrugged. "I had to buy him one."

"Of course you did," Maddie laughed, understanding exactly what he was talking about. Turning to put the frame back, she sighed. "He's adorable Harry."

"He is."

"I would imagine he gets away with just about anything." She turned her attention back to him.

"He does." Harry's eyes danced with amusement, his smile inching higher as she left the photos on the shelves and moved towards him.

"How was dinner?" Her voice dropped softly as she stood in front of him, her eyes turning up to his.

"It was very nearly ready," he smiled down at her. "Care to join me in the kitchen? Only if you're done looking of course..."
"I'm done looking," she chuckled. "For now at least."

Tipping his head to the side, he nodded towards the kitchen. "Join me?"

"Yes." Maddie nodded, happy to follow him into the kitchen, watching as he moved back to the stove, pulling out plates and reaching for serving spoons. "Can I do anything to help?"

"No," he tossed a smile over his shoulder. "The table is set and I'm just going to bring these over..." He lifted their plates. "Though if you wouldn't mind pouring wine..."

"On it," she nodded, moving to get the bottle he had uncorked sitting on the large island counter in the middle of the kitchen. Filling up the two glasses sitting next to it, she gathered them into her hands and moved to join him at the table. "This looks amazing Harry."

"Thank you," he smiled up at her as he sat down their plates. Watching her as she moved into her chair, pulling her napkin into her lap, he couldn't help but notice how at ease she seemed. And he couldn't help the way that made his heart soar.

"And it smells even better," she leaned her face closer to her plate as he took his seat across from her. "Did you take lessons?"

"No," he chuckled. "Just followed Bernard around a little bit. He got tired of me brooding and put me to work."

"I wish I could have seen that," Maddie snickered at the image.

"I wish that too," he smiled across the table at her.

"Thank you for having me over for dinner," Maddie reached for her fork.

"As if you left me a choice," he chuckled.

"Complaining?" She arched an eyebrow.

"No," he shook his head quickly. "Not at all."

"Good." She grinned and took a bite; a soft moan pushing from her lips. "Wow...Harry. This is fantastic."

"Yeah?" He tried not to get completely caught up in the way she looked right then, in the way her breath came from her lungs.

"Yes...mmm..." She nodded and swallowed, reaching for her wine. "I, for one, am happy your soul searching manifested with you following around Bernard."

"Not as happy as he was." They both laughed and took a few more bites. "So tell me, how was your afternoon?" He asked, slipping easily into casual conversation with her; finding that this came more second nature to him than he had ever cared to recognize.

"It was great," she nodded, taking a sip of her drink. "After I left your office, I had lunch with Ian."
"Good. How was he?"

"Great. Surprised to see me again."

"I'll bet," Harry laughed. "Did you tell him that you were coming here? Does he know you're here now?" Harry pointed to the table, feeling slightly nervous as he asked the question.

"He does," Maddie nodded; her smile small and soft as she watched him.

"And?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, his words catching in his throat.

"Are you asking if Ian approves?" She was amused, leaning back in her chair.

"I'm curious." Resting his fork on his plate, he brought his hands together in front of him. "With all that's gone on...of course I'm curious."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, trying to hold back any reflexive laughter that came with his question. "Though I'm curious too...if he didn't approve...would you ask me to leave?"

His eyes didn't leave hers as he blinked. "No." He shook his head and reached for his drink. "I can't imagine asking you to leave. I just...I don't know," his eyes shifted from her then and she could see; he was nervous and slightly afraid. She could see a flash of whatever it was that had made him leave her at the Bishop family home that day in the fort. And she didn't want that. Not now that she was there with him; she didn't want that nervous, anxious side to return.

"You know..." Maddie reached for a drink. "Ian is, by nature, not a judgmental man."

"I know," Harry nodded his agreement.

"And he...he loves me very much," she smiled sweetly as she said it out loud.

"He does." Harry had seen that as clear as day.

"And..." She took a breath and let it out, shrugging as she did. "And he is a Bishop."

"Yes. He is." Harry's eyes swept up and locked with hers. "And...so are you."

Maddie's eyes blinked and her lips curled higher. "I am." Taking a sip from her glass, she watched him carefully, sitting the glass on the table as her head tipped to the side. Though she was curious about where that line of conversation would take them, she decided to answer his original question. "He knows I'm here."

"Good," Harry smiled. "Though you said that already."

"I did," she chuckled. "When I told him I was coming to see you...that I had come back to London to see you..." She took a deep breath and held his gaze. "He told me to have a good night. He told me to trust myself and to trust that I know what I'm doing, what I want."

"And?" Harry's voice was nearly a whisper, almost afraid to ask.

"And?" Her eyebrows lifted.
"What are you doing?" He couldn't help it, he had to know. "What do you want?"

The air between them grew heavy in an instant, his pulse pounding in his ears as he awaited an answer. For the longest of beats, she couldn't look away from him; his eyes had her locked in the heat with him. But she smiled, sweet and innocent, and she took a deep breath.

"Well," she let it out and with great sincerity she answered. "Right now I'm enjoying this...remarkable dinner you prepared." She could see the tension begin to fade. "And this lovely wine," her fingers circled around the glass. "And..."

"And?" He asked again; despite his nerves, despite his fears.

"Is it okay that I'm here Harry? I know I...forced this a little bit but if you don't want me here..." She knew the answer to that; knew it before she asked. But she had to ask.

"I want you here." He was quick to confirm her assumptions, his hands lifting up in surrender. "I...I want you here. I do. I've wanted you here for a very long time."

"Okay." Her eyes blinked as his words washed over her.

"Okay."

"Okay," she softened; her smile, her posture, her voice. "I'm enjoying this food, Harry. The food and the wine and...and the conversation," she met his eyes and watched as he gave in; as he let the questions sit in his head. At least for now. "Now tell me...how was your day? How was the meeting with the general?"

"Well..." Harry took a deep breath and reached for his fork, moving back into the moment they had been in before they had stepped off track. "I suppose it got off to a bit of an awkward start."

"Awkward?" Maddie's nose scrunched up as she moved in for another bite. "How do you mean?"

"Well," Harry shrugged, taking a drink. "I was completely in the mode; ready for business. And this...this beautiful woman...she barged right into my office and she just..." He chuckled lightly as he watched Maddie smile. "She kissed me senseless."

"Senseless?" Maddie arched an eyebrow.

"Witless," he added with a nod.

"Is that so?" She shook her head at him.

"It is," he took a deep breath, his smirk making him that much more adorable to her. "But I rebounded. Don't worry. And the meeting ended up going really well."

"Good. Was it for Invictus?"

"It was."

"You know, my boss really does want us to get in on it."

"Yes he does," Harry got a chuckle out of Ian being Maddie's boss.
"Do you think I might be able to schedule a meeting with you while I'm here?"

"I think so," he nodded to her across the table, smiling as he thought of the two of them in a business meeting. "Tell me. How long are you planning on being here? For meeting scheduling and all," he added with a smirk.

"Ha!" She laughed, thinking for a moment. "Honestly?"

"Please."

"I...I don't know," she shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know that I have a set date one way or another." She could almost feel the sass come back to her as she lifted smiling eyes to him. "I was kind of waiting..."

"For?"

"To see how this date goes," she winked and he laughed.

"This date?" He still couldn't believe the words, still couldn't grasp the notion.

"That's right," she nodded.

"No pressure?" He laughed again, his hand pressing to his chest.

"Ha!" She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that necessarily. I just...I meant..." She took a deep breath and smiled across the table at him. "What does your week look like? Are you terribly busy? Do you have any events scheduled or..."

"No, no," he shook his head, thinking over his week. "I have meetings lined up, mostly for Invictus. But it's nothing major and I'm free in the evenings."

"Good," Maddie nodded, satisfied with the answer. "Then maybe we can get in a business meeting?"

"Sure..."

"And maybe...a second date?" The way she tossed it in, threw him for a second; pausing his heart and his lungs.

"Well," he cleared his throat, forcing his body back in gear. With nerves hidden behind his smug grin, he held her eyes. "We'll have to wait and see how this one goes."

Maddie laughed at that; loud and wide and happy. With a shrug and a grin, she nodded, "fair enough. Fair enough."

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As they finished their dinner, the laughter and the conversation continued. Doing his best to stay in this moment, Harry didn't dip into their past and he didn't question her motives for being there. He took a deep breath and allowed himself to bask in the fact that she was there. And he loved that she was there; was thrilled to have her sitting across from him, laughing and talking and flirting. It was
something he hadn't dared to hope for, and it was happening; right there in his kitchen.

So he followed her lead; talking about the projects they were both working on, talking about little Arthur and his hilarious antics; catching up on things they had missed since they had last talked. And after they finished eating, after she helped him clear the table despite his insistence that she let him handle it, they refreshed their drinks and she asked him to continue on with the tour.

He took her through the formal dining room, laughing when she asked why he hadn't served her there. He took her back through the living room, across the entryway to the drawing room. And she held in her sigh when she remembered her plans for this room, her eyes drawing to the large window she had imagined would be perfect for framing a large Christmas tree, skipping over the fireplace where she had imagined stockings would hang, to the alcove where children would play.

"You okay?" His low, soft voice called out to her, bringing her back to the moment. He had noticed; her far off gaze, the waver of her smile.

She nodded quickly, turning her eyes to him and taking a deep breath. "I am," she answered. And she was. Even with the way the room tugged at her heart, she was fine. "It's crazy how, even after all these years..." She trailed off with a laugh and a shake of her head.

"I know," he nodded; and he did. He knew this was a moment; strange and big and simple. And they were only standing in the drawing room. His stomach flipped as he thought of the rest of the house, of the rooms he still had left to show her. And though there was a part of him that wanted to run, that made him unbelievably nervous—he knew they had to do this. Whatever it was that had brought her back to London, whatever it was that had brought her here this night, they were going to have to go through it all—their past, their end, and the rooms of this house that should have been hers.

And Maddie knew that too. With a slow, deep breath, she pushed a smile to her lips and held his eyes. "What's next?"

"You know..." He started, thinking that maybe they should pause, wondering if they should talk. But she stepped right up to him, her hand taking hold of his. Leaning up on her toes, she kissed him; soft and easy.

"Come on," she tugged at his hands, her eyes wide and full of assurances. "Show me the rest." As she pulled him from the room into a hallway, he followed.

"Well..." He held onto her hand as he stopped at door, reaching in and flipping on the light switch. "This is my office."

Stepping inside, her eyes grew wide and her smile slipped soft. "Harry..." She kept his fingers tangled with hers as she moved further inside, as she looked around the room that was so completely him. The dark colors, the soft leather, the far wall lined with photographs; not just of family, but of his travels, of the people he had come in contact with. She was drawn there immediately, her eyes scanning over the pictures of children playing, of people dancing, of majestic landscapes and brilliant smiles. In some she saw places she had never been and in others she saw a place that had been a home to her.

"This is..." Her fingers let his fall as she pointed, her eyes tearing up as she studied it. "Bendal?"

"Yes," he answered, his own emotions tugging at him as he nodded.
"Harry..." She shook her head, moving on to the next one, a large group of children playing with a soccer ball, the smiles on their faces lit up the photo. "Did you take these?" She turned to look at him; proud and astonished.

"I did," he nodded, unable to help the smile that curved his lips; the memories of these moments still as fresh in his mind as the days he took them.

"They are so...amazing," she whispered the word as she turned back to them, wishing she could spend the night there, looking them over and learning the stories behind them. "I would love to hear about them sometime," her hand moved to her chest as she turned back to him, her smile wide and bright.

"I would love to tell you about them," he smiled down at her, wanting more than anything to have her be a part of all of this again. "Sometime."

"Sometime," she echoed with a slight nod, turning to look out at the office, at this space that was his. As she did, her eyes landed on the set of doors in the middle of a wall that separated this office from another room. Her forehead drew in for only a moment as she tried to remember. And when she did, she was in motion; walking towards them just knowing what she was going to find on the other side. "If this is your office, then..." She reached the doors and pulled them open, Harry right behind her as she stepped inside. "Then this is..." She trailed off as he turned on the lights.

"Yes," he breathed. "Yes it is." This was the room that had been meant to be her office. He could still remember the night, almost a lifetime ago, when she had told him she was claiming the room next to his office as her own. And he could remember how she had asked that doors be installed between them, the very same set of French doors that they had just walked through. She had wanted to be able to see him from her desk when he was working at his.

He knew, as he watched her walk into the middle of the room, that she was remembering that very same fact. And he was dying to know what was going on in that mind of hers as she took it in. "Was it hers?" Her voice surprised him, her words even more. His eyes blinked and focused.

"I'm sorry?"

"This room," Maddie waved her hands around. "Was it Cassandra's office when she was here? Did you use the doors..." The smile on her face faltered at the look in his eyes, at the way he was watching her. "Harry?"

"Yes," he answered reflexively, his mind spiraling just a bit as he watched her. His heart thumping at this new image. In truth, this had been Cassandra's office. This room that had been his mother's office, this room that had been meant for Maddie—it had been Cassandra's office, though she had spent very little time in there. So little in fact, that this image of Maddie standing in the middle of the space, smiling back at him –this image was so easily replacing those memories of Cassandra being there, of the night it had all come crashing down; of the vases she had thrown, of the doors that had slammed and the words that had been hurled right in these rooms. "Yes," he smiled, nodding his head as he tried to focus. "It was...though she hardly ever used it."

"That's too bad," Maddie was sweet as her hand ran over the back of the long, beautiful sofa in the middle of the room. "It's an amazing room."

"It is," he agreed. And it was; especially now.
"Is there more to see?"

"There is," he nodded, holding his hand out to her, knowing they were heading upstairs, knowing they were only going to face more moments like this one—when their history snuck up.

Without words, Maddie took his hand, turning off the lights as he lead her from the room. They moved back through the house, climbing the staircase together, laughing as she asked if he had any other new hobbies she didn't know about; what with the cooking and the photography. When they reached the top of the stairs, he pointed out a few spare bedrooms, bathrooms. He even grinned as he nodded towards the door at the very end of the hallway, "That one's mine."

But before either of them could really get their brains around the fact that she was standing there outside his bedroom, Harry pulled at her hands and pulled them both from the moment.

"You have that look in your eye..." She watched him as they moved towards the room on opposite end of the hallway from his room.

"What look is that exactly?" He chuckled at the puzzled look on her face.

"I don't know," she shook her head. "Like you're about to jump out of the bushes and surprise me."

"Ah yes," he laughed, coming to a stop outside a set of double doors. And just as it began to dawn on her, just as she realized where she was standing, Harry continued. "Well, there's no bush for me to jump out of...but...there is this..." He dropped her hand to open up the large double doors; pushing them in and standing aside.

"The library..." Maddie's voice dropped low, her heart thudding. As she stepped inside, she could remember the very night he had brought her here, offering it to her as a Christmas gift, promising her the library she had wanted since she was a little girl. She could remember it just like it were yesterday, they had planned for a family that night. "God, Harry. It's exactly like I imagined it would be..."

"Well, it was yours the entire time," he shrugged, following her inside, watching as she began to look around. And it was true. Even when he had lived there alone, even when he had been there with Cassandra—this room had been Maddie's in his mind. Always hers.

"It's amazing," she seemed to be lost in it as her eyes danced around the room; the tall ceilings, the stacks of books, the plush, comfortable seating, the fireplace. And then she stopped; her eyes blinking as her mind registered what was hanging over the fireplace. "Harry..." She pointed to it, her eyes not turning to look at him even as he moved to stand right next to her.

"I didn't know what to do with it," he confessed in a quiet voice, his emotions welling as he thought over the years that had been between them. "I kept it because...I don't know. I kept it because I wanted one thing...just one thing that reminded me of you, of when we were happy. So I kept it. It hung in the old place, right where you left it, for a while. And then...I don't know. There were moments, some of my darker ones, when I nearly destroyed it." He looked down at the ground and swallowed. "Eventually it ended up in storage and after New York..." He sucked in a breath and turned to look at her. "After New York I thought that maybe...I don't know. I thought we could possibly be friends again. So I had it pulled and hung here." He sighed and smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "I have to tell you though, I never in a million years thought I would get to show it to you."
Maddie stood, mesmerized by the painting that looked just as vibrant as it had the day he had gifted it to her, the view of Bendal bringing back so many memories that she hardly knew how to sort them all. "I..." She laughed at her own lack of words, at the way this painting was pulling up all of her feelings. With a deep breath, she tore her eyes from it. With a wide smile, she turned to him. Lacking the words to articulate what she was feeling, lacking the voice to express it, she reached out to him. With slightly timid fingers, she gathered the soft fabric of his shirt and she pulled; just enough to move him from his spot, just enough to jar him from the memories that had been flooding his mind all night, just enough to bring him right to her.

In mind and in body.

"Harry..." She whispered; her eyes wide and innocent. And then in a move that brought all of the warm tension between them to a head, she tilted her head to his and kissed him.

This wasn't a timid sort of kiss, wasn't one of exploration or reunion. It was one full of the swelling emotions that had been building, the hot passion that they had between them; the warm familiarity. Taking the same shared breath, they moved into each other. Her arms snaking up around his neck, her fingers pushing into his hair as he hugged her warm and tight and close to him; as close as he could possibly get her.

Her lips opened under his nearly instantly, his tongue not wasting a moment as it drew into her mouth; tasting her, stroking her.

And the shake that had been in his hands disappeared; the hesitation of nerves drifted away. There was no doubt. No trepidation. He wanted this. With every single bone and nerve in his body, he wanted this and she had had more than one chance to step away. All along the way, she had had the opportunity to say no, to put on the brakes, to walk out of the night and she hadn't taken it. She had stayed through dinner, she had stayed through the tour. She had stayed and she had stepped into his space, into his arms and she had kissed him.

There in the library she designed, in front of the portrait he had given her for her birthday. In the home that should have been theirs. If he let it, the enormity of it all could have swept him away, rendering him speechless and witless. But he couldn't let it. Not now, not with the way she was pressing her body into his, not with the way her lips were kissing him, the way her hands were moving over him.

No. He had to be present for this. He had to have his mind and his heart and his body all in line because she was right. When she had walked into his office that morning and told him that this never comes along twice, she was right. It doesn't.

But it had. It had. And he was reaching out and taking it; just as she was.

"Harry..." The way she said his name, that breathless whisper against his lips, brought a moan from him and propelled him forward. He deepened the kiss as his hands moved over her; sliding up and down her back, around the curves of her waist as he rediscovered the turns and dips that were uniquely her. As one hand moved up across her shoulder blades, to the back of her neck, the other moved down to the small of her back, pressing her to him; gathering her near.

Maddie sighed as she pressed closer, her own hands sliding down his chest that was rising and falling with each deep breath he took, rounding to his sides and down to his waist and then, as her eyes opened to watch him, to catch his expression, her fingers tipped up under the softness of his
shirt, making hot contact with his skin. His muscles jumped and his eyes opened and her lips curled up into a smile at the genuine surprise she saw in his face.

"Sorry..." She smirked, her hands flattening out on his stomach before they slid out and moved higher, taking care of his buttons as she did.

Harry's heart beat wildly in his chest as she worked higher and higher, forcing his hands from her so she could take off his shirt, so she could toss it aside. As the fabric fell to the ground and his arms returned to his sides, Maddie's smile pulled higher, her eyes brighter and her hands fell to his shoulders.

"You really are a sexy man, Captain," she bit her lower lip as he stepped in, bringing his hands back to her hips, tugging her back to him.

"I am really happy you think so," he chuckled; a mixture of smug and pleased on his lips. "Come here..." He flattened his hands on her back and pressed her closer; his lips descending on hers hotter and firmer than before. And when she moaned into his mouth, he felt every desire inside of him stir to attention.

There was the slightest tremble in his fingers when they swept up under her shirt, the tiniest of shakes but Maddie caught it. She smiled against his lips and moved her hands to cover his, to hold them to her skin, to steady him and encourage him forward. With the tiniest bit of guidance from her, Harry's hands moved up under her shirt, gliding along her soft skin with accustomed ease.

She felt amazing there in his arms, under his hands. He knew her, he knew her body, her moans, her lips. But there were just the slightest changes to her, small differences that made this new, that made this unique. It was familiar. It was fresh. It was like coming home.

A pulse ran through his body at the thought, his emotions battling for control while his desires held ground. And he had to let go of his mind a little bit. He had to stop thinking about how rare this was, how momentous this was, how fucking lucky he was. He had to let that fade or he would never be able to do what she wanted him to do.

What he wanted to do.

So he pulled it together, rounded up his wits and his nerves and he forced that part of his mind to quiet. And as he continued to kiss her, continued this beautiful dance with her lips, with her tongue, his hands moved higher, steadier as they pulled her shirt up. When she pulled away so he could rid her of it, he caught the look in her eyes and he could tell she was right there with him; just right there with him.

"I don't remember you being so slow..." She joked lightly as his hands returned to her body, moving at a snail's pace towards the band of her pants.

"Ha!" He tossed his head back, his chest rumbling under her hands. "Well it's been awhile love. I'm figuring it out as I go."

"Ah," she grinned. "Well then, let me help you." Without dropping his gaze, without missing a beat, Maddie's hands moved right to his pants; unbuttoning, unzipping and then, with a wide, mischievous look in her eyes, she pushed them down and off his hips. Her breath sucked in as they fell to the floor, her smile pulling higher as her eyes raked over his flat stomach, over the soft trail of hair, over the obvious bulge in his boxers. "See..." She looked up to him. "Just like that."
"Seems easy enough," he shrugged with a smirk.

"It is," she nodded, moving closer to him, her hands skimming along his skin just above his boxers. "You should give it a try."

"Think so?" He lifted his eyebrows, his fingers teasing along her exposed skin.

"Mmmm..." Maddie nodded, biting at her bottom lip. "Come on. I think you can do it." Harry bit back his smirk, held her eyes with his and did exactly as she asked. His fingers were quick with her button, with her zipper and before he could catch up with what was happening, he was pushing her pants to the floor with his. Maddie watched as Harry looked her over, as his eyes moved up her body. She watched as his expression changed, as it grew darker, hotter. She watched as his gaze leveled with hers and she saw it; the want he had for her. It was written all over his face; in his smile, in his eyes, in the way his lips curled up on the sides. She sucked in a breath, feeling the weight of desire between them. "See..." She breathed. "You got it."

Though it was meant as a joke, though a smallish laugh accompanied her words, the feeling in the room had shifted; far from funny, far from light.

"Maddie," he whispered, his hands moving over the lace that cover her, aching to touch underneath; longing to be naked with her.

Her eyes locked with his and she nodded. "Do you have any idea how much I want you right now?" Her hips arched towards his hand that passed over her; barely gracing the fabric over her hot core. She watched as he blinked, as he swallowed. "I've been thinking about your hands on me since I left your office..." Harry groaned as she spoke to him, as her hands slipped slowly into the band of his boxers. "I've been thinking about your mouth on me since I left New York..." His breath hitched as she let him in on that secret, as her hand moved closer and closer, slower and slower. "Don't hold back from me now..." Her voice was so soft, so strangled that he could barely hear her. But he could and it drove him so fast and so hard to his end, he could barely keep up. "Please...please put your hands on me, put your mouth on me...I don't think I can take it any longer."

And there was simply no way he could not do as she asked, no way he could refuse her. As his hand passed over the front of her panties, he paused and with a knowing smile, with a renewed confidence, his fingers stretched out and began to stroke her.

"Yes..." She exhaled, her head tipping slightly back as pleasure pulsed through her body. With his other hand, he let his fingers trace up her side, around to her chest and as he increased the pressure at her core, he took her breast in the palm of his hand. "Mmmm..." Maddie moaned into a smile; a smug look on her face as he gave her exactly what she wanted. Exactly what she needed.

Her eyes fluttered closed for a second, reveling in the way his hands moved over her, the way they stroked and teased and drove her mad. She sucked in a breath and sighed into this pool of desire he was sending her deeper and deeper into. When his lips met the soft skin of her neck, when his tongue licked at that spot just below her ear, he swore he heard her whimper.

It felt amazing. Harry's hands, Harry's mouth, Harry's tongue, Harry's lips. Harry. He felt absolutely amazing and it lit a fire in every corner of her body.

"God...you feel...so good..." He whispered light breaths against her skin as he kissed her, as his
mouth traveled over her skin, wanting to cover every inch of her. "You smell...so lovely..." He smiled into her neck. "I want you too Maddie..." His fingers at her center picked up speed, increased pressure. "I've wanted you for so long..." His mouth traveled up the column of her neck, catching the way her breath came up faster, finding pride in his involvement in that fact. "The entire afternoon all I could think of was this...was the thought that I might get to hold you..." He kissed her lips. "That I might get to kiss and touch you and..."

And her knees gave just a bit, just enough that his hands pulled from their spots to catch her, to wrap around her waist and pull her tight. "I have you," he smiled as her eyes pulled open to look at him. And though he meant it in the literal sense, Maddie couldn't deny herself any longer.

With a small nod and eyes brimming with emotion, she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. "You do. You...you have me. You have me." And just like that everything around them grew serious; the heat between them magnifying and Harry didn't really have words any longer.

So he let the words fall from his mind and he moved entirely back to her. As his lips moved back to hers, his hands worked diligently; unclipping her bra and sliding it from her body, smiling as he took her in; sighing as she pressed her chest to his. His hands slid down the arch of her back, tickling her bare skin as they did, and then they rounded over her ass and slid up to the band of lace at her waist. With a nudge to her nose from his, his fingers slipped inside and with a quick kiss to her lips, he pulled them from her; following them down her legs. He pulled them from her feet, tossed them aside and then he stayed.

In her entire life Maddie would never get over the way he looked in that moment; on his knees in front of her with that mess of red hair and those smiling blue eyes. He looked so happy, so content, as his hands ran down her legs, as his eyes took in the sight of her as if for the first time.

But it wasn't the first time. Far from the first time. And that's how she knew what that smile meant. That's how she knew that when his eyes flickered like they did, when his tongue tipped out to wet his lips, when his smile pulled high to one side...that's how she knew that she should brace herself; that's how she knew she should take a breath.

So when his mouth moved to her center, when his lips kissed her, wet and full and hot—she wasn't surprised. And when her knees buckled and her skin stood on end and a gasp pushed from her lungs—she was ready. But for as much as she remembered, as much as she prepared, when his tongue slipped out to stroke against her, it still drove her mad; deliriously, wildly mad.

"You taste..." He breathed against her wetness, his lips moving against her. "Amazing..."

"Oh God..." Her eyes pressed closed, her hands twisting into his hair, her body giving in to what he was doing.

With a groan of desire, Harry's hands moved higher on her thighs, pulling them apart just so, just enough so that he could move in and then his fingers caught up; joining his mouth in her slow, wonderful destruction.

It didn't take long for Maddie to race to her end. It had been a while since she had felt somebody's mouth on her, since she had felt any of the sensations Harry was drawing from her hot, pulsing body. And the fact that it was him; that it was Harry. Her sweet, sexy Harry with his amazing tongue and his talented fingers and the knowledge of exactly what to do to her to make her sigh, to make her pant, to make her give in to this all-consuming feeling that was racing through her body.
"Harry..." She called out to him, her fingers tightening in his hair. "Oh my God...Harry..." She moaned around his name, arching towards his face, his mouth. His hands, his strong, firm hands, held her to him; held her up and in place as he held steady and increased his efforts. For as much as he wanted to be inside of her, as much as he wanted to look into her eyes as she called out his name, he wanted this more.

This moment where this magnificent woman, this amazing, sweet, wonderful woman who he had no right to, who had through some crazy twist of the universe walked back into his life, into his home, into his arms...this moment when she surrendered to him and let him take her with his mouth to this place of total abandon.

He wanted that more than anything else in the world.

So when he felt her tense around him, when he felt her start to go, his eyes lifted up to look at her and his heart pounded in his chest and he held on as she went.

With a shudder, with a cry, with a flood of emotion she had been holding onto for a very long time, she went.

And Harry couldn't hide the way that it affected him.

Before the waves of her orgasm had left her body, before she could articulate much of anything, she was pulling at him. Tugging at spikes of red hair, she wanted him up off the floor. She wanted his arms around her and his mouth on hers. She wanted to feel his weight press into her.

She wanted him inside of her.

And she moaned just that as he stood upright, wrapping her up in his arms and kissing her; full and hot on the mouth. She didn't hesitate to open her lips to him, tasting him and her and the sweet way they melted together. As he moved her back towards the couch just behind her, she pushed at his boxers, wanting him free, wanting him naked. Wanting him.

It was quick and feverish and the very representation of just how much they wanted each other.

Maddie gasped as he held her body flush with his, groaned at the feel of him hard and long and pressed against her. When her hand reached between them, encircling him with her fingers, running up and down him, it was his turn to groan; his turn to feel weak in the knees.

"I need..." He spoke to her between long, lusty kisses. "A....condom..." He pulled his lips from hers, his hands reaching behind her as they found the couch. He smiled as he saw the look in her eyes. "I have to go get a condom..."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, pulling his mouth back to hers.

"Mmmm..." He moaned into her mouth, every single fiber of his being wanting to stay right where he was. "My room..." He pulled back again. "I will go and I will be right back."

"Please hurry," Maddie grinned as she stroked him again.

"Jesus Christ Maddie," his fingers wrapped around hers, stopping her in her movements. "I have to..." He kissed her again; a long, lingering kiss and then with will from where he did not know, he
stepped all the way back, pulling her hand from him as he moved.

"Hurry."

"Yes." He smiled down at her, his heart and his cock swelling at the sight of her; pink and warm with mussed up hair and thoroughly kissed lips. "I swear." He held up his hand and then turned away from her, intent on getting back in record time.

Maddie, in the hazy state of come down, in the blissful spark of promise, leaned up on her elbows and watched as he hurried from the room; giggling at his naked ass as he fled. Sighing she laid back on the couch, her eyes travelling around the room; up to the painting. And though the lump of emotion threatened to bring tears to her eyes, she shook her head, shook them off and smiled wide. She was happy; blissfully happy to be there in Harry's house, in Harry's arms. This was what she wanted.

And then he was back; wide grin and a condom in hand.

"Look at you..." He slowed down as he stepped into the room, his eyes loving over her as she laid there on the couch; exposed and open to him.

"I was just thinking the same thing about you," she matched his grin, waggling her eyebrows as she looked him over. "You know Wales, I think your ass has gotten better over the years."

"Ha," he chuckled. "Not nearly as nice as yours..." He returned to the couch then, his knees resting between hers as he moved closer.

"Well I suppose that's true," Maddie's laugh was only slightly nervous; her cheeks flushing as he sat before her. They shared a smile, passed a gaze between them and then, with a deep breath meant to calm him, Harry opened the condom and tossed the wrapper aside. Maddie watched as he looked down at it, watched as a pulse of nervousness flashed across his face and then she moved. Sitting up, she scooted closer to him, her hands resting on his forearms as she smiled; sweet and soft. "May I?"

"Of course," he nodded with a small smile, holding it out to her. He knew she knew he was nervous; he knew she could see the way he stalled. And he knew that she knew that it only came out of this enormous desire he had, this crazy way his life was falling back into place.

Maddie took the condom from his fingers with one hand and with the other, she smoothed over his cheek and pulled his face back to hers. Her lips were soft against his; warm and slow and loving. Harry sighed into her mouth, his shoulders easing, his mind clearing. He felt her hand leave his cheek, felt it smooth down his neck, over his chest and then it left him for only a moment.

And when it returned, she was holding him in her hand, unrolling the condom with long, purposeful strokes. The same strokes her tongue was moving against his. And it felt amazing; the way she kissed him, the way she touched him, the way she was with him. He would never get over it, never move past it; just how perfect she was in that moment.

Her hands were gentle as she pulled him with her; laying back onto the couch, bringing him over her, making room for him between her legs. Harry's eyes opened as they settled against each other, his heart pounding but his breathing calm. This had been so far away from anything he had imagined; anything he had dared to think about.
Maddie back in his arms.

Maddie back in his home.

"Maddie..." His fingers ran over the profile of her nose, over the arch of her cheeks, up to smooth hair from her forehead.

"Harry..." She smiled up at him, her hands smoothing down over his back, down to his hips where they held onto him and guided him forward. His breath sucked in and her hips arched forward and then with the most adorable little pout he had ever seen, she sighed. "Please."

And it was all over for him; he was done. With a small nod and a soft pinch to her nose, he leaned in and captured her lips as he pressed forward and into her in one smooth, long motion. Maddie let out a whimper as she took him in, her legs pulling up around him; drawing him further into her.

"My God..." Harry moaned into her mouth, his hips moving him slowly out of her and slowly back in.

"Oh..." Maddie breathed at the sensation, at just how hot he felt; how long and hard and perfect he felt. How well he fit with her.

His hands moved over her then; taking great care to caress her skin, to slide along every inch of her. They ran down to her calf, hiking her leg higher around him, they ran up to her knee, over her thigh. They ran to her hips, angling her against him; forcing him to stroke against her in a new, mind blowing way. They moved higher and higher, roughing over her breasts, kneading them as his mouth lowered to her nipples. As he licked and sucked and nipped.

Up over her shoulders, his hands skimmed over her neck, up into her hair and as he moved steadily in and out, as he pushed himself deeper and deeper with every stroke, his fingers pulled into her blonde strands and cradled her head.

"Maddie..." He whispered against her lips, drawing her eyes to his. "This feels so....good. You. You feel..." He swallowed, taking a breath. "Unbelievable."

"Hmmmm..." She smiled, her lips pressing together as she arched up to him, meeting his rhythm stroke for stroke. "Harry...." She gasped as he pushed in; deeper and harder. Her hands pressed into his shoulders, sliding down to his back; squeezing as he moved out and back in.

Deeper.

"Jesus..." She groaned underneath him. "Harry...you're going to make me..." He moved out and back in and... "Oh!" Maddie's head tipped back into his hands.

Harry's lips lowered back to hers, kissing her as he moved again; out and in. Out and in. Out and in. Out and in. "You're so beautiful..." He breathed, kissing down her jaw. "You're so warm and..." 

"Ohhhhhhh..." She groaned, arching towards him; feeling greedy, wanting more. "Harry...Harry...Harry..." She panted as he stroked her, as he kissed down her neck, as he gave everything he had to this moment. "Look at me Harry...look at me..." She pulled his face from hers, wanting him to watch her, to see what he was doing to her.

And he did. He smiled down at her, he moved his arms around her, he gathered her near and
because he knew no other way to do this, he opened himself up to her. His heart and his soul...everything he had. It was all hers. From the moment she stepped into his office.

And years and years before that.

But as she moved underneath him, as their bodies worked together in this amazing dance they seem to have perfected, he knew one thing for certain. This time was better than the first time, better than all of the times between then and now. Because this time he knew what it was like to lose her, what it was like to feel her absence in his heart and his soul. He knew what she meant to him, knew how precious it was, how precious she was.

And it was that thought, those emotions—along with the delicious way she made his body feel—it was that which ultimately drove him over the edge that night in London. As she pulled his lips to hers, as she began to clench around him for the second time that night, as she pressed her fingers into the skin of his back, as she cried out his name and refused to close her eyes for one single moment of any of it, he lost control.

In fact, he handed it over.

He felt the explosion building in his toes, he kissed her deeply and thoroughly, he moaned out her name and then he simply let go; tumbling over the cliff with her, holding onto her for dear life.

And even then, even in this moment where his mind was as far away as it could be, he knew. He had zero plans of ever letting her go.
Chapter 12

When Harry returned from cleaning up, he found the library was empty; Maddie was gone, along with a few articles of clothing. As his eyes graced over the sofa they had just abandoned, his cheeks turned pink and his smile pulled wider. Memories of her in his home were already taking hold of his mind. They were already replacing the dark ones.

"Madeline?" He called out into the house, scooping his boxers up from the floor. Stepping into them, he set out to find her. "Maddie?" He called down the hall as he rounded to the stairs. "Maddie..."

"Down here!" He could hear her voice from downstairs and he moved towards it with quick feet. With a glance to the drawing room, he went the opposite direction through the living room and into the kitchen.

And there she was. With her back to the door as she poured wine into their glasses, Harry had a moment to take her in. Her hair was pulled up into a mess of a bun on top of her head and she was wearing the button down shirt he had been wearing before she had pulled it off of him. It was big on her, long, and he instantly wanted to kiss her again. He wanted to kiss her while his hands tucked up inside that shirt to see just what she was wearing underneath.

"Did you want more wine?" She called to him over her shoulder, knowing he was there.

"Yes please," he chuckled, stepping into the room and moving over to her.

"Mmm..." She smiled into her glass as she took a sip, turning around to hand him his. "Here you go," her smile pulled wider as she looked up at him; her eyes dancing as they scanned over his bare chest, the boxers low on his hip, his mussed up hair.

"Thank you," he took the glass from her and took a drink, watching as she leaned back against the counter, watching as she watched him. "So..." He smiled; a slight cocky twitch to his lips.

"So?" She lifted her eyebrows, loving this new semi-nervous, mostly-flirty nature between them.

"Can we talk about it?"

"It?" She chuckled. "We're well into our thirties, Harry. Are we really going to call it, it?"

"Not that," he laughed with a roll of his eyes, moving in closer as his hand stretched out. His fingers tucked into the long shirt, bringing a flush to her skin as they parted the fabric and found home on her hip. "I'm curious...exactly how was it that Bishop convinced you to put his name on your body?" As his thumb smoothed over the scrawled signature that was permanent on her hip, her smile grew less cocky; more warm.

"Ahhh...." Maddie nodded slowly. "It." Harry laughed along with her, his fingers still on her hip as he waited. "Well..." She took a long drink from her glass and sat it to the side, her hands moving to him; one running up the arm he had on her, one reaching out to tickle his stomach. "You sure you want to hear this story?"
"Yes," he nodded, softening up a bit. "I...I want to hear all of your stories, Maddie."

As she looked up into his eyes, as she watched for a reaction from him that might betray his words, she found none. He meant it. "Okay," she sighed. "We were on our honeymoon..." Her smile tipped higher as she remembered. "We were staying on the Amalfi Coast and one afternoon we were out shopping and eating and drinking and...he pulled me into a Tattoo Shop. He went first, asking the artist to tattoo my signature on him and...I don't know," she shrugged. "I wanted one too."

"You got each other's signatures tattooed on your hips?" Harry smiled as his thumb smoothed over the spot again.

"We did," she bit her bottom lip for a second. "They're from our marriage license...the same signatures, I mean."

"Of course," Harry nodded, remembering his friend fondly. "That sounds exactly like him. But you..."

"What can I say," she shrugged. "Bishop rubbed off on me," she laughed. "And now he'll never rub off of me."

"Ha!" Harry laughed. "No he won't."

"Does it bother you?" Her eyes narrowed as she studied his expression.

"No," he was quick to shake his head. "No of course not."

"That I have your best friend's signature on my hip?" She knew their history was more complicated than this.

"He wasn't my best friend then," Harry said the words and immediately shook his head. "That's not what I meant. I meant..." He took a breath and shrugged; easy and calm. "He was your husband." His hand at her hip ran up to her side, warming her skin. "Does it bother me that you have your husband's name tattooed on your hip? No," he grinned. "It doesn't bother me at all."

"Good," she smiled wide, leaning up to kiss his lips.

"Good," he echoed, abandoning his glass of wine on the counter next to her. "Can I confess something?"

"You can," she nodded, her body warming as his arms moved around her.

"I cannot believe you're here," he shook his head as he gathered her body closer. "I can't. You're really just...here. And wearing my shirt. And..."

"Satisfied from the lovemaking?" She offered, her hands moving up his arms as she stepped closer.

"I hope so," his features grew soft.

"Harry..." The way she said his name made his body stir.

"Yes?" He smiled down at her, his hand rubbing up and down the soft fabric of his shirt.
"I was thinking..." She bit at her bottom lip, her smile curling the corners of her mouth. "There's one part of the house you haven't shown me."

"Is that right?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"It is," she nodded. "And there's something I've been wondering about since I saw the library..."

"Oh?" He chuckled, hugging her tight. "What's that exactly?" Maddie's eyes danced with a hint of mischief as she leaned up on her toes and kissed him; passing her lips over his before she pulled back and stepped out of his arms. "Wait. Where are you going?"

"I'll just..." She grinned back at him as she hurried from the room.

"Maddie?" He laughed and followed; steps behind her as she crossed the living room and headed for the stairs. "Where are you going?" He shook his head as she went straight for his room.

"I think you know exactly where I'm..." She didn't stop to look around his room, didn't stop to take in his bed—not yet—instead she headed straight for the large double doors she knew led straight to where she was going. "Aha!" She pushed them open and stepped right inside his bathroom. And though she was out of his sight when she said it, he could hear the echo of her voice. "I knew it!"

"Knew what?" He laughed, following her into the bathroom.

"That." She pointed, her smile and her eyes and the bounce in her step all echoing her excitement. "Is MY tub."

"Ha!" His head tipped back in laughter. "No, love. That's my tub."

"No way," she shook her head, walking up to him; her finger wagging in his face. "I picked out that tub. I narrowed it down. I did the research. I was so excited for that tub and here it is...just sitting there. My tub. Begging to be used."

"Is that so?"

"It is," she countered his smirk with one of her own.

"Well," he shrugged, waving his hand towards it. "It's all yours love. Be my guest."

"I can take a bath?" She grew giddy.

"You can take a bath." And he wondered if she thought there was really anything he would say no to.

Her smile pulled wide, her eyes watching him closely. "And you?"

"Me?"

She moved right up to him then, her hands reaching out to his bare stomach. "Are you going to join me?"

"Did you want me to join you?"
"Yes," Maddie laughed. "Yes, Harry. Yes. I want you to get in that tub with me."

"Well I would be a fool to say no to that," He shook his head.

"Well," Maddie's hands skimmed lower, tucking into the band of his boxers. "It's a good thing you're done being a fool."

"It really is," he nodded, leaning in to kiss her. And God, it really was.

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There was never any question where Maddie would be sleeping that night, never any gentlemanly pretenses where Harry offered to put her things in any one of the guest rooms. When he left her in his room, drying off after their time in the tub, he ran down the stairs to fetch her bag and he came right back to his room.

"Here you are," he sat the bag on his bed and moved over to his dresser, finding shorts and a t-shirt and pulling them on. When he turned around, what he saw in front of him made his heart jump in his chest. Maddie, with slightly tired eyes and a warm smile was crawling into his bed; pulling back the blankets and adjusting the pillows. And for a split second, it threw him.

"What is it?" She caught his gaze, recognized the look in his eyes. "Harry?" She smiled expectantly.

"Sorry," he laughed at himself, shaking his head as he moved towards the bed. "Would you believe that I'm nervous?"

"Nervous?" Her nose scrunched up. "What are you nervous about?"

"This," he waved his hand around him; at her, at the bed she sat on.

"What?" Maddie laughed lightly. "This? But...we've slept together before. We just made love. Twice." She pointed to the bathroom and looked up at him. "Why are you nervous?"

"Because," he looked to her with wide, bright eyes. "This is...God Maddie...you? In my bed? I just..." He shook his head, finding the words hard to come by. She had tripped him up completely when she said 'making love'.

"Come on," Maddie smiled sweetly as she moved to her knees, crawling over to his side and reaching for his hand. She knew this was big but she also knew that if they got caught up in that...they might be awake for days. "Come on Captain. Get in this bed with me. I've flown a long way, for a long time, and you just made my body...feel amazing. I'm exhausted and I need some sleep and..." She bit her bottom lip, her cheeks flushing slightly. "And I would like to do that right here..." Here finger pointed into his chest.

"Okay..." Harry sighed; his face lighting up. "Okay."

Maddie clapped her hands as she moved back, watching as Harry pulled back the blankets and crawled into bed with her. Settling back onto his pillow, he opened his arms and waved her closer.

"Come on in."
"There we go," Maddie grinned and moved into him; stretching her body out along his and cuddling close. With a deep breath in and a slow breath out, she wrapped her arm around his stomach and turned to press a kiss to his chest. "Perfect."

"God," he sighed, his arms hugging her tightly to him, his lips pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "You have no idea."

When Maddie woke the next morning there was the briefest moment of confusion; her eyes opening up to walls that weren't hers, to a bed that wasn't familiar. And then she turned her head and it all came back and it was instantly and wonderfully familiar. "Harry." She whispered her voice low and heavy with the sleep that still tugged at her. All of the memories from the day before came rushing back to her; from the second she decided to go back to London right up to the way he had tucked her into him before they fell asleep. Her body stirred at the memory of his hands, at the recall of his lips and his body and the way he had said her name.

"Maddie," he called out to her.

Just like that, she thought; her eyes focusing on him. "Good morning Captain."

"Are you really still here?" He reached across his pillow, his fingers stroking her cheeks.

"I am," she moved closer to him; closing the distance that had occurred during the night. "Thought I would be gone?"

"Honestly?" He smiled down at her. "I couldn't go to sleep for the longest time on the off chance this was a dream but once I was out..." He let out a low whistle.

"Good?" Maddie giggled.

"Amazing. I haven't slept this well in years..." He wrapped a warm, strong arm around her and brought her closer to him and she went with no argument. "Come here," he tucked her back into him, kissing her shoulder, her neck, her cheek before laying back on his pillow; his smile wide even in his hazy state between sleep and wake. "I don't want to get out of this bed."

"Then don't," she grinned, her hands running over his arms that were wrapped around her.

"Hmmm..." He smiled at the thought. "I don't have to be to the office for a few hours..."

"There you go," Maddie encouraged, scooting closer to him.

"But I really should get up and go for a run..."

"Boooo..." Her nose scrunched up.

"Really?" He chuckled. "You don't want to come with me?"

"No way," she shook her head. "I can't believe you're still doing that."

"Well..." He sighed. "That kept me from losing my mind these last few years. If it hadn't been for that...who knows what sort of mess I'd be."
As Maddie turned to look up at him, she saw a flash of the pain he had been through, she saw it cross over his face. Tightening her hold on him, she kissed his chest. "Well I suppose if it got you through the last few years...then it can't be all bad." The sigh that came with her surrender made him chuckle.

"How very diplomatic of you," he ran his hand up and down her arm. "And what about you? What does your day look like?"

"Well..." Maddie took in a deep breath. "I suppose I don't have any plans. Maybe while you're running, I'll spend a little quality time with that amazing bathtub..."

"Sure," he nodded his head.

"Maybe I'll pop in downstairs and surprise Bernard..."

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back into his pillow, a loud laugh rumbling his chest. "Seeing you. Here. That will absolutely do it. Be kind to him."

"I will," she grinned. "And maybe this time I'll even wear pants."

"Ha!" Harry laughed, his heart thumping in his chest as she brought up their past, the first time she met Bernard.

"Other than that..." She shrugged. "I don't know... I suppose I might do some shopping or go over to the London house or...Hey...I didn't even think, do you mind if I'm here today? Without you?"

"I don't mind," he shook his head, humored that she was asking. "You have...free reign here Maddie. Make yourself comfortable."

"Okay," she moved a bit, leaning up so she could look down at him. "Will you be back for dinner? Or should I make plans without you?"

"I'll be back for dinner," he smiled up at her, his hands running up her back, loving that he got to have dinner with her again, that she was going to be here when he came home. "In fact. I really only have two meetings and once they're over...I'll be back early."

"Ooooh." Maddie's grin spread higher, her eyebrows waggling. "I like the sound of that."

"Yeah?" He loved the way she smiled when she was happy, loved the way she was looking at him; loved the way she felt in his arms. He loved having her there.

"Yes," she nodded. "I actually thought that maybe tonight, I would make dinner for you."

"Is that so?" He pulled her closer, moving her body over his.

"It is," she nodded again, biting her bottom lip as she settled into him. "And...over this last summer, I learned how to make a Crème Brule that will knock your socks off."

"What if I'm not wearing socks?" His tone was suggestive, his lips turning up into a smirk as his hands slid up under her t-shirt.
"Hmmm..." Her lip pulled from her teeth, curling higher as her skin turned hot under his fingers. "What if you weren't wearing anything?" She could feel her cheeks blush as she said the words, but she didn't care. Her fingers bunched up the t-shirt he wore.

"What if I weren't?" His voice dropped low, husky, his fingers tickling around from her back, moving to her stomach, towards her chest.

"Do you think..." Maddie's eyelids grew heavy as she looked down at him, her hips arching towards him, wanting exactly what they were alluding to. "Do you think you have time before your run?"

"Ha..." He grinned wide, his eyes flashing mischievous as his hands moved out from under her shirt, gripping at her waist as he sat up. "What run?"

"Oh!" Maddie gasped surprised as his lips caught hers, his arms tightening around her, pulling her closer into his lap. "Ohhhh..." She moaned into his mouth and he couldn't help the grin that took over his lips, even as he kissed her.

The night before he had been nervous, worried he would wake to find that this had all been just a dream, that she really wasn't there in his bed and that his mind had finally lost its loose grip on reality. But when he woke that morning, when he opened his eyes and saw her there, content and peaceful in his bed, he realized...he had been right.

This was a dream. As corny and ridiculous as it sounded, this was his dream come true. No doubt, he would give up every single second of this reunion to have his best friend back and happily married to Maddie. But he couldn't change that. All he could really do was make peace with what was in front of him.

And in this moment, it was Maddie. This woman he had loved for so long, this woman he had lost, this woman who had come back. And though the night before he had been a bit more timid, more nervous and careful, this morning was different. She was still there, still next to him and despite what happened next, she was sitting in his lap. And the way she was sitting in his lap, the way she was kissing him back, ignited his senses and set him afire.

And he couldn't get enough of her.

With a giggle from Maddie and a groan from Harry, he wrapped his arms around her and moved them, flipping her over onto her back and moving in above her, determination pumping through his veins.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ After they were both sufficiently spent, loved up and blissed out, they laid together in Harry's bed, catching breath and smiling wide. And then, with a long, warm kiss to Maddie, Harry stepped from the bed and moved to the bathroom. When he emerged, much to Maddie's amusement, he was dressed and ready for a run.

"You're really going to go for a run after that?" Maddie smiled up at him from rumpled sheets.

"Of course," he winked down at her, stretching his arms up over his head. "I'm energized now."

"You're crazy," she rolled her eyes with a laugh, gathering the sheet up around her as she sat up.
"And you..." He stopped, biting his tongue and shaking his head at her. "You are unbelievably sexy right now."

"Yeah?" She cocked her head to the side, batting her lashes at him as she patted the bed next to her. "You sure you want to leave me here all alone while you go...run?" Her nose crinkled as she said the word and Harry's head tipped back with a big, loud laugh.

"No," he shook his head as he looked back down at her. "No I do not. But if I come back in there, I'm probably not going to leave and if I don't leave..."

"Thomas would be upset?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows.

"No no," Harry shook his head. "The Mayor of London would be upset."

"The Mayor of London?!' All of the flirt slipped from Maddie's face. "When did you start taking meetings with the Mayor of London?"

"When I started planning the Invictus Games," he shrugged. "We're having it here in London, he's a major player and..."

"Go," Maddie cut him off, her smile soft and sweet. "Go on..." She shook her head when he opened his mouth. Sitting up on her knees, she moved closer to him, her hands moving to his shoulders. "Go run. Go run so that you can get to your meetings. I'm going to take a bath and maybe we can have breakfast before you leave?"

"We can," he nodded, touched at how supportive she had just turned, abandoning her quest to pull him back to bed in favor of pushing him out the door. "Okay. I'm going to go run."

"Go run." She nodded again, watching as he turned and stepped from the room, her eyes appreciating the view as he moved away from her. With a sigh and a wide smile, she sat there on her knees in Harry's bed, in Harry's room—listening to him move down the stairs. Looking around his room, around his space, she took in a deep breath. It was hard for her to believe she was there too, to believe that she had spent the last night in Harry's arms. It was unbelievable—and it made her feel amazing.

And suddenly she was on her feet. Pulling the sheet around her as she hurried down the stairs, she called out, "Harry!"

He was halfway through the door when he heard her. Stepping outside, he turned to look back in the door, smiling up at her wrapped up in his sheet. "Change your mind about the run?" He quipped, his eyes dancing as he watched her move right to him.

"Not in a million years," she shook her head, her hand reaching out through the open door, gathering his t-shirt into her fingers and tugging him towards her. His hands reached out for the door frame, catching himself as he leaned in, as her lips caught his. And she kissed him; her mouth taking over his as her free hand worked up into his hair.

"Wow..." He blinked, wide-eyed and breathless as she pulled away.

"You can go run now," she was smug; pleased.
"Easy for you to say," he leaned to place one more quick kiss on her lips and then he stepped away. "I'll be back."

"I'll be here."

And then, with one last look at her, mussed and wearing only his sheet, he shook his head at her and turned away, knowing that if he didn't do it then—he wouldn't. Maddie giggled at the effect she had on him, sighed at the effect he had on her and she shut the door, heading back upstairs towards the tub.

As Harry set out on his run, as Maddie set out to bathe and dress, there was one more person who had witnessed the exchange—or at least most of it.

Across the lawn, across the gravel drive, the Duchess of Cambridge, stepping out for a quick walk with Lupo and Arthur, had glanced up in the direction of Harry's place. As she lifted her hand to wave at him, she watched as a set of hands reached out through his open doorway and pulled him back in. Her eyes had blinked at the surprise; she hadn't known he was seeing anyone. Though she struggled between wanting to know who exactly it was and not wanting to stick her nose where it didn't belong, she couldn't pull her eyes from it—and when she saw Harry turn away, when she saw him take the first few steps of his run, she saw the smile on his face and her curiosity only peaked.

But an impatient Lupo and a wandering Arthur pulled her from her momentary trance, snapping her eyes from the moment and back to her walk. But her interest never waned and, after she returned from the quick walk, after Arthur and Lupo were back inside eating breakfast, she took a deep breath and set out. As she moved towards Harry's place, she knew this pushed the boundaries of their relationship but she couldn't help it. She was drawn there and her intentions, truly, were born only out of her wanting him to be happy. She debated knocking on the door, introducing herself to the mystery woman on the other side while Harry was out for a run, but she knew that was just a step over the line. So instead, she took a breath and she took a seat—right there on the front stoop. And she waited for Harry to return.

When Harry rounded the corner and came into view of his place, he caught it immediately; his sister-in-law sitting there on his step. His eyes narrowed as confusion danced around his head. Had he forgotten something? Was everything okay? With a half smile and a muddled look in his eyes, he slowed to a stop in front of her, catching his breath as he wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

"Good morning," he smiled down at her. "Aren't you supposed to making an appearance somewhere?"

"I am," she nodded, a smile on her lips as she rose to her feet, studying the curve of his smile, the light in his eyes. "But I don't have to start preparing for that for about an hour."

"Well then," Harry's arms crossed over his chest. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Well..." She took a deep breath, her hands coming together in front of her, her mind still trying to figure out exactly how she was going to approach this. "You know...you know I think of you as a brother, yes?"

"Yes..." His eyes narrowed even further.
"And you know that I really do just want for you to be happy."

"I do..." He nodded, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest. "Want to let me know what's going on right now or..."

"There's a woman in your house." Her voice was rushed as she pointed her thumb back towards the door.

Harry's eyes blinked in surprise, his smile quick to cover it. "What?"

"There is a woman. In your house." She stood tall, unwavering. She knew what she saw.

"Did you call the authorities?" He laughed, only a little nervous, more than a little amused.

"Very funny." She blinked her eyes, completely undeterred. "There's a woman in your house."

With a long, deep breath, he nodded. "There is." He was caught. He knew it, but he really didn't care. "Though I'm not quite sure how you know that." His finger pointed out at her.

"I saw her pull you back in before your run." She pinched the finger he had pointing at her. "And I saw the smile on your face when you left."

"Are you spying on me?"

"I was on my way out with Lupo and Arthur...and you're avoiding the question."

"There hasn't been a question yet." He shook his head, laughing with ease.

"Fine." Kate nodded. "Who is she?"

"Ha. No." He shook his head, moving around her. "We're not going to do this."

"Yes we are," she held her ground, spinning to watch him. "I worry about you. And your taste in women hasn't been the best and...if you don't tell me, I'll tell Will and..."

"Okay," he held up his hand. "Though I don't appreciate your comment on my taste in women...I'll tell you."

"Really?" Her nose scrunched up, surprised.

"Really," he reached for the door handle. "In fact, for the look on your face alone, I'll show you." Before Kate could say another word, he pushed open the door and stepped inside, calling out into the house. "I'm back!"

"In the kitchen with Bernard!" Maddie's voice called out from the back of the house.

"I have company with me..." He warned, laughing as he glanced back at Kate, waving her in. "Come on in, Snoopy." With a roll of her eyes, she stepped into his place and he shut the door behind her.

"You have company with you?" Maddie called out again. This time Kate heard the voice, her eyes
flashing in that direction; she knew she recognized it but she couldn't quite place it. "Where did you pick up company?" Maddie's voice grew closer as she rounded the corner.

And when she came into view, completely dressed and ready for her day, when Kate saw her step into the living room, her jaw fell open and her eyes stretched as wide as they had ever been. "Oh my God." She was stunned, shocked. Her eyes blinked at tears that suddenly and quite unexpectedly sprang to her eyes.

Maddie glanced quickly at Harry who lifted his eyebrows, hoping it was okay that she was there. With a soft smile, Maddie nodded, swallowing back a ball of emotion in her throat. She hadn't quite prepared for seeing Harry's family again, she hadn't really thought about it when she had boarded the plane to come back to him—just how big moments like this could be. Her eyes shifted back to Kate and she lifted her hand in a wave. "Hi."

Kate's mouth opened and then shut as she shook her head, trying to shake her mind out of the heavy stun. And then she was in motion, walking right past Harry, right through the living room, she stepped right up to Maddie and without a word, she wrapped her arms around her, hugging her tight.

"Oh!" Maddie gasped, her surprise quickly fading as she hugged her back. Harry stood off to the side, watching their reunion with a whole host of emotions swirling inside of him.

After a long, warm moment, Kate pulled back just enough to look at Maddie, her eyes scanning her face. "It's really you..."

"It is," Maddie nodded, sniffing as she smiled at Kate—at a long lost friend.

"And you...you were the woman...kissing Harry this morning?" Kate glanced back to the door as Maddie laughed.

"I think so..." She looked around Kate to Harry, lifting her eyebrows with a grin.

"You were," his eyes met hers with a nod.

"You were..." Kate's smile pulled high as she glanced back and forth between them. "Are you...back? Are you...together?" Her eyes were wide and full of questions as she laughed.

"We're..." She shrugged and looked to Harry; she really didn't know the answer to that, not entirely. They hadn't really talked about it. "Yes? I think?"

Stepping into the room with a smile that matched both of theirs, Harry spoke up. "I think you caught us right in the middle of figuring that out."

"So this is...new?" Kate stepped back from Maddie, almost reluctant to let go of her.

"Very new," Maddie nodded, squeezing Kate's hand as they parted. "But...I'm...here and we're...figuring it out..." Maddie looked to Harry for confirmation.

"We are," Harry nodded, his smile and his eyes and everything about him reflecting just how thrilled he was with that fact.

"Okay," Kate took a breath. "Okay. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bust in or..." She laughed at herself,
at the situation, turning happy eyes to Maddie. "I'm just...really, really happy to see you standing here." She looked to Harry then, "and YOU!" She moved towards him, stunning them all when she took his face in her hands and leaned in, kissing him square on the mouth before pulling back and meeting his wide eyes. "Don't you mess this up."

"I..." He laughed, shaking his head. "I don't plan on it."

"Okay...okay..." Kate looked back at Maddie. "I'll leave you two now. I have to go get ready for this afternoon and you two...you have things to figure out..." She clapped her hands together and Maddie couldn't help but laugh at just how happy Kate seemed. "But..." Kate met her eyes. "I would love to spend time with you. Sometime...while you're here and...it would be wonderful to spend some time with you."

"I would like that too," Maddie nodded, her eyes opening wide as a thought occurred to her. "Hey! Maybe you could come over for dinner tonight..." She glanced to Harry quickly. "I mean, if that's okay with you and..."

"It is," Harry nodded, happy to agree to anything she asked, knowing he had hoped that this would all happen eventually.

"Great!" Maddie looked to Kate. "If you're free, you should come to dinner tonight. I'm cooking dinner and making dessert."

"I heard she makes a Crème Brule that will knock your socks off..." Harry offered, meeting Maddie's eyes with a wink and a smirk.

"I do!" Maddie agreed with a laugh. "You should come."

"I..." Kate looked to Harry and then back to Maddie. "I would like that and I'm sure that Will would be thrilled and Oh! You can meet Arthur."

"I would love that," Maddie felt her heart tug in her chest as she wrapped her mind around reconnecting with Harry's family. "So you'll come?"

"We will," Kate nodded. "We'll be here. What time?"

"Seven," Maddie offered, looking to Harry who gave a quick nod of agreement.

"Perfect," Kate sighed. "Okay, okay. I should go...but..." She moved to hug Maddie one more time. "But I'm really happy you're here. And I'll see you..." She stepped away then. "Both of you...tonight."

"You will," Maddie agreed.

After a chorus of good-byes, Kate slipped back out the door, leaving Harry and Maddie standing together in his entryway, both with wide, matching smiles. Harry watched her for a moment, noticing the soft furrow of her brow, the distant look in her eyes.

"Are you okay?" His voice was quiet, his smile sweet.

"I am," she nodded, her eyes swinging up to his. "I...when I got on the plane to come and see you..." She cleared her throat. "I hadn't thought about everything else. All I thought about was
coming to see you. I hadn't really thought about seeing Kate and Will and meeting Arthur and..."
She took a breath and her smile widened. "You're sure it's okay that I invited them all over? You're
okay with them knowing that I'm..." She waved her hand around, not sure how to finish that
sentence.

"I'm okay with whatever you're okay with, Maddie." There was nothing but sincerity in his voice,
in his eyes. "You should know that...whenever you and I get around to figuring out...any of
this...I'm on board with whatever you're on board with. And if you want to have dinner tonight with
my brother and his family then..." He spread his hands out in front of him.

"Okay then," she grinned.

"Okay then."

"So we're having a dinner party," she watched his eyes, watching for a flinch. And she found none.

"We're having a dinner party." He felt proud and happy and so unbelievably lucky that she was
there. Though he knew that they had a lot to talk about, that they had much to figure out and
though he guessed there were likely bumps ahead on the road they were on—he was more than
happy to face them with her. And he was sincerely thankful that she was willing to face them with
him.
Chapter 13

When Harry stepped through his door that night, his home, his body, everything felt warmer. He had spent the better part of the day in planning meetings, with the Mayor of London, with the committee. Though he did his level best to focus everything he had on the topic at hand, he couldn't help the way his mind drifted towards home, towards her. When his meetings were finally over, later than he had thought they would be, he was happy to be going home.

And when he walked through the door, he was greeted with music playing throughout, the smell of something cooking or being prepared to cook and the absolute knowledge that somewhere in all this was her. He knew it was crazy, but he felt like he was breathing easier.

"Maddie?" He called out as he shut the door behind him. Setting aside his bag, his suit coat, he moved into the house. Loosening his tie as he walked through the living room, unbuttoning his cuffs as he passed the stereo that played, his smile grew wider; his body relaxing as he moved.

There were remnants of Maddie everywhere. She had only been there a day, but the evidence of her presence was already planted in his home. The playlist that was turned up, her shoes in the entryway, the warm fuzzy blanket that he used for decor and she used for warmth was rumpled and tucked into the big chair he had left her in that morning. There was a book on the cushion next to it with some slip of paper as a bookmark and a half drunken cup of tea on the stand.

With every sign of life, every sign of her, Harry's smile pushed higher and higher and by the time he reached the kitchen, his cheeks hurt from the grin on his face.

And then he caught her. Standing at the large island in the middle of the kitchen she was chopping and mixing and dancing to the music that flooded the house.

Harry had to stop, had to watch this woman, this wonderful woman who had made herself at home in his space; making it feel more like home to him than it had since he was a child and lived there with his mother. He watched her for a beat, thanking whatever contention of gods and fates had brought her back into his life and then he did the only thing he really could.

Clearing his throat, he stepped inside. Her eyes lifted from her work and the way her face flashed bright at the sight of him made his heart swell in his chest.

"Welcome home Captain!" She called out over the music; her feet and her hips still moving to the beat. "I hope you don't mind...I've taken over your kitchen!"

"I don't mind!" He shook his head. "Though I can't say for sure that Bernard won't!"

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, clapping her hands together. "Don't you worry about him! He gave me his blessing before he left!"

"I'm sure he did," Harry's voice dropped as he stepped up in front of her. "Are you making dinner?"

"I am," she tilted her head up to him as he moved in on her; his body pressing close, his hands moving to the counter on either side of her. "For you and me and Kate and Will and Arthur..." She held out a chopped carrot and nodded for him to take it.
"I see," he laughed, biting the carrot from out of her fingers, making her laugh in the circle of his arms. "I see..." And there he stood, watching her look up at him with her bright happy eyes and that sweet, beautiful smile and all he wanted to do was drown in the warmth that surrounded her. With very little thought, his hands moved from the counter, moving around her waist and pulling her body to his.

"Oh!" Maddie giggled, her hands moving up to his shoulders as he bent his lips to hers. "Hi..." She smiled against him as he kissed her hello.

"Hi," he grinned, nudged her nose and reached for her hand. Gathering it up into his, he pulled her away from the counter and then, with his strong arms guiding her, he started swaying.

"What's this?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted, her body moving willingly and easily with his.

"Dancing in the kitchen," he shook his head softly. "I can't let you have all the fun without me now, can I?"

"No," she laughed, moving closer, wrapping her arm up over his shoulder, her hand behind his neck. "No you most certainly cannot."

"Can I tell you, all I was thinking about today was the fact that you were here without me," he tightened his hold on her.

"And can I tell you that all I was thinking about today was the fact that we desperately need to come up with a plan?"

"A plan?" He stalled for only one beat before he picked it back up. "A plan for what?"

"For how we're going to manage..." Her cheeks turned pink as she nodded between them. "This."

"This?" Harry breathed; his heart thumping faster in his chest as his eyebrows shot up. "When you say this you mean..."

"You and I," she narrowed her eyes; playful but genuine. "Us. This....thing that's happening..."

"The dancing?" He tried one last shot at a joke, one last attempt to settle his wild pulse.

"Harry..." She ran her hand up his shoulder, into the hair on his neck. "Don't tell me I'm alone in wanting to..."

"No," he cut her off, instantly serious. "No of course you're not alone. You could not be less alone..." He shook his head with a breathy laugh. "I simply never thought I would ever, in my life, be having this conversation....I didn't think that luck crossed paths like this Maddie. I..." He sucked in a breath and gathered his wits. "We need a plan. We absolutely need a plan."

"Okay," she smiled, the dancing resuming. "Can we talk about it? Tonight after dinner is over, can we talk about how in the world we work with an ocean between us?"

"Yes," he nodded, his eyes wide and full of all of the emotions that were bubbling inside of him. "We will. I promise."
"Good," Maddie nodded, allowing a few more turns around the room before her hand slid down and swatted his ass. "Come now Captain. Help me finish dinner before they get here?"

"Anything you ask," he agreed readily; meaning it on every single level. "Anything at all."

When the knock at the door came, Maddie and Harry were just finishing up. They had put the final touches on dinner, they had changed and he was happily taking direction from her as they set the table. Looking up from his duties, he smiled across the table at her.

"They're here," he sat down the last napkin and stood tall, watching as she took a long, deep breath. Her eyes sought calm in his as she confessed. "I'm a little nervous."

Stifling a laugh that came out as a puff, Harry nodded. "You know you don't need to be. It's just Will and Kate—who is already thrilled to see you—and Arthur!" His face brightened. "You're going to love Arthur."

"I'm sure that I am," she softened at how happy he was, how excited he seemed.

"Come on," he held his hand out to her. "Let's go let them in."

When they opened the door, they were greeted with three smiles, three easy-going, laid back, warm smiles. And Maddie instantly eased up.

"Well, well, well, would you look at that," Will tried to keep his wide eyes from giving away just how surprised he was. "Kate told me you were here, but seeing it for myself..."

"Hi Will," Maddie smiled back as they moved inside the house. "It's good to see you again."

"You too," he moved to kiss her cheek, to hug her shoulders, his eyes focusing on his brother. "Shocking. But really good."

"Thank you," she glanced at Harry who winked in return, moving to hug his brother hello.

"Alright, get out of the way," Kate was playful as she nudged her husband aside, moving to hug Maddie herself. "And this..." She stood to the side. "This is our son Arthur. Arthur, this is Maddie Bishop." Maddie's eyes shifted down at the adorable little man standing next to his mother.

"Bishop?" His eyes lit up. "Like the Bishop Hotel?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded, her features softening as she dropped down to his level. "Do you know it?"

"Yes," He nodded happily. "We were there for a party last week."

"I see," Maddie smiled, knowing he was talking about an event he had gone to with his parents. "Was it a fun party?"

"Yes! They gave me a bicycle as a gift!" He nodded again, his eyes lighting up as he remembered. "Wow..." She loved him instantly, her heart tugging in her chest as her memory flashed over the
"time she had missed with him. "That's pretty amazing."

"It was," he grinned and leaned in closer to her. "Is the Bishop Hotel your hotel?"

"Well..." Maddie thought for a second. "It's my family's hotel."

"That's pretty cool."

"It is," Maddie laughed softly as Kate leaned down to her son.

"Do you think you could say hello to Ms. Maddie before you ask all the questions?"

With a sheepish smile and sweet eyes, he nodded. "Hello Miss Maddie."

"Hello Mr. Arthur. It's wonderful to meet you."

Like the young little heir he was, he stuck out his hand. "It's nice to meet you too." With a wide smile, Maddie shook his hand and then Arthur with his cute little face and his inquisitive ways, looked up at his beaming uncle and asked. "Is Miss Maddie your new girlfriend?"

And all sets of eyes in the room looked right to Harry who blushed under their gaze. "Ha..." He clapped his hands together, his own eyes travelling over each of them as they looked at him; Will was curious, Kate was expectant, and Maddie—Maddie was beyond amused.

"You know, Mr. Arthur," Maddie spoke first, drawing his eyes back to her. "Do you ever have a question that you don't quite know the answer to yet, one you have to think about for a little bit?"

"Mmm Hmm," he nodded.

"Well," Maddie sighed happily. "I think that might be a question that your Uncle Harry has to think about for a little bit."

"Oh..." Arthur mulled that over in his head for a second before he shrugged. "Okay."

"Okay," Maddie shrugged and rose to her feet. "Now, would you mind helping me put forks out on the table? Your Uncle Harry was helping me but he kept dropping them all over the place..."

"Hahahaha," as Arthur drifted into laughter, he let his question go, imagining his uncle dropping forks all over the kitchen. "I can help you."

"Fantastic. Thank you," Maddie smiled, meeting Harry's eyes as she moved towards the kitchen, catching the way he was looking at her—his heart right out in the open, right there on his sleeve for all of them to see.

As they all moved towards the back of the house, as Kate lifted her eyebrows to Will who shrugged, Arthur—who was leading the way—called back over his shoulder. "Hey Uncle Harry!"

"Yeah buddy?"

"When I don't know an answer to a question, I ask Mrs. Eleanor," he was casual and sweet as he thought of his nanny. "She knows the answer to everything." Maddie snickered as the others laughed.
"There you go," Will turned a smirk to his brother. "Maybe you can check with Mrs. Eleanor."

"Ha!" Harry laughed. "Thank you buddy. I appreciate that."

It was midway through dinner before it happened, before Kate couldn't take it any longer. The small talk had passed, the polite questions had been asked and she felt like they had caught up on what Maddie was doing with her life—except for this one great big piece. So, taking the last swallow of wine in her glass, she rested her fork to the side and went for it.

"So I'm just going to ask..." Her eyes looked from Maddie to Harry. "How is that the two of you..." She shook her head, not even completely sure what she wanted to say.

Maddie looked to Harry, their eyes meeting in a bit of a flirtatious dare. With a smile and a deep breath, Maddie smiled at Kate. "Do you want the long version or the short version?"

"The long," Kate's smile curled higher on her cheeks, victorious and pleased.

"Okay," Maddie took a drink from her glass as Harry settled back in his chair, eager to hear her tell the story. "Well...when Bishop died..." Her eyes blinked, but her smile didn't fade. "He left Harry a bottle of Scotch in his will."

"A bottle of Scotch?" Will looked to his brother, his voice soft and sympathetic.

"An important bottle of Scotch," Maddie added, her fingers stretching to cover Harry's hand on the table. "I had the bottle in our apartment in New York and we thought about shipping it but...we decided that the next time Harry was in New York, he would stop by and get it." She squeezed his hand, drawing his eyes and his smile up to her before she released him and turned back to Kate. "Nearly two years later, Harry was coming to the states."

"Back in October?" Will asked, just as curious as his wife.

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "He called me and asked if he could come over and he did." Her eyes shifted a little bit, growing hazy as she remembered that night. "And we...we opened the bottle and we toasted Bishop and..." She bit her bottom lip and looked down at her hands for a beat. "And we finished it."

"A bottle of Scotch?" Kate's smile was warm as she clarified.

"A bottle of Scotch," Maddie grinned. "We spent that night reminiscing, telling stories about him." She allowed a moment for it to sit with her, for Bishop's memory to flash across her mind before she drew in a breath and continued. "And then the next night we had dinner together and we caught up on everything else; all that's happened in between and it was...nice?" She looked to Harry who was watching her, his heart warming as she told the story, at the smile that was on her face as she told it.

"It was nice," he nodded; beyond nice.

"After that, we started texting and then calling and then when I came to London, he came out to Ian and Michael's for dinner and we met up with friends and...and here I am."
"Here you are," Harry still couldn't believe it, even now that he had witnesses. It still blew his mind.

When dinner was over, the group moved to the living room as Arthur sought out his bin of toys that Harry kept stashed for when he visited. And as Harry played with his nephew and Kate settled into a chair, Maddie went back to the kitchen for drinks with Will following behind to lend her a hand.

Maddie pulled out wine glasses while Will uncorked a bottle, watching her as she moved about the kitchen. Catching the thoughtful look on his face, the way his eyes were following her, Maddie met his gaze with half a smirk.

"Everything okay?"

"Sorry?" He caught himself, pulling his attention back to the bottle in his hands.

Maddie chuckled and stopped her movements, her hands resting on the counter between them, her head tipping to the side as she studied him for a moment. "Will?"

"Hmm?" He lifted his eyebrows without looking up to her.

"Is everything okay?"

"Of course everything is okay," he shook his head, pulling the cork out with a pop. "Why wouldn't everything be okay?"

"I don't know..." Maddie laughed lightly, blinking as she tried to figure it out. "It just seems like maybe you..." She stood taller, her eyes narrowing. "Will, are you not happy with me being here?"

"What?" His eyes shot up to hers, denial hot on his lips. "Why would you say that?"

"I don't know," she shook her head. "You just...seem off and you seem a little distant and...I get this feeling. I..." She pressed her hand to her chest and looked down at the glasses in front of her. "I mean...of course you don't have to be happy about this, not everyone is going to be but I just expected..."

"Stop," he held up his hand, his eyes soft around the edges. "Please. I'm happy you're here. I...I am." He nodded his head, hoping she could see the sincerity in his eyes, hoping she could hear it in his voice. "When Kate told me you were here, I didn't believe her. I thought she was toying with me but she wasn't. You're here and..." He laughed then, his hands moving to his chest as he held her eyes. "And Harry is..." He swallowed and looked down at the floor, gathering his thoughts together, his emotions swirling around in his head. When his eyes finally lifted back to hers, she could see just how much he loved his brother. "When you and Harry were together before, that was the happiest I had ever seen him. He was at his absolute best when he was with you..." He meant it and he prayed she knew that he meant it.

"But..." She whispered the word, afraid of what came next.

"But when you and Harry ended..." His voice dropped, his eyes grew sad. "That was the...darkest
I've ever seen him. He was at his...absolute worst when he was without you." He gulped back the memory of it all, the worry he had held onto. "And I know it was all his doing and I know that he deserved every single second of the darkness he sat in...believe me, I know that." He shook his head again. "But he's my little brother and I love him and I just...I worry about him. I don't know if he survives losing you again and as much as seeing you here brings back this...hope I think he lost, it also brings back the possibility of..."

"The darkness..." She offered up in a barely audible voice.

"I'm sorry," he rounded the counter to her side, reaching his hands out as though they wanted to soothe her. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything, I really shouldn't have. I just didn't want you to think that anything I'm thinking or feeling has anything to do with...you. I adore you Madeline, I really do. I just...I worry about him."

Maddie stood there in Harry's kitchen, dumbfounded and caught off guard, as her mind raced. "I...
She swallowed at the dryness in her throat and tried to shake it off. "I'm not here to mess with Harry, Will. I swear to you that..."

"I know that," he cut her off, wanting her to know it. "I know you're not. I didn't mean it like that. I just meant..."

"Good lord!" Their conversation was cut quick when Harry came into the room, his smile wide and his eyes alive and bright. "What in the world is taking so long in here? Kate and I are ready to send in a search party."

Pulling his eyes from Maddie, Will looked to his brother, "Sorry. It's my fault. I'm heading out now." He lifted the bottle up in the air, turning to look at Maddie. "Maddie?"

"Yes!" She smiled up at him, nodding to him and then his brother. "I'm right behind you."

As they both moved past Harry, he watched them, slightly confused but following behind them—shrug and smile in place. Oblivious to the tension that still hung in the room, to the reasons behind it.

"Wow..." Maddie sighed as Harry waved once more to his brother and his family before shutting the front door behind them.

"Wow?" He smiled as he turned to face her; his hands reaching for hers, their fingers lacing together.

"Just...seeing them," she shrugged, her smile matching his. "After all this time...it was nice."

"I'm pretty sure they enjoyed it too," Harry nodded, watching as she moved slowly back, her fingers sliding out of his as she moved to sit down on the stairs in front of him.

"You know I read about Arthur being born," she looked up at him with a bit of a tired smile. It had been a long night full of laughter and stories and it had brought up a lot for Maddie. Not to mention what her conversation with Will had done to her mind.

"Yeah?" Harry leaned back against the large table in the middle of the foyer, his arms crossing over
his chest as he smiled down at her.

"I was right in the middle of...hating you." She smiled into a sigh, looking away from him and swallowing at the lump in her throat. "But I sucked it up and I called her. It was so hard; to hear her voice, to miss your family." She looked down at her hands. "But it was a good thing. It was...cathartic." With a deep breath she swung her eyes back up to his. "I remember calling Bishop and bragging about this big step and..." Maddie laughed. "And tonight I got to meet him; Arthur. And I got to hug Kate again and your brother and...big day."

"Big day," Harry agreed; watching her for a moment before he blinked, took a breath and felt his stomach clench just a bit.

"Yeah..." Maddie nodded, feeling the tone of the room change just a bit, just enough.

"You know," Harry shifted his wait; nervous about the words he was about to speak. "All of this time you've been in London...Hell, even when I was in New York, I nearly forgot there was a time when you hated me."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded. "Me too."

"You know, I'm sure that..." Harry began, shifting the conversation away from the uneasiness but Maddie, true to who she was, jumped right into it.

"I hated you," she breathed the word, shaking her head as she remembered. "I just...I hated who you became that night, who you became period. I..." She laughed and looked right up at him. "Harry...I hated you."

Though his eyes grew sad and his shoulders slumped and his lips turned down—he didn't look away; he didn't turn his gaze from her. He stood there in front of her, held her eyes and he nodded. "I know." His voice croaked as he spoke, as his emotions tugged at his heart. And he was stuck; his words, his thoughts. It was all stuck and he didn't know where to turn or what to do with all of it. He looked down at the floor and swallowed before looking back up at her. "Do you still?"

Maddie blinked in surprise; taken back by his question. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." He took a deep breath and let it out. "Do you still..."

"Hate you?" The words tumbled from her mouth with a dry laugh. "Harry, I..."

"I wouldn't blame you, you know," he didn't turn away from her as he spoke, didn't move. "Not after..." He swallowed the lump in his throat, the bitter taste that rose when he remembered what had happened. "Not after the way I treated you."

"Yeah..." Maddie breathed.

"You know," Harry cleared his throat, adjusting his weight and shuffling his feet. "Maybe we should talk about it."

"It?" She lifted her eyebrows; part of her wanting to just hold onto the warm, wonderful feelings they had been swimming in for the last few days.

Harry smiled down at her, his heart pounding away as he realized the road they were nearing; as he
contemplated all of the results that could come out of this particular discussion. "We're going to have to eventually, right?"

Maddie nodded her head, her expression growing serious. "I know you're right, I do. I just...I also know that this conversation isn't pretty, it's not going to be nice..." She laughed lightly.

"I don't need you to be nice to me," he shook his head but stayed still. "I don't need you to sugarcoat anything or tone it down or..."

"What do you need?" Maddie cut in, Will's words flashing into her mind.

"I need you to be honest with me and I need us to..." He laughed a bit; nervous and a little scared. "You said you wanted to have a conversation about making this work with an ocean between us and I don't know Maddie...."

"You don't know?" Her eyes scrunched up. "You don't know what? If you want to do that or..."

"No, no," he shook his head vigorously, holding his hands up to stop her. "I want that, I...I'm not sure I've ever wanted anything more than...that." He swallowed the lump of emotion that rose. "I meant that although the ocean you were speaking of was literal, I don't know if there might be a metaphorical sense to it all."

"You're so prophetic tonight," her lips curled up.

"Ha!" He nodded, running and hand through his hair. "I just don't want there to be anything hanging over our heads, Maddie. And I know that you being in London is the happiest I've been since...since before you went to the bookstore that morning." And just like that, the room filled with the weight of the years between them; the emotions that had passed. "And if there's anything left over from before...we should really address it, don't you think?"

Maddie watched him for a beat full of silence as she took in his words, his expression, the fact that he hadn't run for the door yet; that he hadn't tried to sway them away from this. She knew he was right; had known they would have to get there eventually. And then, with tears already brewing below the surface, she took a breath and spoke.

"I hated you..." Her words cracked on their way out.

"Yeah," he nodded his head, slow and solemn. "I hated me too. For a very, very long time..."

To Be Continued...
Maddie watched him for a beat full of silence as she took in his words, his expression, the fact that he hadn't run for the door yet; that he hadn't tried to sway them away from this. She knew he was right; had known they would have to get there eventually. And then, with tears already brewing below the surface, she took a breath and spoke.

"I hated you..." Her words cracked on their way out.

"Yeah," he nodded his head, slow and solemn. "I hated me too. For a very, very long time..." She knew that too, even before Will had told her the dark place Harry had slipped, she knew that he had gone there. But she couldn't help that and she couldn't protect him from that. All she could do was be honest.

"You left me," she whispered. "I trusted you. I loved you and was devoted to you and you just...you left me." She shook her head; her feelings evening out as she put it out there; simple and easy. Harry opened his mouth to speak, but she hurried forward. "I don't need an apology from you; you've given me one or...several. I don't need you to apologize. I know you're sorry and I know you regret it...or you did."

"I do," he offered softly, not wanting to interrupt her train of thought.

"And I don't really need an explanation. I know why you think you did it."

"Not why I think," he cut her off wanting to be clear. "Why I did it."

"I...I don't need the explanation."

"I thought you would be safer," he whispered; needing to say it even if she didn't need to hear it. "I thought you would be happier, that you would find a life that was better..." He looked away for a moment as unexpected emotion began to bubble. "And I was right..." His eyes were wide and sad when he looked back to her. "I was right Maddie. You found something...so much better. You were happier."

"I was," she nodded, her own eyes tearing at the suggestion of Bishop. "I did find something better, I was happier...." She sniffed. "Eventually. I was happier...eventually. But at first...at first I was...."

"I know," he groaned as he remembered.

"Destroyed."

"I know," his head hung.

She looked down at her hands, her fingers playing with a ring she wore, her mind at the beginning stages of scattered. "And it wasn't just you that I lost. I lost your family and my home and my safety net...I lost everything." She hugged her arms around her knees, her stomach turning just a bit as she remembered. "It was all outside of my control; the sudden destruction of life as I knew it. I had no power here. It was all yours."
"I know," he whispered.

"Yeah," she nodded and took a deep breath, rising from her spot on the stairs. "I know you know." Her hand reached out to his arms crossed over his chest. "I'm not trying to punish you here."

"I don't feel like you are," he held her eyes.

"I was happier," she blinked at the tears that came then. "And in the grand scheme of things, in the big picture, that is what was supposed to happen. I was supposed to be married to him and love him and..." She had to stop herself before she started crying over Bishop. This wasn't about him; not exactly. "But it doesn't change the fact that I'm here, in your home and we're making love and we're laughing and we're having dinner with your family and God...Harry. What if...what if at some point I look over at you and I remember what it felt like when you pulled it all out from under me....and even worse than that, what if you..."

"It won't happen again," he shook his head; standing tall and full of certainty.

"Harry...."

"It won't happen again. I swear it."

"You swear it?" She couldn't help the burst of laughter that came through the tears, feeling scattered and shaky. "You swear it? Harry....we were going to get married. Married. You swore things to me then too."

"But it's different now," one of his hands slid out to cover hers. "It's so incredibly different now."

"How?" She lifted her eyebrows. "You don't think that this time around there's going to be press? That there are going to be people with very strong opinions on us? That there are going to be people coming after me? After us?"

"No I think there will be," he squeezed her hand under his. "I know there will be but...I'm different now. I am different now."

"How?" She bit at her bottom lip.

"Listen, I know that everything that happened then was my fault and I am no way trying to diminish any of the responsibility that I own..." His eyes were wide as his hand pressed to his chest. "But I lost a lot that night. I lost too."

"I..."

"I did," he hurried on. "I woke up the next morning and nothing has been the same since, nothing has even come close. You were gone. Everything was gone; my future, my hopes, my dreams of having a family, of growing old with somebody. I didn't laugh anymore, I could barely smile. My family was so upset with me...it was like if they were given the chance to choose..." He trailed off with a shake of his head. "And it didn't get better. It got worse because then...when you and Bishop got together, I lost him too. Through nobody's actions other than my own, I had pushed away the love of my life and my very best friend. Gone," he snapped his fingers. "Just like that. And I couldn't pull you back. I couldn't get you back, I couldn't bring him back; no matter how much I confessed my sins, no matter how much I repented and begged for forgiveness you were both gone..." Maddie could feel his rapid heartbeat under her fingers, could see his heavy breathing.
"And I was happy for you, I was. And I was happy for him; eventually I was but...God Maddie. Madeline..." He moved to hold her shoulders, to keep her there with him. "You have all the power now; all of it. You have to know that...you have to. I am..." He laughed lightly, fighting his tears. "I am completely at your mercy love."

"I don't want you at my mercy Harry," she shook her head. "I just don't want to know how it's going to be different this time, how..."

"I know what it's like now," he cut her off. "That's what's different. I know what it's like to live without you. My heart knows that ache so bloody well." He shook his head at her. "I couldn't leave you again; I wouldn't survive it."

"You're being dramatic now," her eyes narrowed.

"I'm not." And he didn't look it. He wasn't smiling or laughing. He was watching her with wide open eyes. "I went to such a dark place when you were gone. I....I shut down all of my emotions and only after..." His voice trailed off and his eyes welled up and his words tripped over the lump in his throat. "Only after he...only after we lost him did I finally realize...." He wiped at his eyes. "And now you're HERE? You walked into my office and back into my life and you're here?! You are completely in control here Maddie...completely."

"I..." Maddie took a breath as her mind tried to keep up with all of it, as her emotions tried to maintain. "I think...I need a drink."

"What?" Harry blinked; his breath pushing from his lungs.

"A drink," she nodded as though she was convincing herself. "I just..." She cleared her throat and stepped away from him. "I need a drink." And then Harry watched as she turned away from him, moving through the living room towards the kitchen.

"Maddie..." Harry followed behind her, watching as she found a the bottle of wine from dinner only half empty, eyes wide as she reached for a few glasses, pouring one for her and holding the bottle out to him with a question in her eyes.

"Have a drink with me?"

Without question he took the bottle and poured his own glass. After a long, slow sip, he took a breath and moved them back to the conversation they had just left. "Why did you come back to London Maddie?"

"Why do you think I came back to London?" She looked up at him over her glass.

"Honestly," he sucked in a breath. "I've been too afraid to ask myself that question."

"Too afraid?" She put her glass down, surprised by his words.

"Yes," there was a laugh that came with it but she could tell he was serious, could tell he meant it. "I wasn't being dramatic. You hold all the cards. If you were here to...pay me back..."

"Pay you back?" Her forehead scrunched up. "You think that's why I came here? To..."

"No," he shook his head; forceful and clear. "I don't. I really don't. But I would be lying if I said
that somewhere deep down I'm not afraid that...afraid this isn't real, that you're going to...." He sucked in his breath.

"I would never do that," she answered.

"It's not as if I don't deserve it. It's not as if I don't have it coming to me or..."

"You," she cut him off without hesitation, without thought. "I came here because I wanted to be with you."

"Even after all of it?" His voice was hoarse, her words making him smile even as his heart jumped into his throat.

"Tell me..." she whispered, her fingers playing with the glass on the counter. "Tell me what happens if...when this goes public; when your fans who already think I cheated on you with your best friend find out that we're together. Tell me what happens then."

"My fans?" He nearly started laughing. "They don't matter. You matter. They are not the ones who've made me happier than...God...happier than I have been in years. You are. I don't care what they say."

"And what happens when the articles come and the criticisms and..."

"I don't read that shit anymore anyway," he shook his head.

"And what happens if one morning I wake up and decide to go to the bookstore..." She trailed off, watching the memory settle over his face.

"I see where you're going with this."

"You had all the power Harry and in a split second, you changed my entire life; without thought, without discussion, without flinching. You brought it all to a screeching halt. So I'm standing in your kitchen, telling you I came back to London to BE with you and I just....tell me what happens if I go to that bookstore tomorrow morning."

Without shifting his eyes away from hers, he took in a shaky breath. "I don't know Maddie. What do you want me to say here? I don't want anything bad to ever happen to you. I'm not going to..."
He let out a breath. "I'm not going to apologize for wanting you to be safe and happy. Those things were important to me then and they are important to me now. When you talk about the bookstore, it makes my heart ache. It makes my stomach turn but not just because of what happened there...because of what happened afterwards." His hands slid from the counter, one of them resting over his heart. "I made a mistake; a great big mistake and it has been one that I have paid for over and over and over again, one I will continue to pay for if you need me to," his eyes were wide as he stood tall before her. "I can tell you again how I've changed, I can tell you again how I know what I lost—I know what it's like to live without you and I can tell you how I would do anything to not have to do that again. Anything..." He shook his head and took a breath. "I will tell you over and over again, however many times you want, for however long you want but in the end..."

"I'm just going to have to trust you," she finished for him; her voice soft and quiet, her head nodding. She knew that this is where it all ended up anyway; this would always be the turn in the road.
"Can you?" He whispered, his eyebrows lifting without expectation.

"Yes?" She answered with wide, hopeful eyes.

"That sounded like a question."

"I..." She looked down at her fingers. "I don't know Harry. I want to." Her gaze moved back to him. "I don't think I would be here if I didn't to some extent, if I thought I couldn't just...I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried."

"I know," he deserved that; at the very least, he deserved that.

"I just might need some time..."

"I have time," Harry smiled as relief washed over him.

"Yeah?" She smiled over at him; her eyes tired from the late hour, from the heavy discussion.

"Are you kidding?" He smiled wider. "Whatever you need Maddie."

"Then I need..." When she took a breath, Harry saw the flash in her eyes, the way she flinched as she processed the words she was about to speak. "I need to know how it was that you loved me so much and...and not only did you stand by and let the world trash me but..." She sucked in her breath. "But you trashed me right along with them."

Maddie watched as the impact of her words hit him; watched as his shoulders sank and his eyes grew dark. She watched as the hope in his smile faded. "Wow..." He looked down at the floor, not sure if he could handle the look in her eyes.

"And it's only going to get worse," she tried for laughter but it fell flat. "The things that they are going to say, the stories they are going to make up...it's going to get worse. But that's not even..." She moved closer to him then. "Harry the things you said to me..."

"I was hurt." "I know," she nodded, the tears from earlier returning. She bit her lip and tried to calm it all down. "I know you were hurt. But I was hurt too. I was....devastated by what happened and even after you pushed me out and sent me away and cut me out of your life...I never let anyone believe that you were a horrible person. I...I stood up for you to Collins and my family and I tried to explain that as crazy as it sounded, you leaving me, in your mind, was loving me..."

"It was," his own voice was labored by his own tears as the pendulum swung back out in this fight they were having.

"But you...." Her eyes narrowed as she blinked at the tears in them. "You just..." She had to look away then, the emotions from all of it rushing forward. Focusing on something in the distance, on a vase on the counter across the room, she whispered. "At Anna's wedding when you asked me if I had been sleeping with him while we were together..."

Harry stood still in his kitchen and watched as her words ended, as the tears won and slid from her eyes and he hated himself all over again.
"You know," his voice cracked. "You know as well as I do that there's nothing I can say to take that back."

"I know," she sniffed, wiping at her eyes.

"And I have no excuses for you," he shook his head. "I was hurt and angry and I just...I wanted you to be hurt and angry and..."

"And you hadn't already hurt me enough?" Her eyes shot back to his. "It wasn't enough that you took away one man who loved me? It wasn't enough that you took away my home and my life and a family? It wasn't enough that you had already brought me to my knees?!" Her voice rose with each question, punctuating with more and more emotion as she continued. "You wanted me to hurt more?!"

"I..." He trailed off. "I don't know what to say Maddie..."

"I don't know either," she huffed and crossed her arms over her chest, wiping at her cheeks again. "I don't know either...." She bit at her lip again as these long-buried emotions continued to wash to the surface. "I don't understand why this is...I was over it. I was over you..." She laughed and walked away from him, moving towards the other counter as she thought it over. "I had let all of this go, I had moved on and you had lost the power to hurt me. I just don't understand why now..."

She turned to look at him then, seeing the hurt in his eyes. This wasn't easy for him; not at all. Yet, he stayed; tall and steady, taking everything she threw at him. "Our relationship was over and done and I moved on and now it feels like this..." She waved her hand between them. "This is bringing it all back, bringing our relationship back and it's just so...."

"Awful," he supplied.

"Fractured," she corrected.

"I desperately want to fix it, Maddie," his conviction, his passion was not lost on her. "I know that it can never fully be fixed, that what I did will always be there. But I want to...God...I want to show you how wrong I was—how right this...." He gestured between them, moving towards her as he did. "How right THIS is." He stopped right in front of her; eyes sad and sorry. "And in the end, it comes down to..."

"Can I trust you?" She answered in a whisper.

He nodded slowly.

And there they were; full circle back to the question at the root of it all.

"Yeah..." She breathed, her mouth stretching into a yawn. "We just keep coming back to that."

"We do," Harry nodded, noticing how tired she looked, how late it actually was and his natural inclination to take care of her took over. "And you know, I'm not sure that's something we're going to be able to answer in one night."

"No," Maddie shook her head, her lips turning up in a small smile. "Or even a week in your bed."

"Even that," his smile matched hers. "Listen. It's late and you're tired and...I'm not trying to avoid any of this but maybe we should...I don't know. Maybe we should time out, just for the night."
hands moved to her shoulders, rubbing warmly. "I swear to you we can continue this in the morning. I will set an alarm if you would like and we can do this all over again over coffee. I promise."

"We can set an alarm so that we can wake up and I can yell at you?" She arched an eyebrow; amused.

"Absolutely," he grinned with a nod and then grew serious. "I meant it Maddie. I'll do...whatever it takes to make this right with you. I just think we could both use a little sleep."

"Yeah," she sighed, nodding her head slowly; loving the way his hands felt warm and comforting on her arms. "Maybe you're right."

"Maybe?" He smiled wider.

"Don't get ahead of yourself Wales."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he held up his hands and then nodded his head towards the stairs. "Come on. Come to bed with me?" And though he was smiling, though he was light and easy about it, Maddie could see that he was nervous she might say no; afraid she might be pulling back.

So she took a breath and she nodded. "Okay," she smiled, her hands lifting to his chest, curling around the front of his shirt. "Okay." Pulling gently at the fabric in her fingers, she dropped a kiss to his lips. "Take me to bed?"

Because he was too caught up in his own thoughts, in the way his stomach clenched at the idea that he was so close to having her in his life again, in the way his heart ached at the worry that she might change her mind, all he could do was swallow the heavy lump in his throat, nod his head in agreement and, when she took his hand and tugged him from the kitchen—he followed.

Harry was the first to wake the next morning and when he turned to look for her, she was still there; still tangled up in his sheets and pressed into his pillow. And he knew. He knew how lucky he was. Every day had been a reminder of just how lucky he was. He knew how unlikely it was for lightning to strike twice and he knew that the issues they had started to address the night before were far from over.

But she was still there, still peacefully asleep. And that meant something.

He thought about rising from bed, thought about going to fetch breakfast or maybe for a mind-clearing run. He thought about kissing her awake but ultimately he sighed into his pillow and choose to watch her sleep.

It wasn't long until she stirred, wasn't long before she stretched out her toes and opened her eyes. And when she turned, she saw him and she smiled; wide and easy.

"Good morning," her voice was low and rough from sleep.

"Good morning."

"Have you been awake long?"
"No," he shook his head, not entirely sure if he was telling the truth or not.

"Just laying here watching me sleep?"

"Mmmm," he nodded. "Waiting for you to wake up."

"To resume the yelling?" She turned her body towards his, inching closer.

"Yes, that exactly," he chuckled, watching her in anticipation.

"Do you think..." Maddie moved in a little closer, her toes moving to nudge his leg under the covers. "Do you think that maybe I can skip the yelling for a moment?"

"Of course."

"I just...I thought a lot last night..."

"When?"

"I woke up in the middle of the night," she grinned, remembering the way he had looked completely passed out next to her. "And I did some thinking."

"About?"

"About...this..." Her smile slipped sweet. "About us and...about Bishop."

"Oh?" His eyebrows lifted as she said his name, curiosity scurrying through his mind.

"You see...I learned a lot from losing him," her fingers stretched out, landing on his chest as she took a deep breath and held his eyes. "But not nearly as much as I learned from loving him...from being loved by him."

"Yeah?" His voice was a whisper as his fingers curled around hers, his heart thumping in his ears.

"I mean...you know how he was," her smile pulled high as she thought of him. "When he decided to do something, he did it. There was no half way for him. No matter the risks, no matter the...consequences..." Her hand flexed on his chest as she thought of all of the fall out that had happened when they had gotten together. "He just...jumped right into the deep end of the pool..."

"In his black-tie finest," Harry offered, squeezing her hand.

"Exactly," she nodded. "And that's exactly how he loved me..."

"I know," his fingers smoothed over hers. "I know he did."

"He just jumped right in and it was...amazing and wonderful and that's how I want to live my life, Harry. That's..." She took a big, deep breath and moved in closer to him. "I know that the conversation from last night isn't...over. And I know that we'll probably have to work through a few bumps in the road and that our history will come up again..." Her eyes were bright as she looked at him, her emotions stirring in her chest. "But. I came back to London to be with you Harry..." With a soft bite to her lip and a shrug, she lit up his morning, his entire day. "And you
know what? I'm just going to do it."

He couldn't help the tears that sprang to his eyes any more than he could help the smile that stretched across his face. His arms reached out for her, wanting to pull her in to him. "Really?" She could hear the relief in his voice.

"Yes," she laughed at the look on his face, at the way her own happiness was bubbling up in her chest. "Yes really. I want to be with you Harry. I want to make this work and, if you're willing..."

"IF?!" His eyes flashed huge, his head shaking as she laughed at him. "There is no if here, Maddie."

"IF you're willing..." She sighed, leaning into him. "I want to just...jump right in the deep end of the pool."

"In our black-tie finest?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"In whatever you're wearing right now," she lifted hers too.

"My God, Maddie..." He shook his head. "I..."

"Before you say yes," Maddie stopped him with a few fingers to his lips that curled into a smile underneath them. "I...I have a few ground rules, a few non-negotiables that I think you should know about."

"Okay," Harry breathed, kissing her finger tips as his smile turned serious. "Okay. Well, that sounds important...let's hear them."

"Okay," Maddie took a deep breath and moved to sit up, thinking it would be better to have this conversation not tangled up in him. Harry followed behind her, watching her closely. As they adjusted blankets and pillows, she looked down at her hands in her lap for only a moment before her eyes lifted back to his. "First...I'm not moving any time soon." She paused for a beat and watched his features, studied his reaction. Finding nothing but openness, not a hint of a flinch, she let out a bit of the breath she was holding. "I'm...I'm not ready to leave New York. I'm not ready to leave my home there..." She bit at her bottom lip and offered him a smile and a whispered admission, "not that I won't ever." His lips twitched up towards a smile. "Just not anytime soon. So if you're looking for a local girlfriend..."

"I'm not looking for anything Maddie," he cut in with a soft voice and an easy smile. "I don't want a local girlfriend. Hell, I don't want...a girlfriend." His head shook as he shrugged his shoulders. "I want to jump in with you. However that looks."

Maddie pulled in a deep breath as her smile widened, her tensions eased. Though there was a part of her that wanted to lean in and kiss him, a part of her that wanted to delve further into what he thought that looked like, she knew she had more to say. So she continued on.

"Second," she held up two fingers. "Ian and Michael are my family now." Her head tipped to the side as she thought of them, of their unwavering support of her, their love. "Now and in the future, they are my family just as much as my mother is. I'm...I'm a Bishop now," her hand pressed to her chest as her emotions warmed. "That's just how it is now and...any future that I might have with you...they come as a part of the package."
"Of course," Harry whispered, his own heart jumping as he thought of all they had collectively lost when Bishop had died. He had no problem thinking of them as Maddie's family, he had thought of them as his. "Maddie..." His hand reached out for hers, feeling this instinct to touch her, to draw her near.

"And finally," she could feel her voice waver as it left her lips, could feel the mix of emotions as she laid out her last condition. "I know that there have been times when you've kept your mouth shut about things...because you don't take on the press or you don't respond to ludicrous stories or outspoken nonsense. And the first time we did this, I followed your lead—because it's smart and it makes sense and you've been doing this for a very long time..." She took a deep breath as her fingers fidgeted together. "And I would be happy to do that again with nearly everything that could get thrown our way...except for one." Her eyes blinked and she smiled when she said his name. "Bishop."

Harry swallowed the lump that rose in his throat and nodded, quiet as she continued. "Nobody gets to say bad things about Jamie Bishop and have me sit by and keep quiet. I don't care if it's a friend of yours, if it's a reporter or a pap on the street or a member of your family." Her voice was calm and final. "I won't keep my mouth shut if somebody comes after him, I can't. I simply don't have that in me."

Maddie met Harry's gaze as he watched her there in his bed, she watched as his lips curled higher, watched as his fingers stretched out to pull hers closer to him, watched as he took a breath and nodded his head. And she watched as his forehead knotted up thoughtfully. "Can I just ask..." His eyebrows lifted up.

"Of course."

"If that happens..." He cleared his throat. "If somebody—a friend, a reporter, a family member—if somebody comes after Bishop...will you tell me?" He pulled her hand into both of his. "Before you come out swinging, will you tell me? Because I want to come out with you. I want to stand right next to you when you're...not being quiet." He tightened his hold on her hand. "Though I sincerely hope that people won't even look in that direction, I know that there's a chance that somebody will say something and I just...I want to be there with you when you shut them down...when we shut them down. Is that okay?" His eyes were wide as he looked to her. "Is that fair to ask?"

"Yes," Maddie breathed, her fingers moving around his. "That's fair."

"Thank you," he held onto her.

"You're welcome," she held onto him. "That's it. For me...that's it. But how about you?" She smiled up at him expectantly. "Do you have any...non-negotiables?"

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back as he laughed. "God Maddie...you're asking me if there's something I'm not willing to negotiate so that I can see you again?" His head shook. "No...there's nothing. There's..." The words drifted from his mind as the emotion of it all swept in. Blinking back tears in his eyes, he looked down at their hands and when he spoke, it was a whisper. "I don't deserve this."

"Hey..."

"I don't," his voice was a little louder as he sniffed and took a breath and finally looked back up at her. The sincerity in his eyes, the humbleness in his smile, it hit Maddie's heart. "I promise you...you won't regret this. I will do whatever it takes to make sure that you don't ever wish you
hadn't boarded that plane back to London..."

"Whatever it takes?" Maddie's smile was soft as she brought humor even with her tears.

"Whatever it takes," he nodded his head; solemn and certain and bursting with happiness.

"You know we still need to figure out how it's going to work...what with the literal ocean and all."

"I know," he nodded, scooting closer to her, drawing her hands to his lips.

"Maybe tonight? After you get back from work?" Maddie ran her finger over his chin. "Maybe we can have pizza and beer and make some plans?"

"Actually..." Harry sighed, his eyes turning mischievous. "I have an idea for tonight...someplace I want to...take you. Do you think that would be okay?"

"You want to take me somewhere?" Her eyes narrowed, curious. "Where?"

"It's a surprise," he grinned. "What do you say? Trust me?"

"Ha..." She laughed, biting at her bottom lip as she decided to do just what she had said she would —she let go. "Yes. Absolutely."
Chapter 15

As Harry drove through the dense London fog, the rainy mist continued to settle over their windows and his eyes kept darting from the hazy road over to look at Maddie. Sitting quietly and peacefully in the passenger seat, a warm smile on her face and her eyes trained out the window as they passed by the darkening, wet scenery.

"Are you okay?" His voice was low and soft as it broke into the quietness in the car.

"Hmmm?" Maddie turned tired eyes to him, nodding as her smile slipped higher. "Of course..." Her hand reached out to his arm, warm on the softness of his sweater. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," he shook his head, his fingers sliding over hers for a moment. "You haven't said much since we left London. You haven't once tried to get out of me where we're going..."

"Ah..." Maddie adjusted in her seat, shifting to face him, her fingers squeezing his arm. "Well. I know we're heading to Norfolk."

"How do you know that?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Because I can read the signs," her smile twitched. "And I'm good at guessing...Sandringham is up here, Anmer Hall is up here...you're taking me to the country." She watched as Harry chuckled, as he shook his head and turned his eyes back to the road. "Now the only part left is...where. And, for now, I'm content with watching you drive us through the countryside..." She nestled back into her seat, pulling her hand from him and back to her lap. "Though I have to warn you...if you don't feed me when we arrive, you're going to have a whole different version of Maddie on your hands."

"Yeah?" Harry laughed.

"Yes," she nodded. "I'm starving."

"Well you are in luck," Harry flashed his smile over to her as the car slowed. "Because we're nearly there and..." He turned to the left, driving a short distance to a set of inconspicuous wrought iron gates. "And there's plenty of food."

"Perfect..." The word came out in a breath as Maddie sat up. Leaning forward, her hands rested on the dash as she peered out the windshield, through the windows, watching as Harry drove them through the gates, taking in the land as they passed by. The property seemed to be lined with enormous, old trees and as the winding road pulled through the trees, there was a bit of a clearing and Maddie could see the sprawling land that laid before them. There were hills of grass spattered with trees. There was something of a river, a stream running through it all. And somewhere in the distance, she was certain she saw a tall, dark figure that must have been a house. In a bit of an awed whisper, she asked, "Harry...where are we?"

Seeing her intrigue, her excitement, Harry's smile pulled wide and proud. "Foxgrove."

"Foxgrove," she repeated, turning to look at him. "Foxgrove?"

"Mmm," he nodded, biting his lip as he looked to her. "It's...it's mine. I bought it...not too long
"A home in the country," Maddie softened as she looked back out the window, as they grew nearer and nearer the massive home. "You bought a home in the country."

"I did," he nodded his head, pulling up the long drive and bringing the car to a stop. "I've always wanted one...a place to escape, to breathe the fresh air."

"And you found it," Maddie turned her grin towards the house and then back to him. "How long have you had it?"

"A while," Harry shrugged, looking down at his hands that gripped the steering wheel, his mind dipping to a time in his life that wasn't quite as warm as this. "I found it not too long after I married Cassandra."

"Ah," Maddie nodded, her voice softening. "Did she like coming out here?"

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back in laughter. "No. No..." He turned to look at her, shaking his head. "She only came out a few times...and even then, she complained until we went back to London." With a deep breath, he shrugged. "She was never a big fan of the country. I hope it's okay that I brought you here. Maybe I should have asked..."

Maddie's smile was wide and warm as she reached out to him, pulling his hand into hers with a reassuring squeeze. "Come on," she gestured towards the house. "We drove all this way and I'm hungry and...curious..." She let out a soft laugh. "Take me inside."

"Okay," Harry nodded, squeezing her fingers before he dropped her hand and reached for the door handle. As they stepped out of the car, as Jim unloaded from the car behind them, Harry took in a long deep breath of the fresh air, his eyes turning up to the sky scattered with stars and splotched with clouds. Trying to shake this nervousness he felt, he stretched his arms up over his head and turned around towards Maddie, towards the house. And his breath drew into his lungs and held.

She was beautiful. He had always thought she was beautiful, had been attracted to her from the very beginning but standing there in this space--she was stunning. Her hair was shifting in the breeze, the moisture in the air bringing it to a slight curl. Wrapped up in her sweater and her coat, her hands stuffed into the pockets as she looked up and around and took in this place that was his. The mere fact that Maddie was standing there in this space that had felt like home to him the instant he had stepped foot on it--it did something to his heart that made his entire chest warm.

So he stood still on the other side of the car, he stood tall and quiet and he watched her as she looked around, as she took in the house, the architecture. He watched her as she shifted her gaze to the grounds, to the trees, to the water, to the vast openness that surrounded them. And when her smile turned back to him, her eyes were wide and her nose was pink and her smile pulled even higher.

"Foxgrove," she said the name with the same sort of reverence he felt when he was there. As his own smile crept up, he nodded. Holding her eyes for a moment, holding the heavy air between them, Harry cleared his throat and nodded his head towards the house.

"You hungry?"

"Starving," she grinned.
"Come on. Let's feed you."

As the trance between them broke, Harry rounded the car. His arm moved around her, his hand warm on her back as they moved up the walk and stepped into the house.

"Mmmm..." Maddie was beyond content as she finished her spoonful of vegetable soup, reaching for the last bite of her buttered bread and sitting back in her chair. "That was..."

"Good?" Harry offered with a chuckle, amused at how happy she seemed to be after having eaten.

"Really good," she nodded, taking a sip of her drink. "I'm impressed with your skills Wales."

"My cooking skills?" He wiped his mouth with his napkin, finished and full himself.

"And your gardening skills," she waved her hand over the table, over their nearly empty bowls and plates. "You really grew all of that?"

"I really did," he nodded, a tint of pride in his eyes. "Apparently my father's knack for it wasn't completely lost on his sons."

"Apparently not," Maddie agreed. "Thank you for dinner."

"Of course," he nodded. "And you...for making the bread."

"No problem," she shook her head, stretching back in the chair and looking around the kitchen; homey and warm and seemingly perfect for this wonderful, not quite so small, country house Harry had made his home.

Watching her look around, he smiled, finishing his drink and pushing back his chair. Rising to his feet, he moved towards the fridge. "Can I get you another?" He nodded to her empty bottle.

"Please," Maddie smiled and watched him as he moved, as he pulled two more bottles from the fridge, taking off the caps and returning to the table. "Thank you. You must come here often, then?"

"What makes you say that?" Harry mimicked her movements, resting his elbows on the table.

"You have a garden. That you tend to..." She shrugged and nodded to the cabinets and the fridge. "The kitchen is well stocked. I assumed..."

"I do," he smiled, his fingers turning the bottle around on the table. "I come here as often as I can." He shrugged and took a deep breath. "When I bought it I had hoped that it would bring some...peace?" He wasn't sure about his word choice. "I was hoping it would settle things a bit with Cassandra, ease the tension..." He laughed. "But the country most definitely did not bring her peace..." He shrugged and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "When things went south between us, I started to come here to escape and have some quiet and when Bishop..." His words caught in his throat, his eyes blinking back sadness as he looked up to her. "When everything around me seemed to crack, I came out here to be someplace that felt warm and normal..." He laughed and shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know what it is about the place but...yes. I
started coming out every weekend and eventually I started to plant things, started to cultivate the land and it started to feel more and more like home."

Maddie watched him closely, the way his eyes wrinkled as he smiled, the way he seemed to drift to the past and drift back, the way his eyes softened when he talked about all of it, about this place. With a comforting smile, she reached out to him, her hand soft on his arm. His eyes flashed to hers, his fingers moving to cover hers almost instinctually. "I'm really happy you have it," she squeezed his arm. "And I'm really happy you brought me here."

"Yeah?" His fingers rubbed over hers.

"Absolutely," she nodded. "Will you show me around the grounds tomorrow when the sun's up?"

"I would love that," Harry agreed easily.

"Good," her smile pushed higher. "Now...show me the rest of the house? I know that my stomach was the top priority for a minute..."

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back in laughter. "But you're ready for the tour now?"

"I am," she laughed along with him, pulling her hand from his arm as she rose from the table. "Come on, let me check this place out. It looks absolutely massive from the outside."

"So?" Harry lifted his eyebrows to her. They had finished the tour and were back in the kitchen, having just poured hot tea and were on their way to the living room to sit down.

"So?" She tossed a smile over her shoulder at him, sinking down onto the couch as Harry followed.

"So..." He sat next to her, taking a sip from his mug. "What do you think?"

"Of the house?" Maddie asked, making herself comfortable as he nodded. "Oh Harry..." Her voice drifted soft and low as she leaned into the cushions, her head tipping to the side, her fingers stretching out to reach him, to stroke at his shoulder. "It's big and warm and...and the woodwork is phenomenal and it's funny because..." She laughed lightly, thinking about his home, about him. "If I had to pick a home that reminded me of you, of your personality and...swagger..."

"Swagger?" Harry chuckled.

"If I had to match a home with you...I would choose this house."

"What?" He blinked as he looked to her.

"I would," she smiled, realizing just how much she meant those words. "It just...it suits you. No wonder you feel at home here, at peace. It suits you quite well."

"Well thank you for saying so," Harry leaned back, turning to look at her; soft and tired and sweet. "And thank you for coming out with me."

"Are you kidding?" Maddie laughed. "I love it here. But you knew I would. I love the country; the
air and the land and the flowers and...you knew I would love it here. Didn't you."

Harry's eyes held hers and he felt his heart swelling in his chest; the truth of it all washing over him. With a smile on his lips, he nodded. "I did," his voice came out in a slight whisper. "I mean...I assumed you would and I...hoped you would. I don't know. I just thought that this might be a good place for us to...figure out what's happening here, how it's going to happen."

"Inspired choice Wales," Maddie lifted her glass to him and took a sip, settling further back into the couch, her legs stretching out in his direction.

"I'm happy you think so," Harry smiled up at her, his fingers moving over her calf, pulling her feet into his lap. "Now tell me, how is this going to happen?"

"Well..." She thought for a moment, taking a drink as she settled further into the couch, into this new direction they were headed. "I'm willing to come to London to see you..."

"Yeah?" Harry's expression was nothing but...hopeful.

"Yeah," she was warmed by it, by the uplift in his voice. "And maybe you could..."

"Yes," he answered, a breathy, emotion filled answer. "I could absolutely come to New York, if you'll have me."

Maddie nodded, her eyes lighting up. "I would love that."

"Then it's done," he loved the way she was smiling, loved the way her smile made him feel; warm and alive and blissfully content.

"How often do you think?" Maddie's forehead pulled to the middle. "I mean, logistically it's a bit of a nightmare. We're so far apart..." She smiled at him as she ran it over in her head. "And your schedule is pretty hectic. You have a ton of responsibilities and..."

"I would make time," Harry cut her off. "For you, for this. I'll make time."

"I know that you will," she reassured him. "I know that. But we can't abandon everything. I don't want that at all...." She thought it over and shrugged. "Maybe we start small...once a month? I know that I can get over here once a month and when you can..."

"I will," he was quick to agree, wanting this, wanting her, more than he had wanted anything else in his life. "I promise I will."

"Okay," Maddie nodded. "We'll start with once a month and we'll go from there?"

"I'm sure I'll be begging for more in no time," Harry couldn't help but toss a bit of humor into the moment.

"No doubt," Maddie laughed. "Maybe we can have a few facetime moments?"

"A handful of drunken texts?" Harry offered.

"I think that can be arranged," Maddie sighed.
"Well then you have yourself a deal," Harry stuck his hand out to her and, the moment she reached out and slid hers into it, he tugged, bringing her to him, bringing her closer.

It was late morning when the phone call came. They had both slept in later than they had in a while, neither of them ready to leave the warm comfort of the bed. Nuzzling closer to him, Maddie had implored him to stay put and he had eagerly complied. When they finally left the sheets, they had eaten breakfast, showered, and dressed for the day. Then, bundled up, they had set out to tour the grounds. Though the sky was still covered with clouds, though the chill from the night before had not yet lifted, Maddie insisted Harry take her out; wanting to see the rest of Foxgrove. They had nearly walked the entire perimeter, ducking into the outbuildings, taking in the water and the trees, the garden and the enormous grounds that were still very much a blank canvas. Much like the house, Harry had touched very little, changing up only the spaces that he used; his bedroom, the kitchen, the study, his garden. He had left so much of the property, of the home, of the land, just as he had found it, awaiting his touch, its final moulding.

As they returned to the house, coming up around the back, through the wet grass and the deepening fog, Harry couldn't take his eyes off of her. He couldn't tear them away. And all he could think of, all that he was afraid to say, was just how perfectly she fit into this space. She seemed at home in his home, she seemed at ease on the land.

She seemed to belong there–almost more than he did. And that realization warmed him from the inside out.

"Are you going to finish it?" Maddie's voice was soft as she called back to him, her cheeks rosy as she glanced over her shoulder.

"Sorry?" He shook his head, bringing his mind back to present.

"The land," she waved her hand. "The house..." She nodded towards it. "It seems a little unfinished..."

"I suppose it is," he shrugged.

"And it's lovely that way," her smile pulled higher as she stopped moving, as she turned to face him. "There's actually something a bit...fitting."

"You like that it's unfinished..." He moved closer to her, drawn in by her smile, by the look in her eyes.

"It reminds me a bit of you," she shrugged, hoping he understood her meaning, hoping he caught it as a compliment. "And I was just wondering if you had plans for it all, the grounds, the other rooms in the house..."

"I don't know," Harry's voice was low and soft, his eyes locked with hers. "I'm not entirely sure what my plans are anymore. Maybe as I figure it out, the house will start to come together..."

"Maybe," Maddie grinned, loving the sentiment. "It's a beautiful property Harry. The trees and the water and the house...it's really all quite lovely."

"Thank you," he nodded his head in agreement. "I'm happy you think so...and I'm really happy you
like it here."

"I do," Maddie sighed, turning to take in the view. "I really do."

And that made it all feel that much more like home. With his eyes trained on her and his thoughts drawn up in them, he nearly missed the sound of his phone ringing in his pocket. With confusion on his forehead and an apology in his eyes, he pulled out the ringing phone.

"I'm sorry," He was quick with his words. "I really am. But I do need to take this."

"Of course," Maddie nodded. "I'm just going to slip inside and start some water for tea."

"Perfect," Harry breathed. "I'll be right behind you." Watching her as she moved towards the house, as she moved inside, loving how easy she moved about, how settled she seemed, Harry took a deep breath and answered the phone call.

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When Harry stepped back into the house, he found Maddie still in the kitchen, pouring hot water into mugs, allowing the tea inside to steep. When she heard his feet on the floor, she turned towards him, her smile bright and warm as the chill from outside began to thaw.

Moving in closer, Harry cleared his throat. "That was my father..."

"The King?" Her eyebrows lifted high.

"That's the one," Harry nodded with a light chuckle, stepping up beside her at the counter. "He had lunch today with Will and Arthur."

"Oh?" Maddie held a mug out to him.

"Mmm," Harry nodded, taking it from her as he studied her reaction. "Turns out Arthur couldn't help but tell him about my new...friend."

"Oh?" Maddie's voice, and her eyebrows, went higher.

"He couldn't stop talking about you and...once Will confirmed it was you..." Harry took in a deep breath, his eyes levelling with hers. "He wants to see you."

"Ohh..." Maddie's hand pressed to her stomach, a feeling of nervousness wafting over her. "Oh wow."

"Now, I told him that we were up in Norfolk," Harry caught the sudden shift, moving in closer, wanting to ease her nerves. "I told him we just came up yesterday and that we're barely figuring this out."

"And?" Maddie whispered, her mind spinning at the idea of seeing Harry's father again; excited and nervous and scared of the feelings that may evoke.

Standing tall before her, Harry reached out, his finger smoothing her hair from her face, a tender smile on his lips. "He told me that...he told me that when you left, he worried about you for months. He told me that he didn't see you for years and that the last time he did..."
swallowed as he remembered Bishop's funeral. "That he didn't get to hug you quite as long as he would have liked..." Sucking in a breath, Harry shrugged. "And then he told me that I should consider this less of a request and more of an order...from my King."

Maddie's hand flew to her mouth, holding in the snicker that burst through her lips, her laughter reaching her eyes as she imagined Harry's father ordering them both to London. With a sigh, she let go of a bit of the nervousness she held. "The King has summoned us to the Palace?"

"Yes," Harry laughed along with her. "As crazy and as antiquated as that sounds, that's exactly what just happened." Seeing her relax, his arms moved around her, pulling her closer to him.

"Well," her smile turned up at him, her arms moving up around his neck. "I would hate for you to get into trouble with the King."

"Yeah?" He arched an eyebrow, leaning in to kiss her.

"Yeah," she nodded, kissing him back. "When is he expecting us?"

"He would prefer dinner this evening," Harry repeated his father's words. "But he would settle for lunch tomorrow."

"Is he really okay with lunch tomorrow?" Maddie's hands moved around his waist, hugging him close as she snuggled into his warm sweater. "Because I would love one more night out here but only if it won't get you into any trouble..."

"It won't get me into any trouble," Harry shook his head, beyond pleased that she wanted to stay at Foxgrove longer. "I'll call him back and let him know."

"Lunch. At Buckingham Palace," Maddie's voice slipped soft as she said it.

"Lunch," Harry nodded, his mouth twisting into a smile. "At my father's place."

And though she appreciated his efforts in making it sound simpler than it was, she still felt that tiny wave of nervousness settle in. She had loved Charles very much. He had become something of a father to her and when he was pulled from her life, it had hit her hard. Though she had seen him since then, the time and place hadn't been such to allow them to reconnect, to catch up. And she knew, lunch with Charles was going to tug at her emotions. But as she nuzzled closer to Harry, as she breathed in the scent of him, she knew that there wasn't really much about this trip that hadn't tugged at her emotions.

And that had really been the whole point.

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"Harry..." Maddie's voice was just above a whisper as she stalled on the walk; her hand holding onto his as she stopped walking. "Wait."

"What?" He turned to look at her; smile in place as his eyebrows lifted. "You okay?"

"I..." She laughed; a nervous breath of a sound, her heels shuffling on the concrete below her. Swallowing, she rolled her eyes at herself and nodded her head. "I'm nervous."
Her admission made him smile, made him love her. "Nervous?" He tried not to laugh, his teeth biting at his lip as he met her eyes. "What are you nervous about love?"

"Your father," she smiled sweetly, looking up to the palace in front of her. "I'm nervous about seeing your father...again. I know it's...crazy but I feel like it's the first time I've met him and all the questions are running through my mind; will he like me? Will I do well? What if he doesn't approve..."

"What?" Harry couldn't help the chuckle that bubbled through, though he was quick to still it. Dropping her hand from his, he held onto her shoulders, squaring himself in front of her as his knees bent slightly; wanting to be the only thing in her line of vision. "Madeline, I adore you. I do. But you must realize just how...absurd you sound right now."

"Well thank you very much Harry, you really do know how to ease a girl's tension." Maddie blinked, her arms crossing over her chest.

"My father..." He moved his head to the side, catching her eyes as she tried to look away from him. "My father has so much adulation for you; so much respect." Harry eased his stance just a bit, moving closer to her as he softened. "There were times, months full of them I'm afraid, when he would have gladly traded me in for you."

"That's not at all true," Maddie rolled her eyes, her smile tipping higher as Harry smiled down at her.

"It is," Harry shook his head; his smile was easy, his eyes bright. "Come on. He's been waiting to see you since he realized you were gracing my life with your presence again. He may have very well bitten off all his fingernails."

"You do know how preposterous you sound when you say such things," Maddie's eyes narrowed.

"I do," he nodded. "But it's true. I'm sure he's inside just itching to say hello." His hand slid down her arm to her hand, pulling it into his and away from where she had them crossed. Bending his head to kiss the top, he nodded towards the house. "Come on. Let's go inside and meet my father."

Maddie took in a deep, shaky breath and let it out with a nod and a smile. "Okay," she turned towards the house, towards the palace, Harry's hand still in hers. "Okay. This will be fine."

"It will be more than fine," Harry agreed, amused endlessly by her. And then, half a step behind her, Harry followed Maddie up the small set of stairs and into Buckingham Palace.

As they walked through the halls, past the state rooms and regality, as they neared the private quarters where Charles and Camilla lived, Maddie's fingers tightened their hold on Harry's; her back straightened up tall and her bottom lip pulled between her teeth.

"Hey," Harry's voice was low as he called to her, his eyes glancing at the staff member who was escorting them through the palace.

"Hmm?" She glanced over when she felt his hand tug lightly on hers.

"You okay?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Yes," she nodded, taking in a deep breath as they slowed to a stop in front of two large, ornate
"Easy..." Harry breathed, his free hand reaching over to her, his finger soft on her lip as he encouraged it out from between her teeth. Her smile tipped higher and her cheeks flushed just a little at the way the contact with him made her warm but before she could say anything at all to him, the doors were pulled open and they were stepping inside.

And just like Harry had told her, just as he had guessed, Charles was nearly right on the other side of them; waiting and ready to see his lunch guests. When Maddie saw him, she felt it in her gut; a burst of excitement and emotion that made her want to gulp and sob and laugh.

But instead she breathed; deep and easy. Just like the smile that spread across her face.

"Your Majesty," dropping Harry's hand, she dipped into a curtsey. By the time she was standing tall, Charles was across the room to her. With his large hands warm on her shoulders, he pulled her into a hug.

"Madeline," he kissed one of her cheeks, his eyes bright and beaming as he moved to kiss the other. "It's wonderful to see you again."

And just like that, Maddie felt relaxed in his presence; all of her former fears slipping away.

"I feel exactly the same way," Maddie nodded, his hands on her arms as he turned towards his son.

"Henry."

"Father," Harry's head dropped into a bow before he took a step forward to greet his father who gave Maddie's shoulders a squeeze before he turned to hug his son.

"Thank you both for coming today," Charles's smile traveled from Harry to Maddie and back again.

"As if you left us much of a choice," there was a spark in Harry's eyes as he joked.

"We're very happy to be here," Maddie's sincerity was abundant and very clear. "Thank you for inviting us..."

"Inviting?" Harry arched an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth twitching into a smirk, earning an amused, warning eye from Maddie.

"Come now," Charles ignored Harry and offered his arm to Maddie. "Camilla's going to join us in the Dining Room for lunch. May I escort you?"

With a quick nod, Maddie took his arm. "Of course."

With Harry following behind them, Charles led the two of them off to lunch.

As they ate, they enjoyed all elements of small talk. Maddie had easily answered Charles and Camilla's questions about her work now, inquiring about Ian and Michael, curious about New York. And they had filled her in on things they were both doing now that they were at the center of the Monarchy. It seemed to suit them, this new role of influence and though it had been thrust upon them with a moment of great sadness and upset, they were both adapting quite well.
They had talked about Foxgrove, pride welling in Charles' eyes as he spoke about Harry's garden, about the way he was taking to his new country home. They had talked about Harry's work with Invictus and just as the plates were being cleared away, Charles asked the question nearly everyone seemed to be itching to ask.

"If you don't mind me asking," he took a sip from the tea that had just been placed in front of him. "How is it that the two of you found each other again?"

"I don't mind you asking," Maddie shook her head, reaching for her own teacup. Taking a drink, she took a moment to collect her thoughts, to put it all together in head. With a breath and a tiny hint of sadness, she went back to the beginning. "As I'm sure you know, Harry met Ian, Michael and I in France to spread Bishop's ashes...about a month after he passed."

"I was aware," Charles nodded, his smile soft, his eyes somber as he reached out to her; his large, warm hand covering hers. "Madeline, I do hope you know just how sorry I was, how saddened I was at the loss of Jamie."

"I do," Maddie whispered, tears welling up at the mention of his name, at the way Charles said it. "I was too."

"I know," he nodded, his fingers comforting over hers. "He was a remarkable young man and I loved him very much."

"I know you did," Maddie smiled through the tears, feeling Harry's eyes on her as she moved her other hand over Charles', patting it as she took a breath. "I'm not sure there were many people who came in contact with him who didn't love him very much."

"No there were not," he shook his head, a warm rumble of a laugh building up in his chest.

"No," Maddie agreed, sniffing and exhaling before she lifted a smile to Harry.

"No," Harry echoed their words, their sentiment. And though he was saddened by the mention of it all, concerned about the ache he knew she felt when she thought of it, when she smiled over at him, he began to breathe again.

Sitting just a bit taller, Maddie continued. "When he died, Bishop left Harry a very specific bottle of Scotch in his will."

"A bottle of Scotch?" Camilla turned to look at Harry.

Clearing his throat, he leaned his arms on the table and explained, "we purchased it at an estate sale when we were thirteen..."

"Henry..." Charles groaned even as an amusement flickered in his eyes.

"We were going to drink it when we were fifty," Harry continued. "It was...a crazy story we could tell and something that would bring us together when we were older..." As a lump rose to his throat, his eyes lowered to his hands. "But he left it to me..."

"With a letter..." Maddie smiled, remembering.

"With a letter," Harry nodded, his hand pressing to his chest as he thought of it all. "And when I
saw Maddie in France, she told me about it and we decided that the next time I went to New York, I would get it from her."

"And then Harry came to New York in October..." Maddie picked up the explanation with a smile.

"He did," Charles nodded, following along.

"And we met up and had dinner and..." Maddie shrugged, her smile pulling higher as she remembered how it all unfolded. "And we became reacquainted with each other; catching up on all that had passed, reminiscing."

"And we became friends again," Harry wanted so badly to reach across the table and kiss her but he found restraint from somewhere and settled for a quick wink.

"And eventually..." Maddie pulled her eyes from Harry's, turning them back to Charles with light pink in her cheeks. "Eventually I came to London to see him."

"I see," Charles nodded, taking it in, processing it all as he watched Maddie closely; noticing how at ease she seemed, how calm and peaceful. He noticed her smile and her wide, open eyes and for a split second, the fatherly affection he had always felt for her flared up. "And you're happy Madeline?" His voice was low, as if he were speaking only to her.

"I am," she nodded, holding his gaze. "Very very much so."

"Good," he sat with that for a moment, letting the warmth settle in the room before he took a breath and turned to his son. With the same sort of fatherly affection, he nodded to him. "I would imagine that you don't need my lecture on how rare and delicate second chances are."

"No sir," Harry shook his head, his smile lifting to Camilla as she watched it all unfold in front of her. He had known this would come; warnings and advisements. He had known his father would have something to say to him. He hadn't guessed it would be in Maddie's presence, but he was ready for it all the same.

"And I would guess that you're well aware of the importance of not taking moments like these for granted, of how imperative it is that you not squander an opportunity such as this."

"Yes father, I am highly aware of both of those things," Harry could feel the emotion building in his throat as he held his father's gaze, as he let his words wash over his mind and his heart. And even though he cleared his throat, his voice still cracked when he spoke. "As you know, the days in my life when I wasn't with Maddie were some of my darkest..." Maddie felt her heart ache for him; despite it all. "And having her back..." He had to look away for a second, had to find his voice; his breath. "Wow..." He breathed, turning a wavery smile back to his father. "You don't need to tell me how unlikely it is to have a second chance at something amazing and...you don't need to tell me how vital it is that I treat this with the reverence it deserves. I've been telling myself that since the moment she walked into my office...I know all of those things. But if you want to tell them to me, I'll be happy to listen..."

"I'm not trying to lecture you son," Charles held up his hand.

"I know that," Harry nodded.

"I also know that you're wiser Henry," Charles reached out to him then. "And I think you know
much better now what makes you happy"

"I do," Harry nodded, swallowing back the lump in his throat.

"Then please, Harry..." Charles leaned in a little closer, holding his son's gaze. "Be happy. Don't let any of...the rest of it get in your way." There was a long moment between them, when conversation paused and breathing held and wishes were made from a father who prayed a son knew what he was doing this time. With a sharp inhale, Charles turned his eyes to Maddie. "I'm very sorry if I've overstepped my bounds..."

"Not at all," Maddie shook her head, her voice just above a whisper. "I hope for the same things."

"Of course you do," Charles nodded, settling back in his chair, his eyes lifting to his wife across the table, memories of their story drawing to the front of his mind. "Of course you do." He took a sip of tea then, his mind working over the wording of his next statement, knowing exactly what it might bring up. But he had to say it. Looking to Maddie, then to Harry and back again, he went for it. "You do know that there is going to be...great speculation..." His eyebrows lifted to Harry whose eyes shifted dark. "Assumptions will be made," he turned to Maddie who refused to look away, refused to blink away what he was trying to tell them. "Great liberties will be taken with the truth..."

"We know," Maddie's voice came out as a whisper at first. Clearing her throat, she sat taller. "We know." Her eyes slid to Harry's and he was looking right back at her; wanting her to know that he wasn't flinching away.

"Good," Charles nodded, his hand reaching out to rest over hers. "If there's ever a time that you need anything from me, from us..." He looked up to his wife who sat tall and steady and right in line with him. "We're here and all you need to do is ask."

Maddie waited a long time before she said anything to him about it. They had returned to casual dinner conversation, they had laughed and chatted and before they left Buckingham Palace, she had hugged Charles tightly to her and bid him and Camilla good-bye–promising to see them both again.

They had slipped into the confines of the car, the tinted windows and easy speed keeping them shielded even as they left the gates of Buckingham and entered the gates of Kensington. She had waited till they were back inside his home, till they had shed their coats and their shoes, till she felt she could bring it up in a place where they had freedom to speak, where they had time to sort it out. Because she knew it just might take both.

And then, as he flipped casually through the notes that had been left on his entry table by Thomas, Maddie leaned back against the doorframe and she took a deep breath and she went for it.

"He was right, you know."

Harry glanced up from the papers in his hands, his eyes looking right to her, his fingers pausing. "He?"

"Your father," she held his gaze. "About the assumptions and the speculation..." The corner of her mouth curled up into a half smile. "There are a great many people who are going to make up all
kinds of versions of what's happening here."

Harry's jaw tightened, his lips turning down. With a nod, he abandoned the notes and turned to face her completely; leaning back against the table, his arms crossing over his chest. "I know."

"The number of things they're going to say..." She shook her head, a bitter chuckle on her lips as she wished that people could just let them be.

"I know," he nodded. "I've been thinking about it since we met with my father...since before that if I'm honest."

"And?"

"And?" He was confused.

"And what's the worst of it?" She blinked as she tried to pull it all forward. "When you think of 'as bad as it can get', what's that look like?"

"Maddie..." His head tipped to the side. "You want to discuss the worst of it?"

"I want to be prepared," she answered with not as much conviction as she might like.

"Well," Harry cleared his throat, looking down at his shoes. "I suppose that depends on your perspective." His neck stretched as he looked off into space. "They're going to try to piece it all out. Those who thought you ended this to be with my best friend will think that you're coming back now that he's gone..." Harry hated saying it.

"Of course," her voice was hoarse as she spoke.

"And those who think that I ended it for selfish reasons will think that I've...passed my prime and am coming back to something familiar."

"Sure," Maddie tried for a smile.

"And then there are some that might think that we...that we never ended." He hated the way her face twisted when he said it. "They might say that we've been carrying on the whole time..."

"That your marriage was a farce..."

"It was," Harry cut her off, the truth of that couldn't be denied. "My marriage was a farce," he didn't give her time to speak, didn't give her a minute to counter him. "But yours wasn't."

Maddie blinked against the blow that came with those words. "And...and they might say..."

"They will say..."

"Wow..." She suddenly felt sad and furious and constricted.

"They'll make comparisons to my parents for sure," Harry knew that this was hitting her hard, but he also knew that there was no way to avoid these discussions. "Which...in my case...is fair."

"Harry..."
"I didn't love Cassandra and I married her...for show, out of obligation or duty or..." He shook his head. "Not out of love. And the whole time I carried a torch for you. Those things are shockingly accurate. But when it comes to you, it's not even close."

"But they'll..." She blinked at her tears, wishing they would stop for just a moment.

"Some will," he nodded. "Don't get me wrong, some will assume that it was just me...hopelessly in love with you while you moved on. And then there will be some who will think that you..." He shook his head. "They'll think that we both married the wrong person and now, that life has happened and we have the opportunity..."

"Yeah," Maddie felt a little sick, her hands pressing into her hair as she tried to breathe easier. "You know...I don't care so much what they call me, how they see me." She shook her head. "I just...I wish they wouldn't drag Bishop into it. I wish that they wouldn't even put words to the ridiculous notion that I didn't love him, that I didn't want to be married to him, that somehow he was a second choice..."

"I know," Harry nodded, wishing for the very same things.

"But they will," she whispered.

"They will," he was solemn. "And then...as much as we can...we'll shut them down."

"Yeah?" Maddie blinked at the tears that rose to her eyes.

"Yes," he nodded, moving away from the table, taking a step towards her. "Remember? Nobody gets to take a shot at Bishop without us coming after them."

"I remember," Maddie sniffed and looked up at him as he moved to stand right in front of her. "Harry..."

"Hmm?"

"When?" She reached out to place her hands on his chest as she asked. "When are we going to..." Her lips curled up into a smile then, remembering their first round at this, how the press had slowly discovered who she was. It wasn't going to be slow this time. Once they saw her, they would know. And then it would all begin.

"I don't know," he shook his head, his hands moving over hers. "Whenever you want or whenever it just...happens. I don't know." He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "What are your thoughts?"

"Well..." She took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she ran her hands up and down his chest. "I don't want to hide. I'm not a fan of that at all but...I think that I should probably give a few people a heads up before we head out to a rugby match or take in a show..." And though she chuckled, though she was clearly humoured by it all, Harry's eyes shifted away from hers and his expression darkened just a bit.

"Hey..." Maddie nudged him with her finger. "Why the frown? Why the sad face? Everything okay?"

"What? Yes...yes..." He drew her hand into his, bending to kiss the top of it. "Everything's fine. I'm
fine."

"You sure?" She leaned closer, her eyes studying the look in his eyes—the look that was telling a bit of a different story. "Because you seem..."

"I...Ha..." He let out a small, low, laugh. "I'm fine Maddie. I was just...you mentioned you giving people a heads up. I assume you meant your family..."

"I did," she nodded. "Them and our friends and...that makes you sad?"

"No," he shook his head. "Not entirely."

"But..." She nodded her encouragement, wanting him to put words to his feelings.

"But..." With a deep breath in, he stood taller, pulling her hand from his chest. "I was thinking about people finding out. Not...the world but our families and our friends and while my family is clearly happy to have you back in my life..." He chuckled and shook his head. "I can't imagine that yours is going to be even remotely thrilled to have me back in yours."

"Ah..." Maddie nodded, feeling the bubble in her stomach rising. "Ah."

"Ah..." Harry breathed, letting her hand drop from his as he took a step away, turning as his mind began to work. "At the very least they're going to hate me," his hand rubbed at the back of his neck. "They're going to hate the idea of me..."

"Listen, I'm not going to say you're wrong," she admitted, knowing this was going to be one of those areas they just had to face head on. "I think...I think my mother will be fine. She's always wanted me to do what it takes to be happy and you know...after losing Bishop, I think she's fine with me living whatever life I want."

"But the rest of them..."

"The rest of them..." She looked down at her hands, her mind pulling up the faces of her cousins, of Collins. "You might be right," she whispered.

"I know I am," he swallowed at the lump in his throat, at the knowledge that he deserved every single ill-willed thing they were going to throw at her. He just wished he was going to be the one to take it on, not her. "They're going to try to talk you out of it." And then, even heavier. "They're going to try to talk you out of me."

Maddie stayed quiet for a moment as her eyes blinked, as her mind ran it over and over and over again. And then, because there was really no room for anything else but the truth here, she nodded. "I think you might be right." His eyes shot up to hers and she continued. "I think that Collins and a fair number of other people are probably going to try to talk me out of this. They are probably going to remind me of all of the shit that has happened between us, of how terrible things were before and they are probably going to...tear you to shreds."

"Sorry, is this supposed to be comforting?"

"No," she shook her head. "It's supposed to be honest. And it's supposed to help us prepare. Those things are going to happen, just like the press is going to come at me, just like the paps are going to swarm and..." She blinked and looked him over. "Are you worried it's going to work?"
He held her eyes for a moment, his heart thumping in his chest. "If I'm honest..."

"Harry," she groaned.

"Yes Maddie, Yes. If I'm honest, I'm worried..."

"That's crazy."

"Is it?" He laughed, his head shaking. "Collins and...fuck, Kyle?" He turned his eyes up to the ceiling for a moment. "I've seen Collins since we've ended and you know, he's put up with me but only because he loves Khenda so much." His eyes moved back to hers. "But he's not a fan. And I can't even imagine how much Kyle must..."

"He does," Maddie gulped as she nodded, as she admitted the truth. "I'm not going to lie to you, Harry, there's going to be push back but...what if it works?!" She exhaled sharply and leveled her gaze with his. "You've asked me to trust you, to trust that when the attention hits, when the paps swarm, that it isn't going to shake you. You've asked me to trust that you're not going to flinch and run. And I guess, well, you're going to have to trust that this, that Kyle and Collins and any of the rest of them....you're going to have to trust that it isn't going to shake me."

"Okay," Harry breathed, nodding his head and standing taller. "Okay. You're right. I know you're right. I'm just...ha..." he shook his head, rubbing at his jaw as he laughed at himself.

"What? You're just..." Maddie took a step closer, curious.

"You're leaving soon," his eyes swung to hers with a light shrug. "In a matter of days, hours really, you're going back to New York and there's a part of me that's...afraid..."

"Afraid?" Her forehead crinkled. "Afraid of what?"

"That this was all a dream..." He seemed childlike, vulnerable, as he admitted it to her. "That when you walk out the door, you're going to take all of this with you; the warmth and the peacefulness and the...hope." He gulped back the surge of emotion that came with his confession. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I don't mean to be melodramatic here, I just...there's a part of me that's cautious, a part of me that thinks that maybe, just maybe, I've concocted this grand illusion of you and maybe I've gone a bit mad and all of this has been in my mind, as broken as it might be."

Maddie let his words settle for a minute, giving them the thought they deserved and then, with a small nod, she smiled and moved in closer. "Well..." She reached out to him then, her fingers finding his shirtfront. "Other people have seen me," she pointed out. "I've had conversations with Bernard and with Jim, with Will and Kate and Arthur and, just today with the King and Queen. Do you think they've all gone mad too?" Her head quirked to the side, her eyebrows lifting.

"Ha..." Harry laughed, his hands moving warm to her shoulders. "Maybe."

"Maybe..." Maddie laughed along with him. "You know what I think?"

"That you're even crazier than I for being here?" His shoulders were easing, his jaw loosening as the laughter continued between them.

"Well, that," she shrugged. "And maybe, maybe we've been...talking...a little too much." Her hands
slid slowly up his chest, her eyes darkening as she grinned up at him. "We've spent a lot of time thinking it over, a lot of time in our heads..."

"Yeah?" His whole body warmed as she moved in closer.

"I think that it might help if we put aside the conversation for a little while..." She bit her bottom lip as she leaned into him. "And maybe stopped...talking...for the night."

"Ha...well, you're the expert," his grin pulled higher his eyes dancing. "I think we should probably do as you say..."

"I was hoping you would say that," Maddie nodded. And then, with a wide, happy grin of her own, her fingers wrapped around his shirt and tugged, bringing his lips to hers. As his arms moved around her, as her mouth opened underneath his, thoughts drifted from their minds and all they were left with was feeling.

And it felt amazing.
Chapter 16

Maddie's departure was quick upon them; the days slipping away with laughter and reconnection and this ominous reminder that, soon, she would be leaving. The night before her departure, they had spent in a state of semi-undress; cooking a meal together, watching some movie they didn't quite watch and retiring to his bed early.

"Don't go." Harry's voice was as quiet as the night that hung over his room long after they had finally fallen asleep. He wasn't sure what had stirred him awake but after trying for awhile to slip back to sleep he had pulled himself from bed. After a trip to the bathroom and a long pour of Scotch, he had settled into the chair across from his bed.

As he sipped, he watched her-undressed and sprawled out in his bed-tired from their travels and the love making, he hoped. With a smirk into the heavy glass, his eyes stayed on her as he drank. She was leaving the next day. Returning home to New York. To her life. And he knew this was what made him restless, made his mind wander. So there, in the dark, he would tell her the things he could never lay words to while she was awake.

"I don't want you to go." He didn't blink as he spoke, a soft chuckle rumbling in his chest. "There. I said it. As if I'd ever have the nerve to say it to your face." Swirling the alcohol in his glass, he leaned back in his chair. "I want you to stay here with me. I want you to...wow..." He felt nervous as he spoke, but settled in conviction. "I want you to move into Foxgrove and plant delphinium and paint the bedroom some color we'll argue about but I'll ultimately love..." He caught himself then, biting his bottom lip as he gathered his emotions, stopping them from slipping away from him. His next drink was longer, slower, and then he leaned forward, elbows on his knees and with the darkness to hide him and the liquor to encourage, his confessions continued. "I wished for this," he whispered. "So many nights and just as many days. I wished for this. It was futile and in vain and you were already gone. Already his." His eyes pulled away from her, looking down at the glass in his hand with guilt and regret.

"I prayed to go back in time, to go back to any number of times when he tried to tell me what a bloody fool I was being. I tried to will my past self to listen, to...listen." He could feel the tension in his neck, in the set of his jaw. "I wanted you back...I wanted you both back. Hell...I wanted to breathe normally again. I wanted to be able to look myself in the mirror again. But it didn't work. And it got worse. I made it worse. And there were times...when I tried but...I had set it all in motion that night I pushed you away and it was my due justice to watch it settle." He shook his head, finishing his drink and sitting it aside. "I wished for this. To have you back in my life, in my home, in my bed..." He rose to his feet then. "But I never wished for it the way it happened. I never wished him harm or..." He gulped and stood still, half wishing she were awake to hear him, to say something. "I'd walk out the door right now if it brought him back. Never see you again if it meant he were here..." Shaking his head, he moved closer to the bed, dropping to his knees at her side. And then, in the softest voice, he laid it out—for only her sleeping self to witness. "I love you Maddie...I've loved you all of this time and I've done the absolute worst job of showing it...I don't want you to go. I don't want you to ever go..." He smiled at her then, reaching to tuck hair away from her face. "But I'm going to do a better job of loving you this time. I swear it." He watched her take a few more steady breaths and then rose to his feet. Bending to kiss her, he took a deep, cleansing breath and returned to his side of the bed. When he slipped in next to her, she drew to him naturally in her sleep and with a sigh, he closed his eyes.
The sun wasn't quite yet up when Maddie woke, though she could see streams of light peeking up through the windows. Snug and happy there in Harry's bed, she took a breath and closed her eyes, wondering if she might be able to drift back to a just a little more sleep before she had to face the day, before she had to do what she knew was going to be difficult...and leave. As she let out the breath, her muscles relaxed and she settled back into her pillow, letting thoughts of the afternoon leave her mind.

And just as she was about to claim those last minutes of dawn, she was stirred back awake.

Or more like...tickled.

At the feel of fingers walking slowly across her hip, her lips curled into a smile and, without opening her eyes, she lifted her eyebrows. "Harry."

"Mmmmm..." He smiled, moving closer to her as his fingers kept up their journey. "How did you know?"

"Well," she turned towards him. "If it's not you..." Her eyes pulled open, her smile tugging higher. "Then somebody on your staff would be in a whole host of trouble."

"True," he nodded, his fingers reaching her hip, his hand warm as it curved around her. "Good Morning." His lips were warm against hers, kissing her the last bit awake as she moved onto his side of the bed, into his space, his arms.

"Good morning," she snuggled closer, his arms moving easily around her. "Did you sleep well?"

"Mmm," he nodded, laying back on his pillow, bringing her with him. "You?"

"Okay," she shrugged, allowing her fingers to slip down his chest, to explore their way across his shoulder. "You know...I'm leaving today."

"I know," he nodded, his own hands smoothing over her back, pushing her into him so he could kiss her again. And he did; long, slow, warm and teasing kisses.

"I have to tell you..." She breathed against his lips. "I had kind of thought you might put up a bit more of a fight, trying to get me to stay longer..."

"Would it work?" Harry's eyes lit up, his face pulling back just a little to really look at her. "I've been laying here trying to remind myself to be a stronger man but if it would work..." His arms tightened around her.

"Hmmmm..." Maddie smiled as he spoke, warm against him.

"I could beg..." His lips were hot against her neck. "Or put up a fight..." He chuckled and her laughter increased. "Or throw a tantrum?"

"Ha!" Maddie smacked her hand lightly on his chest. "No no...don't do that. I do have to go..."

"I know you do," his face lifted from her neck, his lips finding their way back to hers.
"But..." She bit her lip, her head tipping to the side as her hands moved over him. "But that doesn't mean I'm not going to miss you."

"Yeah?" He seemed genuinely pleased, and surprised to hear that.

"Of course," her eyes were soft as she leaned up to kiss him. "Of course I'm going to miss you..." Her hands roamed down his body, hot on their way to his ass, where they stopped and squeezed. "And this..."

"Ha!" His head tipped back with a loud laugh but then, as his lips went back to hers, his body moved over her.

"I'm going to miss this..." Though her body was squirming under him in a way that told of lust and want, her eyes and her smile were clearly speaking of something far more innocent. But, for the moment, she was going to go with the former. Wrapping the fingers of one hand around the back of his neck and the fingers of the other pressing into the small of his back, bringing him down closer to her. "Can we do this...at least one more time."

"At least," he nodded enthusiastically, eager to make sure she was happy with what she would be missing.

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The morning came far too fast, speeding into the afternoon quicker than Harry could get a handle on. Before they knew it, they were out of bed, completely dressed and standing in Harry's foyer with Maddie's packed bags at their feet and good-byes caught in their throats.

"You'll be out in two weeks?" Maddie stood in front of him, her body leaning naturally into his as her fingers played with the buttons on his shirt.

"I will," he nodded, his hands running up and down her arms, having half a mind to hold onto her and not let her walk through the door. "I'll probably arrive late Friday morning..."

"I'll work from home that day," Maddie's hands flattened out on his chest, her smile turning up to him. "And you're fine with us being...homebound for the weekend?"

"Ha..." Harry chuckled, shaking his head as his arms moved around her, pulling her even closer. "I am perfectly fine with that. Yes."

"I promise I'll tell them before I come back out," Maddie began to explain. "Then we can..."

"No, no," Harry shook his head again. "No worries at all Maddie. I...understand. Please don't...do anything on my account. As far as I'm concerned, we can keep this in the dark for just as long as you would like."

"Well...I'll get to see my family in three weeks so after that..." She took a deep breath, knowing exactly the kind of crazy that would unfurl after that.

"After that then," he tried his best for a smile, knowing just how crazy and complicated their lives were about to come....and truly not caring so much, except for the impact it was going to have on her.
"Mmmm..." Maddie kissed him, trying her best to push those thoughts from his mind. When the knock on the door came, alerting them to the car she could hear waiting, she groaned into his mouth and held tighter to him.

"Maddie..." He chuckled without relinquishing his hold on her.

"I know," she kissed him once more and with regret in her eyes, she stepped back. "Okay." She sighed heavily and damn it if it didn't pump Harry's ego just a little to see her this disturbed about leaving. "Two weeks?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"Two weeks," he nodded, bending to kiss her again before he reached for her bags. "You'll call me when you're home? When you've landed safe?"

"I will," she nodded, a brief flash of sobriety washing over them.

And then, without much more to say, Harry was pulling her back into his arms, gathering her close and tight to his body. In a way that was so much more comfort and calm than it ever was sex and lust, he wrapped himself around her. Maddie hugged him back, tucking her face in against his shirt, breathing in the warm, soft, smell of him as she squeezed him tight.

And then, much too soon, he was releasing her, he was telling her good-bye. He was carrying her bags to the car and watching as she settled in, as she drove away. And soon–much, much too soon, he was fading into the distance.

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Maddie hadn't been gone long when Harry reached for his phone. That week of his life had blown every single other completely out of the water. But, as he waited for Maddie's call, there was one more thing he knew he had to do.

When Harry had called Ian, he didn't seem all that surprised to hear his voice. And when he asked permission to go and visit the cliff in France where they had left Bishop, he could tell the older man was smiling. The same all-knowing smirk of his son.

"Of course Henry," his answer had been easy; simple. "You're always welcome there."

So Harry had thanked him profusely and put plans in motion. Cancelling the rest of his day, arranging transportation and before long, he found himself in France; driving up that same dirt covered path they had all travelled together. His security detail had, thankfully, fallen behind; giving him the space for whatever it was he had come for.

Pulling the car to a stop, the dust swirled around his tires and Harry took a deep breath. Stepping from the car, he noticed two things instantly. First, the sun. It had been shining bright and intense since he had turned onto the property, causing him to squint even behind his sunglasses.

And second, his smile.

As bright as the sun that warmed his hair, as wide and open as the land that laid beneath him—the smile that had not faded from his lips for days.

Reaching into the passenger seat, Harry procured two items before rounding to the front of the car and growing still. Looking out over the valley below, he took another deep breath and allowed the
memories to wash over him, to settle. He had no intention of trying to fight off the feelings that came with this place, he had known before he came that it would be an emotional journey. He had planned on it.

So he let it be, let it happen. And with tears in his eyes and the same, wide smile in place, he opened the bottle of scotch in his hands and he poured the dark, rich liquid into the glass that rested on the hood of his car. Setting the bottle aside, he picked up his drink and turned around facing towards the sun, towards Bishop.

And with a sigh that spoke simultaneously of sadness and joy, he lifted his glass and drank it empty, thinking of his best friend as he did. Turning to pour another, he relaxed back against his car and let out a low, soft laugh. "I thought you might like to know...I've finally gotten my head out of my ass." His laughter increased and he took a sip. "It's funny because I just...I know this is where you would offer something witty and supportive at the same time; something about how it must have taken such a long time because of just how far up my ass it was..." He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, looking around him with a nod. "Either that or you would clock me one good in the jaw..."

For only a second, the corners of his mouth turned down and his eyes cast down to his feet. And in the very next moment, he looked back up and his smile return. "But you were never really a fighter, were you." He laughed and sighed and took another drink.

It was quiet on that cliff for a nice, long while. Harry poured and drank and stared—out into the distance, into the horizon, into his memories from the past and his tiny glimpses of hope for the future. And his mind ran crazy; thinking over all of it. He thought of his childhood with Bishop, he thought of them growing, of the wild and crazy antics—some of which were too ridiculous for anyone else BUT them to believe. He thought about meeting Maddie, about falling in love with her and planning a life with her and ultimately losing her. As he sipped back another glass of Scotch, he thought of Bishop and Maddie together; remembered the day his best friend sat before him and laid it all out. He remembered his heart breaking at the loss of the two of them. He remembered hating them both and loving them both.

And then he remembered seeing them at Anna's wedding. He remembered seeing them in the magazines, on the internet. He remembered seeing Maddie in her office. He remembered seeing them both together when Bishop's mother died and he remembered the night he showed up at Bishop's London home and he remembered just how...happy they were.

As tears pricked to his eyes, he let them come. With a deep breath, he let the feelings come. And then he lifted his eyes up from the horizon and he smiled.

"She's...she's doing well, you know." His voice cracked as he spoke, his heart heavy in his chest. "Aside from..." He laughed and waved his hand. "She's doing amazing. She's still in the New York place and she's working in your office and she's working with your father and...ha..." He ran a hand through his hair as he shook his head. "You would love the projects she's working on, the way she's moving her corner of the company. You would be proud." Harry nodded his head and took another drink. "She's strong too...so fucking strong. I mean, I don't know how she's managed to survive the both of us and come out so level-headed and...amazing..." He breathed. "She's amazing." He took a moment, gulped at the lump in his throat. "And she's so much like you now." He laughed; a wide, open rumble. "It's crazy how much she's become a Bishop. You would love it. You would...you would love it." Wiping his cheek with the back of his hand, he took another drink. "I know I do." He shook his head. "I don't know why it is that I get a second chance at this, God knows I don't deserve it. But...Jesus...I hope you understand why I can't not jump at it, why I can't
just...take it." He poured one more drink and took a few breaths. "Who am I kidding...if anyone understands, it's you." He sipped and sighed and tipped his newly permanent smile up to the heavens. "She's doing amazing, my friend–better because of you. And I swear...I swear on...our friendship and our past and our mutual love for her. I swear on all of it," he shook his head and blinked at the blurriness in his eyes. "I'll do better this time...I'll...I'll love her better this time."

It was quiet on that cliff for a nice, long while. And then Harry finished his drink. He put the bottle and the glass back in the car and he walked over to the edge. And even as he laughed at himself for just how cheesy he had become, he closed his eyes and conjured up his best friend's smile.

And he sat with it for just a moment; a long, quiet, peaceful moment.

He was back in London when he got the phone call; reading over some of the memos he had missed during his week with Maddie. Sitting there in his office, with his feet propped up on his desk, he was looking off to the side, through the large double doors into what had been his mother's office, what was supposed to have been Maddie's office. When the ring sounded out into the room, he jumped at the sound, recovering quickly with a wide smile as he snatched his phone up into his fingers.

"Hello there..." He couldn't help the way his eyes and smile drifted mushy; he imagined it would be that way for awhile. "You've landed."

"Safely back in the states," Maddie's voice sounded out; sleepy, but happy.

"I'm very happy to hear that," Harry nodded. "Are you exhausted?"

"I am," she laughed through a big yawn. "I'm going to crash the second I hit the pillow...but I wanted to call first."

"Thank you for that."

"Of course," she took a cleansing breath. "Thank you for a wonderful week, Harry."

"Thank you for springing it on me," he batted back.

"I'll see you in two weeks?"

"With bells on," he didn't even blink. "Sleep well. I'll talk to you tomorrow?"

"Maybe a few drunken texts," she laughed.

"I look forward to it."

"Good night Harry."

"Good night Maddie."

Across the phone line, across the ocean, Maddie was stepping into her living room, sliding her phone into her pocket. Yes, she was exhausted. Yes, she had been in the air for hours and yes....she couldn't wait to take a bath and crawl into bed.

But first.
She sat her bags aside, rested her purse on the stand. Flipping on the music as she moved, she went directly to the liquor cabinet. Reaching for a bottle she knew he approved of, she poured herself a small glass and returned to the living room.

Walking slow along the book shelves, she looked over the mementos of their history; photos and books and trinkets, framed maps, her French man in a box. Her painting.

Swallowing back the lump in her throat, the ache in her heart, she stood tall and smiled.

"I did it," her voice was strong, though merely a whisper. "I did it Bishop. I...jumped. I reached out with both hands and..." She sniffed and wiped at the tears in her eyes and then, with a deep breath, she let it out. "I'm living. I'm...."

As she drank back the warm, dark Scotch, she closed her eyes and thought of Bishop and she knew.

He would know how hard–and how easy–this decision had been. He would know the great big step it was. He would know how risky and how scary. And he would know what it must have taken for her to get on that plane to London.

He would know all of that, would understand all of that. And He would be proud.
Chapter 17

Maddie returned to her life in New York; back to work, back to normal. Though normal for her had certainly been altered. Despite winter in the city, despite the snow and the bone chilling cold, she would walk the few blocks to the office, practically humming the entire way. And when she stepped off the elevator, her red cheeks and bright smile were the first thing that greeted her assistant Jillian.

"Okay...what gives?" Jillian's tone was dry after the third consecutive cheerful morning.

"Sorry?" Maddie looked up to her from behind her desk.

"What gives? What's going on with you?" She waved her hand at her boss as she moved further into the room. With her arms crossed over her chest, she stood in front of her desk and looked down at her, skeptical.

"I..." Maddie laughed lightly, confusion tinting her eyes. "I don't know what you mean."

"No?" Jillian's eyebrows lifted. "It's in the single digits outside. There's, oh I don't know....a foot of snow, ON TOP of the slush and sleet. And every single morning you come prancing in here, singing some melody like you're Snow-fucking-White." She took a deep breath, her face softening as she smiled. "Is everything okay? Are you okay? Is something going on that you want to talk about or..."

Maddie's smile was nervous, her eyes bouncing as she looked up at Jillian. She was concerned. She had noticed a difference and was checking up on her and even given her amusing choice of language, it was sweet of her. For a split second, Maddie considered telling her. She could keep a secret, that much had been demonstrated during her brief fling with Charlie. And Maddie knew that she wasn't thrown by fame like others might be and she had seen Harry before, she knew that he was a part of her history.

"No," Maddie shook her head, letting out a small laugh. "Nothing's going on. I'm absolutely fine. I just...I don't know," she shrugged. "I'm happy." Though she knew she could trust Jillian, though a part of her wanted to be able to talk to somebody about it, she just didn't feel right about telling anyone else until she told her family. "But if it spooks you too much, I can stop with the humming."

Jillian sat still for a moment, looking Maddie over, making her assessment. Then, with a sigh, she gave in and believed her. "That would be nice," she smiled then. "At least not every morning."

"Deal."

"Deal," Jillian eased up. "Now. What do we have going on today?"

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"And on a lighter side tonight..." The anchor turned in her seat, turning their attention to the video clips that appeared next to her. "Prince Harry charmed students and staff alike when he attended the
dedication of a new school named after his late grandmother, Queen Elizabeth the Second. He gave a remarkable speech, took a tour of the new building and, true to form, spent ample time with the children." Though the lady went on talking, Maddie half-tuned her out as her eyes focused on the video clip they were showing. It was a short loop covering the different aspects of his visit and it drew Maddie in completely.

Leaning forward on the couch, she couldn't help the giddy smile, couldn't stop the stir of butterflies as she watched Harry play with the children. She couldn't help the pink flush that reached her cheeks when she listened to his voice craft kind, wonderful words about his grandmother. And when they jumped to a quick close up of him laughing, of his bright smile, she took a breath.

"...Those in attendance couldn't help but remark on his infamous charm, noting that the smile never faded from his face. Not once."

As the anchor segued to the next bit, Maddie's mind stayed with Harry; her smile wide and warm. He looked good. No–she shook her head. He looked great; bright and full of life and...happy. And she missed him, more than she thought she would after not seeing him for nearly a week. The fact that she was dating somebody she could actually see on the nightly news was a blessing and a curse at times; giving her the opportunity to see him but also making her desperately want to SEE him. The feeling in her stomach felt nervous and happy and was something she hadn't felt in a long time.

And before she gave it much thought, before she did the quick time zone-math in her head, she was pulling out her phone and dialing him up. It was only when his muffled, rough voice answered that she realized he might actually be sleeping.

"Maddie..." He smiled even before his eyes were all the way open.

"I'm sorry I woke you," she was quick with the apology, however half-hearted it was.

"S'okay," he shook his head, stretching out a bit. "Everything alright?"

"Yes!" She was quick with her response. "Yes...everything's great. I just...ha..." She glanced up at the tv. "I saw you on tv tonight," sinking back into her couch, a smug smile crossed her lips.

"Oh?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, scrubbing his hand up over his tired eyes, waking up a little more as he imagined Maddie watching him on tv.

"At the school," she nodded, her fingers playing with the hem of her shirt. "You were playing with the children..."

"I remember," he chuckled, leaning up to look at the clock and falling back to his pillow, not even caring about the hour.

"They've always been your favorite," she laughed, thinking about the tons of pictures she had seen of him with children.

"They have."

"The lady covering the segment was talking about the big smile on your face, about just how happy you had been lately," she felt her stomach stir and rolled her eyes at herself. "And I couldn't help it. I had to call you."
"Well..." His grin pulled wide as he sat up in bed; completely awake at her admission. "I can't say I'm not happy to hear that."

"You don't mind?" She leaned back even further.

"Not at all," he shook his head. "Though...you do know whose fault that is."

"Whose fault what is?"

"The big smile on my face," he took a breath. "How happy I've been lately..."

"Ah," Maddie felt her face flush even further. "I'm going to guess....Jim."

"So smart," he laughed along with her as he shook his head. "So smart."

"Mmmm..." Maddie's giggle faded into a smile. "I miss you."

"Oh Maddie," his hand pressed to his chest. "Not nearly as much as I miss you, I guarantee it."

Sitting in the middle of Leo's club, with his friends at the table and a full room, Harry couldn't hear a single thing. Or more accurately—he wasn't listening. One week before he would be in New York, his mind was otherwise engrossed. There was music and conversation and the occasional shout out as one patron or another was pleased with whatever was happening on the tvs surrounding the bar.

But Harry was in his own world. Staring down at the screen of his phone as he sent messages back and forth with Maddie, he couldn't be bothered to hear a thing.

Not even the man sitting next to him.

"Wales." Sean's voice was curt, his stare dumbfounded as he waited for something from Harry. "Hey. Sussex." He blinked as he waited, looking to Kiki who snickered as she watched. "Hey. Your Royal Highness."

Nothing.

"What the hell..." Kiki laughed as she leaned across the table to smack their friend on the side of the head. "Harry!"

"Jesus Christ!" He looked right up to her, his hand catching hers and pulling it away from him. "What is wrong with you?"

"With me?!" She blanched, pressing her hand to her chest. "Sean's been trying to get your attention for five minutes. What the hell is on that phone of yours anyway?" She leaned closer, trying to look. "Please tell me you're not looking at pictures of yourself."

"Of course not," he glared across the table at her, sliding his phone into his pocket. "I was reading a text message."

"What kind of a text message?" Kiki's curiosity rose as Harry ignored her and turned to her
husband.

"Sorry, I just got..." He waved his hand, trying to keep the massive grin from his face as he thought of Maddie. "Lost."

"Sure," Sean's eyes were curious as he looked him over. "You okay?"

"Of course," Harry nodded quickly, reaching for his drink. "I'm here now. What's up? What's going on?"

"Verbier," Sean answered, taking Harry's word for it and moving on. "We're planning a ski trip. You in?"

"Absolutely," Harry nodded, taking a sip from the bottle. "When?"

"Three weeks," Sean answered. "We're going. Leo and his wife, his sister, Anna and her husband and..."

"Three weeks?" Harry repeated, his mind drifting again. Maddie would be there in three weeks, they had already made plans for her to fly in to London.

"Yeah," Sean nodded. "Why? You have plans?"

"I..." Harry smiled then; wide and soft and in a way that anyone who was looking at him would know. "Wow..." He chuckled, avoiding the gaze from Kiki across the table. "I kind of do."

"You kind of do?" Kiki's voice twisted at the end–because she had been watching, because she–unlike her husband–didn't buy for a second that Harry had just been lost.

"Yeah," Harry looked over at her, then to Sean, then down to his hands in his lap. "Hey listen, can I bring somebody? To Verbier in three weeks? Would it be a problem if I brought somebody along?"

"Somebody?" Kiki's eyebrows rose slowly. "Like...somebody somebody?"

"Somebody," Harry shrugged, trying to keep the twist out of his smile.

"You mean like a date?" Sean was mildly interested.

"You mean like a woman?" Kiki's interest was far greater.

"Does it matter?" Harry tired for nonchalance.

"Not really," Sean shook his head.

"Yes really," Kiki waved her hand her husband before her gaze returned, fixed on Harry. "This person you want to bring along...will she need her own room? Or will she be sharing yours?"

Harry's smile twitched higher, watching her eyes sparkle as she made her point and got to dig deeper all at the same time. "Fair enough," he shrugged. "SHE will be sharing my room."

"Really..." Sean's interested rose.
"Who?" Kiki didn't bat an eyelash as she asked.

"Who?" Harry arched one eyebrow across the table at her, knowing this was driving her crazy. "Now I know who it is doesn't make a damn bit of difference in the amount of rooms..."

Clearing her throat, she leaned in closer, her hand reaching out to him, her fingers wrapping around his forearm. "Who."

"Kiki, why..."

"Because," she remained serious as her fingers tightened their hold on him. "If you're giving it another try with Cassandra..."

"Please." Harry's arm jerked away from her, his eyes narrowing as she continued her sentence.

"Then the answer is no. You cannot bring a date. In fact, I'm not even sure I want you to go."

"I am not giving it another try with Cassandra," he groaned, taking a sip from his drink before he took a deep breath and let his easy happiness return. "But." Letting the grin sneak back onto his face, he leaned closer. "I am giving it another try with Maddie."

The table grew still and absolutely silent, shock clouded over the group and sucked in all the sound. Kiki was stunned, frozen as she looked at him. Harry could have sworn it was a full minute before she blinked. "Maddie?"

"Maddie." Harry repeated her name, his smile widening as he did.

"B...Bishop's Maddie?" Kiki finally blinked, her head shaking as she tried to will her mind back to the conversation.

"Yes," Harry's smile softened. "Bishop's Maddie."

Kiki looked to her husband, back to Harry, and then back to Sean who was watching the interaction with wide, confused eyes. And then he broke. "Yeah right," he snorted. "Maddie."

"No I mean it," Harry turned to his friend, meeting his eyes with sincerity. "Maddie."

"You want to bring Maddie, Maddie Bishop, with you to Verbier in three weeks," Kiki's voice was soft and low, her shock giving way to something more emotional. "And she's going to share your room?"

"God I hope so."

"Harry..." Kiki softened even further, her eyes searching his for more information.

"At least she did last week and..."

"Hold. On." Kiki held up her hand. "What are you...when...how"

"Well," Harry cleared his throat, his mind drifting back. "You remember when she was here last? We sat up all night at your house talking about Bishop..."
"I remember," Kiki whispered, her heart tugging in her chest. "That night when I asked you, you were pretty adamant that..."

"I was," he nodded. "I really was and even the next day when I saw her out at the Bishop Estate, I pushed aside any fleeting thought of..." He smiled then, remembering. "We said good-bye out there on Ian's lawn after we had gone to the treehouse and I figured I wouldn't see her again for quite some time."

"But..." Kiki offered.

Harry swallowed at the lump in his throat, blinked as he remembered all of the emotions that had been churning inside of him. "I would never have had the gall to assume that this could happen again for me. You have to know that. No matter how much I might have wanted this, I couldn't..."

"I do know that," Kiki answered; and she did. There had been a time when Harry would have done anything to pull Maddie back into his arms, but once Bishop had passed, she had become off-limits as far as he was concerned—or so he thought. "Then how is it that she..."

"She came back," Harry cut in, exhaling in a sense of relief. "She left for New York and I had resolved myself to how things were. And I was happy to be her friend, as much as she would let me be her friend...that's how this was going to go."

"But she came back," Kiki repeated, so engrossed in what he was saying that she had tuned out everything else around her.

"She showed up in my office the next day," he laughed as he said it, still having trouble believing it for himself. "And she wouldn't listen to a single protest, she didn't want to hear anything from my list of reasons why not...."

"Good for her," Kiki smiled.

"She told me that..." He gulped and looked down at his hands. "She told me that Bishop...that he would be disappointed if we didn't..." He pulled in a shaky breath and let out another laugh. "He would be disappointed if we didn't go for it, if we didn't push aside the reasons why not and just...go for it."

"She's right," Kiki could feel the tears stinging in her eyes even as her smile widened over her face.

"I know," Harry looked back up to her, shaking his head as his laughter returned. "Of course she's right. But it didn't even matter if she wasn't, I'm not sure I have it in me to push Maddie away again. I'm not sure I'd survive the self-loathing and doubt that would come with that decision."

"So are you two..."

"Yes?" He grinned. "Kind of? Ha. I guess I don't know exactly. What I do know is that she was here for a handful of...amazing days and I'm going to see her next weekend..."

"You're going to New York?" Sean asked, following along with the narrative.

"I am," Harry nodded. "And she was planning on coming here two weeks after that but..."

"You're going to bring her to Verbier," Kiki finished for him.
"I want to," he nodded.

"Wow Harry..." Kiki shook her head, leaning back in her chair and reaching for her drink. "I'm just..."

"I know," Harry nodded, taking a drink and looking back and forth between the two of them; trying to gauge Sean's reaction, trying to read Kiki's thoughts. "Look. I know that this might...bring up a lot of questions for you and I can't imagine what you might be thinking but..." Harry trailed off for a second, collecting his thoughts.

"Can I tell you something?" Kiki spoke up, finishing her drink and setting it back on the table.

"Of course."

"Something that might make you sad?"

"Okay..."

Kiki nodded, taking a deep breath as she leaned towards him, bringing her voice down so that it was only them in this moment. "He struggled too. Just like this, just like you." Her eyes welled up as she remembered it, as she remembered him. "He had...he had a whole list of reasons why not and he had the same conflict in his heart that I'm sure you did. He knew that it might shake everything up and he knew there would be push back but..." She laughed, her smile pulling wide as she shrugged. "But she wouldn't listen to him either."

Harry had to laugh at that, despite the tears that came to his eyes. "Of course not."

"Of course not," Kiki nodded her agreement. "She's right you know. She was right to make him jump in and love her and she's right to make you jump in and love her..."

"Kiki," Harry's voice cracked with the emotion of it all.

"You do, don't you," she whispered. "Love her."

He couldn't speak for a moment, the feelings balled up in his throat. So instead, he blinked at the blur in his eyes, he met her gaze. And he nodded.

"Good," Kiki sniffed, drawing her shoulders back as she sat up tall. "I'm just...I'm not sure I can tell you how happy that makes me." But she didn't need to say it, he could see it in her eyes and he wanted to jump across the table and hug her for it. "But you should know Harry Wales. If you break Maddie Bishop's heart..."

"I know."

"She's just, she's had so much more hurt in her life than one person should have."

"I know."

"Good," she reached across the table, taking hold of his hand. "I'm happy for you Harry. It makes my heart warm with just how happy I am," she squeezed his fingers. "And I hope she says yes, to Verbier. Because I would love to see her again. We can drink wine and giggle until we annoy the
two of you."

"Well with an offer like that..." Harry waved his hand, laughing along with Kiki as the seriousness slipped away and the easiness returned. "I'll ask her. The next time I talk to her, I'll ask her what she thinks about Verbier."

"Perfect," Kiki grinned, already excited at the possibility.

"Perfect," Harry echoed, sighing as he looked down at his hands in his lap; relieved at their reactions. "Perfect."
Chapter 18

She was supposed to be working. That's what she told herself—for the twentieth time in that minute. Sitting at her desk in her home office, her laptop open in front of her, she had emails to read, responses to send. She had applications to sort through.

She was supposed to be working. But God help her, she wasn't. Ever since Harry had called, letting her know he was stepping on the plane, she had been mentally calculating the time it would take him to get to her door. And it felt like with every minute that passed, she had to recalculate and it was taking over her mind.

"Get it together," she puffed out a frustrated breath and shut the laptop. Rising to her feet, she walked over to the windows, looking out over the city. Sure. Part of it was worry; the natural state of her stomach when somebody she cared about took to the air. But there was another part, a part that flushed her skin and made her heart beat just a skip faster.

Anticipation.

Rubbing her fingers at the back of her neck, she let her head roll back and closed her eyes. In a matter of hours, Harry would be there. He would be on her side of the Atlantic, he would be in her time-zone, knocking at her door. He would be in her home.

Her head lifted, her eyes opened and her smile slipped higher. Though the two weeks had been difficult, more so than she thought they would be, they had at least had the courtesy to go by fast. But these last few hours were going to drive her mad.

Looking back down at her watch for the twenty-third time that minute, she took a deep breath and tried negotiating with herself. If you work for fifteen minutes, you can have five to daydream.

"Christ Madeline," she rolled her eyes, shaking her head at the 'deals' she was making in her head. But, willing to give anything a try, she nodded and returned to her seat. Opening up the laptop in front of her, she sat tall and straight, hopeful the posture would help, and she clicked on the first email in her inbox. "Fifteen minutes."

Before Maddie knew it, the fifteen minutes had—thankfully—turned into twenty, then thirty. When an hour had passed and she had caught up on her email, she felt a deep sense of accomplishment. Without even mild embarrassment, she closed her laptop and stood up, stretching her arms as she grinned. "I think you've earned at least fifteen minutes of daydream."

Laughing at herself, she left her work in the office and went to the kitchen to make some tea. She was leaning back against her counter, waiting for the teapot to whistle as she let her mind drift. Just as she was about to do another calculation in her head, she heard her phone ring out in her pocket.

"Harry?" She stood up straight, her excitement instantly elevated. "Are you on the ground?"

"I am," he chuckled. "We just landed in New York. It'll be a bit before I get to you but..."
"How?" Maddie cut in with a laugh. "I thought you still had..." She glanced down at her watch, ready to do the math.

"We picked up some speed in the air," he shrugged his shoulders. "The weather was smooth, the pilot was motivated....time-zones..." He took a breath. "I don't know. But I'm here."

"You're here," she had to bite her lip to keep her grin from hurting her cheeks.

"We're taxiing in right now. I'll be there just as soon as the car can drive."

"Yeah?" She bounced on her feet, the whistle from the kettle drawing her attention back to the stove. "Do me a favor?"

"Yeah?" He lifted his eyebrows, getting his stuff ready to de-board.

Pausing as she poured the hot water into her mug, she felt her cheeks flush just a bit. "Pick a fast car."

"Ha!" He laughed loudly. "You got it. I'll see you soon?"

"I can't wait," she sighed.

And just like that, any thoughts of anymore work were completely shoved aside. After saying good-bye, she gathered her tea and moved around the house; checking for last minute tidying—something she knew mattered none. Stepping into her bathroom, she took a long, slow sip and looked at herself in the mirror; checking her hair, her clothes.

"As if you're going to be wearing them long," she snickered at her reflection. "Maddie Bishop..." She shook her head, wondering if maybe she hadn't poured scotch in her tea. Scooping her mug up into her hands, she went back to the office, logging off, shutting down. She knew that once Harry arrived there was zero chance of getting back to work. Glancing out the windows, she could see the snow beginning to fall and decided to start a fire.

And then she waited.

Sitting there in the edge of her couch, sipping at her tea, she waited.

Drumming the fingers of one hand on the mug in her hand, she waited.

Glancing towards the door at every single small sound she heard, she waited.

And then, finally, she heard it; the buzz from down below. Abandoning her mug on the table, she hurried over to the door, pressing the button with unnecessary force.

"Yes?"

"Doctor Bishop," it was Hector. She had gone down early that morning to let them know of the guest she was expecting. "Your guest has arrived and I have sent them up in the elevator Ma'am."

"Thank you Hector," Maddie smiled wide, taking a deep breath to try to calm her giddiness. "Have a great day."
"Thank you Ma'am. You as well."

Maddie didn't even wait for him to finish before her attentions were turned completely towards the door. In all honesty, she had no idea that Harry's arrival would make her feel quite like this. She was excited, sure—had been all week. But this quick rush of her pulse, this way she seemed to be bouncing as she stared down her door—she hadn't counted on that.

But before she had time to delve into all of that, there was a knock at her door.

Taking a deep breath and counting to two, she reached for the handle and pulled open the door. With a swoosh Harry was standing in front of her.

"You're here." And the breath she was holding, slipped from her lungs.

Without taking his eyes from hers, without blinking, he nodded. "I'm here."

Just as quickly as the words left his mouth, Maddie was crossing her threshold and putting herself directly in his arms as they opened to catch her. His bags fell to the floor at his feet and he wrapped himself around her.

"I'm so glad you're here," she smiled against the hot skin of his cheek, her arms wound around his neck.

"Me too," Harry whispered into her hair, his eyes closed as he drew her in. "Me too." And he was. He was beyond glad. He had been counting down the days, hours and minutes and finally, finally he was in New York. She was in his arms.

Maddie stayed there for a moment, taking him in; his height, his stature, his scent. And then, with regret and a breath, she stepped back. While Harry's arms remained around her, her hands moved down his shoulders, to his arms and she turned a smile to Harry's left. "Good Afternoon Jim. Would you like to come in and look around?"

"Thank you Ma'am," he nodded, moving around the two of them and into the apartment; discreet as always. And though Maddie wanted nothing more than to pull Harry into the apartment and kiss that grin off his face, they had to wait. At least for a moment.

"So..." Her hands smoothed back up his arms. "How was your flight?"

"Good," the corner of Harry's mouth curved up in a half smirk. "How has your morning been?"

"Productive," she nodded, the twinkle in her eye telling a different story.

"Really?" His head tipped to the side.

"Mmm," she nodded, holding her ground.

"Because mine wasn't," his hands tightened around her as his voice lowered. "I mean...I tried to work on the flight. I had files and my laptop and...I couldn't..."

"You couldn't?" Her smugness began to slip.
"No," he shook his head, leaning closer and closer to her. "Every time I tried, all I could see was your face..." He laughed as he remembered. "All I could think about was coming here and..."

"All clear," Jim stepped back into the foyer, bringing both of their eyes to him. Harry's hands fell away from Maddie as he focused on Jim for just another minute longer. "You know what to do if you need me?" He held out some small device to Harry.

"I do," he nodded, taking it from his fingers and tucking it into his pocket. "Though I think we're staying put for the majority of the weekend." Bending to pick up his bags, they all stepped inside Maddie's apartment.

"Yes sir," Jim nodded, having gone over this with him prior to their arrival.

"Wait," Maddie looked between them. "I have spare rooms ready to go. You're not staying?"

"No ma'am," Jim shook his head.

"Don't worry," Harry turned a grin and a wink to her as he sat his bags aside. "I'll protect you."

As Maddie snickered, Jim turned a grin to her. "If you need me, you press the white button. I'll be here in under two minutes."

"Hey!" Harry's forehead furrowed.

"Thanks Jim," Maddie laughed as she turned back to the door, watching as Jim stepped outside.

"Have a good afternoon Ma'am," he nodded to Maddie before turning the same to Harry. "Sir."

"Thank you Jim," Harry stood in the entryway, watching as Maddie followed Jim to the door. With one last wave to his Protection Officer, Maddie shut the door behind him, locking it before she turned to face Harry.

Leaning back against the door, Maddie bit her bottom lip, a smile taking over her face. "Hi."

"Hi," Harry echoed, his hands stuffed into his pockets, his feet shuffling as he watched her; amused at how nervous he suddenly felt standing there. "It's snowing outside..."

"I know," Maddie nodded. "I saw that when I was supposed to be working this morning..."

"You were supposed to be working?"

"I was."

"You weren't as productive as you lead me to believe?"

"Not quite."

"And what were you doing instead?" His head tipped to the side, watching the flush rise in her cheeks.

"Staring out the window," her eyes held onto his. "Thinking about you."
"Ah..." Damn it if that didn't make his chest swell in pride.

"And then I started a fire," she nodded towards the living room.

"I like fires."

"And I brewed some tea..."

"I like tea," Harry shrugged.

"I'm happy you're here," she sidestepped his comments and stood tall, stepping away from the door. "I'm really happy you're here."

"Me too," he took in a breath. "Me too."

"Would you like some?"

"Some?" Harry's eyebrows lifted.

"Tea," Maddie grinned, stepping up in front of him, her fingers reaching out to push into the opening at the front of his coat, sliding along his chest. "I could make you some tea, you can warm up by the fire..."

"Okay," Harry nodded, smiling down at her, at the brief glimpse of her own nervousness. "That sounds great."

"Good," Maddie's hand rubbed over his chest, the fabric of his sweater soft under her hand. "Why don't you hang up your coat," she pointed to the hooks off to the side. "And I'll put the water on..."

"You sure you don't want me to be in charge of the tea?" Harry joked, tugging his coat off his shoulders. "I've mastered a few cups in my day."

"Look at the over-confident British Prince," Maddie rolled her eyes, turning towards the kitchen. "I think I got this," she called after him.

"Of course you do," Harry laughed, speaking mostly to himself. As he pulled off his coat and hung it up on the hooks she had pointed out, he looked around the space; looked around Maddie's home. And he began to take it all in.

He had been there before, had been able to pinpoint the features of the home that were uniquely Maddie, the ones that were uniquely Bishop and the ones that must have been born of their relationship. Just as he was doing now, he had walked into her warm, welcoming home, he had seen the artwork on the walls, the photos on the shelves. He had been here before. But his perspective was a little bit different this time.

Moving into the living room, he loved the juxtaposition in front of him. Outside the large windows he could see the snow continuing to fall as it grew heavier and heavier. But there inside with him was the crackling heat from the fire and this wonderful sense of ease he felt around her.

He could hear Maddie moving around in the kitchen, could hear cups and saucers touching together, he could hear the kettle beginning to steam. As a warm smile pulled across his face, his eyes swept around the room; the comfortable couch, the soft throws tossed here and there, the
horrible painting she had hung over the mantle. Chuckling, he shook his head, remembering the story, the image of what Bishop's face must have looked like still amusing him.

Turning around in the room, he moved over to the shelves, wanting to get a closer look at the things that surrounded her. Just as she had at his place, he read the book titles, he noted the items that held places of importance. He familiarized himself with her home, with her life.

And then his eyes landed on a picture in a frame that drew all of his breath back into his lungs. His fingers lifted, stretching out as they reached for it, wanting a closer look.

"Okay..." Maddie's voice called out as she stepped back into the room, a tray and the tea service in her hands. Harry's eyes flashed over to her in surprise and Maddie's feet slowed just a bit. Her eyes sliding quickly to the picture he had been reaching for, her cheeks flushing just a little.

Seeing this, Harry cleared his throat and turned around to face her, his hands pulling back to his side. "Look at you..." He nodded to the tray in her hands. "I honestly expected mugs with the bags but you've done the whole thing." He waved his hand and smiled across the room at her.

"Yes, well," she took a deep breath and continued on over to the coffee table by the couch. Setting the tray down, she stood tall and shrugged; her smile dancing in her eyes. "My husband was British and apparently Scotch wasn't the only thing he had traditions for."

"Ah," Harry nodded, his lips twitching higher. "Very nice."

Maddie watched him for a beat, her eyes looking around him at the shelf. "Looking for a book?"

"No, no," he shook his head, turning back towards it. "I was just...ha. I don't know what I was doing," he shrugged his shoulders. "But I saw this photo and..." Reaching out and pulling it from the shelf, his thoughts seemed to fall from his mind, his eyes focusing on the photo, on the people in the photo.

With a breath, Maddie moved over to his side, smiling down at the picture in his hands. "I see," she glanced up at him, expecting to see a furrow in his brow but instead she found warmth in his eyes, a smile on his lips. Looking back down at the frame, she explained. "It's from our wedding."

"I know," Harry whispered. "I mean, I guessed as much."

"This wasn't even one that the photographers took," Maddie's eyes glazed over just a bit as she remembered. "Michael just happened to catch us off to the side and...I don't know, he thought it would be a nice photo."

"It's a beautiful photo," Harry's voice was low, holding onto a hint of reverence as he looked at the smiles on both of their faces.

"I agree," she nodded. "It was a really beautiful night."

"I bet it was," Harry pulled his eyes from the photo in his hands to the woman standing next to him. Taking in the warmth on her face, the happiness in her eyes, he felt a tug in his heart. "Are there more?"

"More?" Her eyebrows pulled together in confusion as she looked up at him.
"More photos from the wedding," Harry looked back at the frame, moving to set it back on the shelf.

"You..." She blinked, the corner of her mouth twisting up. "You want to look at the photos from my wedding?"

Giving it a moment to settle over his mind, just in case he hadn't been thinking clearly when he had mentioned it, Harry's head nodded slowly. "Yeah..." He gave a soft shrug, his emotions welling in his heart. "If you don't mind..."

"I don't," she shook her head. "I just didn't think that would be something you would want to see."

"I know," Harry nodded, his arms crossing over his chest, his eyes focusing down on his feet. "But you look...you both look so happy. And it has been a really, really long time since I've seen his smile and..." When his eyes lifted back to hers, they were wide and heavy with all he was feeling. He knew it was an odd request, knew that it was probably confusing. But the part of him that had known Bishop forever wanted to hold onto that smile he had seen on his face for just a little bit longer.

Maddie's hand reached out, her fingers curling around his arm, her thumb stroking the sleeve of his sweater. "You can see them. Come on," she squeezed his arm. "Let's sit down and pour some tea and I'll get them..." Her hand slid down his arm, pulling his hand into hers. "If you want to see them, you can see them, okay?"

"Okay," Harry nodded, holding tight to her fingers as she lead him back to the couch.

"Okay," Maddie watched as he took over the tea service, working quickly to fill their cups. "Harry?"

"Mmm?" He glanced up at her.

"You're sure?" Her eyes were a bit scattered as they scanned his face, judging his tone and the undercurrent of his feelings.

He could see she was unsure, that her nervousness had shifted a little. So he stood tall and leveled his eyes with hers. Moving right over to her, his hands reached for her face, his fingers curving around her cheeks as he lowered his lips to hers.

It was the first time they had kissed since he had come to New York, the first time they had kissed in her home, in this living room. And as her mouth opened under his, everything else around them seemed to slip away for a moment; the tea, the snow, the wedding photos. Maddie sighed and leaned in closer to him, her hands sliding up that soft sweater he wore that made her want to cuddle up next to him for the whole of the weekend.

When he pulled back, his cheeks were warm and his eyes were soft. "Hi," he smiled down at her.

"Hi," she chuckled, loving the feel of his palm against her cheek.

"I'm really happy to be here Maddie."

"Well good," Maddie's grin pulled higher. "Because I'm really happy that you finally made it."
"Good," he leaned to kiss her once more before he took a breath and shrugged. "I didn't mean to make things awkward..." He nodded his head back towards the photo on the shelf.

"You didn't," she shook her head, her hand reaching up to smooth down his arm. "I was surprised you wanted to see. That's all."

"I know," he nodded. "And I know that there was a time when...ha..." He laughed, shaking his head. "Things have changed Maddie and I want things to be different for us now, I want things to be open and easy and...he was your husband and this was a big moment in your life," his thumb stroked against her cheek. "And it was enormous for him and at the end of it all, he was my best friend and despite what I may have thought then, I wanted him to be happy and it's nice, now, to see him that way." His hands fell from her then, watching her closely. "But if it makes you uncomfortable..."

"It doesn't," she shook her head fast. "It...all of those things are true Harry and you're right. It was a very big moment in my life." Taking a breath, she clapped her hands together. "I'm going to go grab the albums. You have a seat, drink some tea...I'll be right back."

"Okay," Harry nodded, watching her go before he lowered onto the couch. Reaching for his cup of tea, he settled back and waited for her to return.

When she did, she had two large albums in her arms and a smile on her face. "I have to warn you," she sighed as she sat down right next to him. "I might get a little emotional while we look through these."

"Okay," Harry smiled as he nodded.

"No judging?" She lifted her eyebrows, handing him the first album as she sat the other next to her on the couch.

"As long as there's no judging if I do..." His eyes and his hand ran over the cover of the album, his smile twitching up as his eyes shifted up to hers.

Maddie smile and swallowed the lump that seemed to be developing in her throat and she reached for her cup of tea. Tucking her feet up underneath her, she ran her hand along Harry's shoulders, her arm moving back behind him on the couch. Nodding down to the album he held onto, she took a breath. "This one is has most of the photos in it; all of the professional ones and few others here and there. This other one has all of the other random shots that people took that night."

"Okay..." He nodded, his hand shifting to her knee, warming over it before he gave it a squeeze and turned his attentions back to the book. Flipping open the cover, he turned the first page and there he was, Bishop. There were a handful of photos on the page, all of them with Bishop on his knee with a ring, all of them in different locations. Glancing up at Maddie, he lifted his eyebrows. "Did he...did you..." He glanced back down at the pages. "Did you two get engaged in Paris? Or...Bendal?" His fingers ran over the photos as his mind tried to sort it out.

Clearing her throat, Maddie blinked at the tears that were already welling up behind her eyes. "No," she shook her head. "He...sorry..." She laughed and took a deep breath. "He took the ring to all of those places, took photos in all of the places he had thought about proposing but in the end it was..." Her eyes looked up from the photos, concentrating on Harry's face as she told him. "We got engaged here."
"In New York?" He turned to look at her; curious in the way that people were curious to know the details of a fairytale, of a story being revealed.

"In this apartment," she was soft as she told him, knowing it would bring something else into the room with them.

And it did.

"Wow..." Harry breathed, his head nodding slowly as his eyes swept around the room.

"You know how he was..." Maddie's voice drew him back to the present. "Everything was big and everything was bold and..."

"Of course," Harry chuckled, his eyes looking back to the pages, flipping through another of the set of proposal photos Bishop had given her that night. "I wouldn't imagine him being less that way with...this."

"No," Maddie shook her head, relief coloring her smile.

There were a few more pages related to their engagement, photos they had posed for, pictures that had been sent along to the newspapers and professional publications that the Bishop family had requested. Maddie watched, sipping slowly at her tea, as Harry flipped through them. He was slow and thoughtful but he didn't seemed stressed or bothered—not in the least.

And then the wedding photos began; first the ones that set the stage; the church, the flowers, the boutonnieres, Maddie's dress hanging, her shoes, the rings. Then the photos began to tell the story; Bishop getting dressed, Maddie with her bridesmaids and champagne, Bishop and his father, Maddie and her mother. They showed him waiting at the altar, they showed her coming down the aisle.

Even in the photos, even in the dim light, the resounding joy they both held was more than evident.

"We were married in the mountains in Colorado," she leaned in closer to him, offering her voice to the story he was flipping through. "It was just before Christmas and it snowed the entire time..." She chuckled as she remembered. "The ceremony was by candlelight...it was small and intimate and warm." Her heart swelled as her emotions built in her chest. "It was...perfect."

The soft whisper of her voice drew Harry's eyes up to her, his hand moving back to her leg, his smile one of comfort. "It looks beautiful."

"It was," she nodded.

"And he...my God Maddie..." Harry's other hand spread out over the pages. "He looks...just so incredibly happy."

"He was," Maddie nodded, wiping at her eyes as she looked down at that familiar smile in the book. "He was so, SO happy." The smile on her lips was soft and warm and reminiscent. "Of course, how could you blame him? He WAS marrying me."

"Ha!" Harry laughed, nodding as his head tipped back. "Of course. Of course. And I'm sure he would have said exactly that."
"He absolutely would have," Maddie nodded, her fingers wrapping around his on her knee. "It was a beautiful wedding and an amazing party."

Smiling as he leaned in to kiss her, Harry pulled her hand with his up to his chest. Kissing her slowly and deeply, he pulled back and bent his lips to kiss her hand. "I wish...I wish I could have somehow been there."

"On my wedding day?" She let out a light laugh.

"On the happiest day of Bishop's life," Harry corrected, knowing it was all a mashed together cluster of emotions. "He was my best friend. It would have been nice to have seen him then, at what must have been his happiest."

Biting her lip, she grinned and nodded. "It really was a sight to behold."

"I would imagine," he agreed with her. "Thank you."

"For?"

"For letting me look through these," he turned back to the book, flipping the pages through their kiss, their pronouncement and to the moment they were leaving the church and heading to the reception. "I've never seen one photo from that day," he shook his head. "Our friends never showed me and nothing ever hit the press so...this is the first time I've seen any of this, except for the ones on your shelves."

"Yeah?" She lifted her eyebrows, her fingers moving down his arms. "I mean, I knew about the press but not about your friends. Kiki didn't show you any? Or Leo or..."

"No," he shook his head. "I think they thought it would do me in," he laughed as he remembered.

"Fair enough," Maddie chuckled, her eyes lighting up as she remembered something from that time. "Oh! Speaking of the press..." She turned to face him a bit more. "He knew. Bishop...he figured it out."

"Knew?" Harry was confused. "Figured out what?"

"What you did...for him, for us. The way you pulled the paps and the reporters to London so we could have that day for us..." She blinked as she gathered her tears back from slipping out of her eyes. "It worked. They weren't there, not even close."

Harry didn't speak for a moment, his mind drifting back, his voice deep as he spoke. "Good. Good. I'm glad that they weren't all over you...at least for a day."

"They weren't," she leaned in, pressing a kiss to his shoulder. "And Bishop...he knew it was you. And you should know, he was touched by the gesture."

Harry sucked in a deep breath, nodding as he took it in, as he remembered. And then he exhaled and turned his eyes to hers. Together they sat in a close silence, smiling at each other, thinking of Bishop and the smile of his that leaped off the pages in the album. Maddie could see it was heavy, all of the feelings and memories that these pictures had stirred up for Harry. She could see that it was big, but she could also see that it wasn't bad; it wasn't dark. He had asked to see them and he wasn't at all disappointed that he had.
"The reception?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Was a party like no other," she reached to turn the pages, pointing down at the people dancing, at the pictures they could almost hear the laughter jumping up from. "There was a ton of dancing, a ton of Scotch..." She laughed as Harry nodded, continuing to turn the pages. "There were fireworks in the snow and..." She sighed. Happily. "It was an amazing night. Truly. One I'll remember for the rest of my life."

"Good," Harry turned over the last page of the book and closed it softly. His hands smoothing over the cover before he handed it back to her; careful as he did. "Thank you Maddie."

"You're welcome," she smiled as she took it, leaning forward to place it on the table in front of them. Leaving the other next to her on the couch, she turned towards him, her arm on the back of the couch, her palm supporting her head as she looked him over. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I did," his hand moved to her leg as he relaxed back on the couch; content. "I did."

"So..." She ran her fingers over his. "Since I showed you mine...are you going to show me yours?"

"What?" He laughed.

"Your wedding photos," she nudged him with her foot as her legs unfolded over his lap. "You've seen mine. I think it's only fair that the next time I'm in London, I see yours."

"Oh!" He shook his head, his laugh deepening. "You say that like I have an album stored away somewhere."

"You don't?"

"I don't," he shook his head, his hands moving down her legs, rubbing her calves, her feet. "And even if I did, you certainly wouldn't find the same kind of smiles in mine."

Even though she had guessed as much, something inside of her felt sad at hearing it out loud. "Well..." She stretched out a bit. "I suppose I could always look them up on the internet."

"I suppose you could," he turned an easy smile to her.

Catching his eyes, Maddie could feel the moment shift. She could almost see the friendly nature of their discussions slip away from his smile, from her own. "Harry?" Her head tipped to the side.

"Hmm?" His eyebrows lifted lazily, his hands drawing heat to every place he touched.

"I'm really...really glad you're here..." As her voice dipped lower, her eyes dropped down to look at his lips; those perfect, pouty lips that curled higher as he watched her.

"That works out well for me," his hands moved up her legs, his fingers tightening around her.

"Yeah?" She breathed, her body adjusting, moving closer to his.

"Mmmm..." He nodded. "Because I am really...really glad to be here."
When he tugged–his hands at her hips–she moved; lifting up from where she was sitting and settling, quite happily, quite easily, right into his lap. Her hands rested on his shoulders as his smoothed up her waist. As his lips tipped up, her face turned down.

And all of the friendship drifted away as a hot, heavy want slipped into its place.

"Mmmm...." She moaned against his mouth, loving the way it felt to kiss him, missing the feel of his lips on hers. His hands pushed up into her hair as he held her mouth tight to his, as he kissed her lips warm and swollen.

She couldn't seem to get enough of him. Not enough of his tongue, dancing and teasing along hers. Not enough of his hands, strong and hot and full of purpose. Not enough of his body underneath hers; growing and swelling and pushing up against hers like he too couldn't get enough of her.

"Oh," she gasped when his lips pulled from hers, air rushing into her lungs as his mouth worked down her jaw to her neck, his hands hot as they held at her neck; keeping her right there with him. "Harry..." She tried to swallow, tried to catch her breath but when his lips teased at the collar of her shirt, at the sensitive skin over her collarbones, she groaned and she tugged at the mess of red hair of his.

Her lips were rough over his, her hands pushing down his chest, slipping even further down between them. As much as she loved that soft sweater, she wanted it off of him.

Now.

"Harry..." She spoke into his mouth, feeling his hands running all over her as though they didn't know quite where they wanted to be; pulling at her hips to bring her closer, or kneading her breasts into an ache of need, or between them where he might be able to pull away her clothing, where he might be able to bring them even closer together.

"Jesus..." His breath was hot against her lips, his forehead pressing against hers as he tried to catch his breath.

"Please..." She blinked as she looked into his eyes, her hands moving up around his neck. "The bedroom..." She breathed, holding tighter to him. "Take me there."

Nodding, he turned his lips back to hers. His hands gathered her tight against him and he rose from the couch. As he moved from the living room, he didn't know where he was going–not really. Walking slowly down the hallway, he held onto Maddie with one hand, his other reaching out to help him navigate.

"Right...there..." Maddie breathed between kisses, pulling her hand from his hair to point at the bedroom at the end of the hallway, her lips curling up in a smile. She was taking Harry to her bedroom, to her bed. And it made her giddy...and it made her hot.

Harry adjusted her weight in his arms as he moved into the room, his lips shifting from the frenzied madness that had started on the couch to something a little slower; something a little deeper. When his legs bumped into the bed, he pulled back and he opened his eyes. The look on her face–heavy with want, eyes wide and innocent, lips thoroughly kissed and poised for more–pulled a groan from deep inside his chest.
"Hi," she breathed.

"Hi," he smiled, his fingers reaching up to brush hair from her forehead. His eyes glanced around behind her as his heart slowed in his chest. "So this is your room?"

"It is," she nodded, turning to follow the path his eyes were taking, noting the expression on his face. Smartly, she had moved the photo of Bishop she had kept on her nightstand, knowing it might take away from what she had hoped was going to happen here this weekend.

"Wow..." Harry swallowed as he looked around, taking it all in. Even with the absence of the nightstand photo, the memory of Bishop was still alive in this room; the elegant decor, the coloring, the photos that sat on the opposite side of the room in a sitting area. They weren't dominant, but he saw them.

"Hey," Maddie's fingers were gentle on his chin as she turned his face back to hers. Smiling sweetly, she caught his eyes and her fingers smoothed back over his cheek back into his hair rubbing softly at the back of his head as she leaned in to kiss him.

And he kissed her back—he didn't have it in him to not to, but something was different. His lips were warm, but not nearly as insistent. His hands were steady, but not needy. And as amazing as it felt—it had shifted. But Maddie was persistent and she knew he wanted her—wanted this. So she leaned closer to him, she tightened her legs around him and she let her tongue tease at his lips. But something was wrong, and no matter the intent behind his responses, she could feel it.

Pulling back, her eyes opened. "Harry?"

With a groan, his head fell forward, pressing his forehead to hers, his hold on her slacking. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" She let out a light laugh, pulling her forehead from his, searching his face for some answers. "What are you sorry for?"

"I don't know," he shook his head, his eyes still pressed tightly closed as he swallowed again. "I just...I don't know if I can."

"What?" The shock in her voice was tinted with hurt and his eyes opened instantly. Her legs unwrapped from around him as she moved back and away from him. "You don't know if you can...what?"

"Oh come on," he shook his head, his hand reaching out for hers. "Don't look at me like that."

Pushing a smile to her lips, she held onto his fingers. "Explain?"

He took a deep breath, slowly letting it out as he nodded. "It's just...this is...his."

"Harry..." She blinked.

"It is," he shook his head at her. "It's his home and his room and..." He waved at the giant, comfortable bed under her feet. "His bed."

"No," she shook her head, her smile pulling higher. "This is mine. This is my home and my room and my bed."
"Sure," he looked up to her, a comical frenzy sweeping over his face. "Your bed...that you shared with him."

Her head tipped back in a laugh as she moved closer to him, her fingers reaching out to pull at his sweater. "Yes Harry....I lived here with my husband. And..." She sucked in a breath. "When we were in London, we stayed in a home, in a room, in a bed you shared with your wife..."

"It's not the same," he was quick to shake his head.

"What?" She laughed. "It IS the same. You were married, I was married. We were married...to other people. Are you really going to let that keep you from..."

"I'm really trying not to," his eyes leveled with hers. "But it's not the same. You and he..." He shook his head, muffled the laughter that came from his throat. "You loved each other. Cassandra and I..."

"Harry," Maddie's head tipped to the side.

"It's not the same; what happened here and what happened there...that's all I'm saying."

"Fine," she shrugged. "Fine. Maybe it was different but then...what does that mean? You don't want to make love to me now or..."

"Of course I do," his eyes leveled with hers. He ran his hands up through his hair, exasperated with himself. "I just don't know if I can...here." He looked around the room, wishing he could pull it together.

"What?" Maddie couldn't help but laugh, the absurdity of it all edging out her will to be understanding. "You're joking."

"I'm not," he shook his head, his eyes narrowing as her laughter increased.

"So what do you want to do?" Maddie's arms crossed over her chest, her eyebrow arching up in something of a challenge. "You want to go to a hotel to have sex with me?"

"You have to be so crass?" He countered.

"You have to be so crazy?"

"Maddie..."

"Listen Harry," she took a deep breath and eased up, her hands resting lightly on his shoulders. "I get it. It's...strange for you right now. We just looked at my wedding photos and Bishop is on your mind and we come in here and....yes. It was his. But it's not anymore. He's gone, he's not here..."

"But..."

"BUT," she cut him off. "But if you want to be with me tonight then you have a decision to make. Either you get over it..."

"Or?"
"Or we go to a hotel." She shrugged her shoulders, her eyes dancing as she smirked.

"There's not...I don't know..." He sighed. "A spare room or..."

Maddie's laughter danced as it rang out into the room. "Oh Harry," though there was still a smile on her face, the corners curved down in a slightly mocking frown. "You think there's a flat surface around here that Bishop and I didn't..."

"Alright," he held up his hand, his jaw tightening.

"I'm just saying..." She giggled.

"You think this is helping?"

"I don't know," she shook her head. "Would it help at all to know that I've had sex in this apartment since Bishop?"

"What?!" He blinked, momentarily deterred from his spiral. "When? Wait. No!" He shook his head, his hands rubbing over his face. "Jesus Maddie."

"Can I be honest with you?" Maddie's laughter faded a bit, her hands running down over his shoulders.

"I really don't know how to answer that," he sighed, his shoulders hanging a bit as he resigned himself to this moment.

"You're being a little crazy right now," she patted his cheek and leaned in to kiss him. "You're stuck in your memories and in nostalgia and you're letting it cloud your judgment."

"I don't know," he shook his head again. "Maybe you're right."

"I am," she nodded. "But...while you're thinking of Bishop, you should remember who he really was, not this sanctified version you're putting on a pedestal."

"What do you mean?" His forehead screwed up as he looked to her for answers.

"I mean that yes...he loved me and yes...things were different in here," she allowed him at least that concession. "But he was also a man and he was a realist and if you stopped and thought about it long enough, you would know what I know."

"What's that?"

"Bishop would never in a million years have wanted my life to end because his did." Moving closer to him, she softened her stance. "He would want me to move on after him. Just as much as he wanted me to keep living, he would want me to keep loving and...as crazy as it sounds...he would want me to keep having amazing sex."

"Amazing?" Harry's lips twitched into a smile.

Maddie nodded, sliding a little bit closer to him. "Amazing."
"Even if it was with me?" His hands reached out to her hips, drawing her nearer.

"Yes," she nodded. "As long as it wasn't a French man..." She snickered. "Or Matt."

"Matt?" Harry's eyebrows lifted.

"Another time," Maddie shook her head, focusing on her point. "Tell me, what exactly is it you're afraid is going to happen here?" Her fingers worked their way to the center of his chest, taking a slow, steady trail downwards. "You're going to get me naked and Bishop's going to descend from the heavens and pummel you to death?"

Even Harry had to laugh at that. "I think maybe you're underestimating Bishop's abilities."

"Maybe," she laughed into a sigh.

"And..." He let out his breath, his hands warming as they moved over her body. "And I think you're making fun of me."

"Oh I'm definitely doing that," Maddie nodded happily.

"Nice."

"But only a little," she held her fingers about a centimeter apart, her nose wrinkling as she smiled at him.

"Only a little," he laughed, leaning in to bite playfully at her fingers.

An easy sort of laughter settled between them, the stress on Harry's brow fading away at the sound of Maddie's giggles.

"Okay..." Maddie nodded her head, giving in just a little. "Here's the thing Captain..." She bent to kiss him, her hands warming his cheeks as she held him in place. "I've been thinking about seeing you since I left you in London two weeks ago..." She stepped back from him, a teasing glow in her eyes. "And all day, I've just been sitting here waiting for you to get here..." She paused, holding his eyes with hers as she pulled her shirt up and over her head. Pleased at the way his eyes bugged big and round, she tossed it off to the side. "And I couldn't stop thinking about...being with you." Her eyes were heavy as laid it out there for him. "And as crazy as I think it is..." She slinked closer to him, her hands running up his chest, as she pressed her own against him. "I'd rather be with you somewhere else than not be with you..."

"Aw, Maddie..." He groaned, his head shaking as she moved in on him.

With her lips hot and soft against his, she drew him into a kiss that pulled the breath from his lungs, the skip from his pulse and it pulled his mind right out of the crazy drift it had been in.

And then she stepped away, reaching for his hand. "Come on Captain."

"Wh...what?" He stammered. "Where?"

"I don't know," she grinned at his stumble. "But...there may be a chance that there's an end table in the living room that we never even touched..." As she stepped backwards away from him, she pulled at his hand, wanting him to follow.
But instead, he stood firm. With her fingers tight in his, he tugged back, and every tiny reason he had had to want to take her from this space had slipped away.

And all he wanted to do was keep her here. And take her. Here.

In this home that was hers, in this room that was hers. In this bed that was hers.

With an oomph, he brought her to him, his neck stretching up to kiss her, his hands wrapping around her body, pulling her flush with his. It took her only a second to respond to him, only a second to open her lips to his, to give in to his advances.

He was done with the nonsense. He was done putting it off. He had wanted her since the moment she had opened the door to him and Jim. He had been thinking about these kisses since the second he had heard her voice on the other end of the phone when he had arrived in New York.

And he had been aching to touch her since he had boarded that plane hours earlier. And now here he was with Maddie half naked, completely glowing and wrapped up in his arms. And there was nothing, not even the ghost of his best friend that would keep him from loving her.

His hands slid down, gathering her hips in his fingers as he stepped back away from the bed and lifted her into his arms. Her legs moved around him with practiced ease and he took a step forward, this time when his legs hit the mattress in front of him, he didn't stall. Instead he moved forward, onto his knees as he climbed into her bed.

She smiled as he moved them both back, as they settled further into the bed.

She moaned as his hands swelled over her ass.

She sighed happily when he laid her down below him, when he smiled down at her in that heated way that told her he had absolutely made it over the roadblock that had been standing in his way.

And when he pulled his sweater off, when he tossed it aside and leaned back over her, his hot, wet mouth dipping down into her neck, she gasped and gripped at his shoulders and silently thanked God that he still had that stubborn streak inside of him.

In the end, it was an emotional moment for Maddie that night, in that bed. There was a portion of that emotion that belonged to Bishop, a part of it that was there because she was letting more of him go. Though her body and her mind and her spirit were wrapped up in Harry, were there in his arms as they came together and fell apart–there was a part of her soul that let loose of Bishop just a little bit more.

Despite her words to Harry, there was a part of her that had held this place as sacred, a part of her that knew just how different it had been between her and Bishop. Harry had been right–they had loved each other there.

But she had been right too–Bishop wouldn't want her to stop loving simply because she could no longer love him.

So in those moments where she let it all go, when she turned herself over to Harry and what they were doing there together, she could feel the heaviness of that emotion, of that good-bye. And when she cried out it was in ecstasy and in reverence.
If Harry knew that she was juggling these emotions, he didn't let on. Instead he held onto her and he kissed her and he made love to her and when her feelings ran over, he moved with them. When her cries came, he caught them.

And never once did he let go of her.

It wasn't the last time they would make love there that weekend, not even that night. Once Harry had moved past his own craziness, his desires were unleashed and Maddie was up for matching him go for go. Since they were staying inside for the weekend, they managed to eradicate a multitude of ghosts.

The end of the weekend came much too soon for the both of them and Maddie would have been lying if she said she hadn't seriously thought about working out of the London office for the next week. But she would see him soon, in two weeks when she flew to meet him in Verbier.

In the time between, she was going to be making two trips; one home to Colorado, the other to Paris and on those trips, she would be letting her family in on what was going on with her and Harry.

And after that, she was certain a secluded holiday in the mountains of Verbier would be just what she needed.
Maddie was nervous as her car pulled through the gate at the airport, rounding towards the runway where the Bishop jet awaited her. She was always nervous when she flew, this was true. But this particular flight brought with it its very own particular brand of nervousness.

The phone clutched in her fingers buzzed out, his name appearing on the screen as though even across the ocean, he could sense her need for a bit of grounding. Glancing ahead at the road, Maddie swiped her screen and answered the call.

"Harry," she smiled as she said his name.

"Hi!" She could hear the surprise in his voice. "I was hoping I would catch you before you took off but my meeting ran over and..." He took in a deep breath. "Hello."

"Hello," she chuckled at him, at the way he rambled, the way he stopped himself. "You just caught me."

"Boarding now?"

She shook her head, "still in the car but we just pulled into the gates and my guess is in less than twenty minutes I'll be in the air towards Colorado."

"Yeah," he let out a breath of tension and when Maddie closed her eyes, she could almost see him rubbing at the back of his neck. "Listen, you're sure...you're sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"To Colorado?" Her eyes pulled open, her smile tipping higher. "Desperate to watch Kyle unravel?" Though her tone held humor and amusement, she knew there was a truth to her words.

"Desperate to be by your side," he shrugged. "Either way."

"Look at you," she chuckled. "Turning soft."

"What can I say..." He laughed along with her. "Really though, is it going to be that bad?"

"Kyle?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, her head nodding from side to side as she thought it over. "Maybe," she whispered, looking down at her fingers as she sucked in a breath. "Don't worry about Kyle Harry. I can handle him."

"I know," he agreed. "But I meant it. I can come out there if you want me to. I can get on a plane in an hour and I can be there when you tell them."

"You think seeing your face will help?"

"I think I'd rather him take a swing at me than at you. Metaphorically I mean."

"Ha..." Maddie laughed, nodding her head and looking out the window at the snow covered ground, at the dark grey sky. "Metaphorically..." She sighed. "It'll be fine Harry. Even if it
isn't...I'm still coming to Verbier in a week."

"Promise?"

"I swear it." As the car pulled to a stop, she sat up in her seat. "Okay Captain..."

"Time for you to go?" Letting her go made him sad, the thought of her on that plane to Colorado alone made him sad and this was the first time in quite some time that anything to do with Maddie had made him sad.

"It is," she nodded, stepping from the car and smiling a thank you to her driver.

"You'll call when you land?"

"Of course," Maddie turned to look out at the city, the wind tossing her hair as the crew loaded her luggage, as they readied the plane.

"Who's up first?" He was doing much the same thing; standing outside in the cold, starring off in the distance, wishing he were there with her.

"My mother," Maddie smiled as she thought of her; warm and happy and such a strong steady presence in her life. "I'll tell her tonight when I get there. I'm having dinner with Kyle tomorrow night and I'll tell Jenna and Gary at some point before I leave."

"And the others?"

"I have a play date with Dena and the girls before I leave," she smiled. "I'll fill them in then."

"Busy weekend."

"Indeed," Maddie nodded, taking a deep breath as she began up the steps, her mind already working over the words she was going to use. "Okay Wales. I'll let you know when I'm on the ground."

"Travel safe," he felt his heart warm in his chest, wishing he could wrap himself around her and cushion the blow that was coming. His lips parted, wishing he could say more but knowing he shouldn't.

"I always do," she grinned and with a heartfelt good-bye, she ended their call and stepped further into the plane.

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The weather in Colorado was beautiful. Even in the heart of winter, with New York under an icy chill, it was gorgeous outside. The temperature was in the fifties and the sun was shining bright in the sky with not even a trace of overcast anywhere close. Tossing her coat into the back with her bag, she kept her sweater on and drove the entire way to her mother's house with the window down and the breeze tossing her hair. Her mind drifted as she drove; to thoughts of home, thoughts of her parents, of her cousins. She thought of their lives growing up, what it was like to be children together, how their friendships had grown.

And she thought about all they had been through together. Despite the brave face she put on to
Harry, she was nervous about this weekend and—if she was being completely honest—she was a little sad. Because she knew that, no matter how understanding and supportive all of them could be, that this was going to ruffle more than a few feathers.

Because as wonderful as this little group of cousins was, as fun-loving and free-spirited and flexible as they could be—they were also very stubborn and very loyal and very protective. And she was about to light a fire underneath every single one of those innate traits that was so very much a part of who they were.

Swallowing at the lump of anxiety in her throat, she shook her head and tried to clear her mind. There wasn't much she could do about the cousins, about Kyle most specifically, until they were in front of her. And even then, all she could do was tell them the truth and hope they would find a way to let their compassion win out over their upset.

But that was for tomorrow. Tonight, she took a deep breath and turned down the long drive to her mother's house—tonight it was Hannah.

As always, Hannah was overjoyed to see her daughter, had been looking forward to the quality time together since Maddie had called and made arrangements to come. She welcomed her with hugs and love and one of her favorite meals. After they finished their dinner, they gathered thick blankets and they took their drinks outside onto the deck, Cuddled together on the couch, drinking Scotch for Bishop and smoking cigars for Jay, the two women laid back, looking up at the clear night sky and they caught up with each other's lives.

Only after they had covered nearly everything else, did Maddie take a breath and jump in. After they covered Hannah's work and Maddie's new projects. After they talked about Ian and Michael, after they talked about the farm. Even after Hannah had shared the tiny bit of gossip from town—Maddie had waited. She had waited until they hit that lull, that easy, contented pause in conversation. Taking a sip of her Scotch with her fingers curled around the glass, Maddie let the hot liquid warm her stomach and then with a smile that was only a tiny bit nervous, she angled her body towards her mother's and she went for it.

"So..." She sighed, her head tipping to the side, resting on the back of the couch. "There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?" Hannah's eyebrows lifted sleepily, her eyes shifting to study her daughter; knowing the tone, knowing the look.

"Mmm," Maddie nodded, looking down into her glass. "Remember when I told you that I had been talking with Harry a little bit?"

"I think so," Hannah nodded, trying for casual even though every sense inside of her was gearing up. "Around the time he had come to the States?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded again, taking a deep breath and looking up from her glass. "Around then."

Hannah waited for a minute, expecting Maddie to continue. But Maddie was nervous and her words were escaping her and Hannah caught it all. "I remember," she smiled over at her daughter. "Are you...still? Talking with Harry?"

"Yes," Maddie smiled, her cheeks warming against the chill. "We're still talking. In fact..." She took a breath and adjusted in her seat, sitting up taller. "We've been seeing each other again."
Hannah blinked a couple of times, her mind tossing over the words Maddie had chosen to use, searching for the correct connotation. "Seeing each other?"

"I've been out to London, he's been here to New York," Maddie's smile grew as she spoke of it, as she remembered. "And next weekend we're going to Verbier...together."

Maddie's eyes slid right to her mother's, watching for her reaction. Hannah, trying her damnedest to remain calm and collected, took a deep breath. With wide, blinking eyes, she thought it over.

And then she reached for Maddie's glass of Scotch. Pulling it to her lips, she took a long, slow sip and then she handed it back.

"Wow..." She finally breathed, her lips curling up in the slightest of smiles. "Wow. I just..." She laughed and looked away. "Wow."

"Wow?" Maddie's forehead furrowed as she watched her fidget in her seat. "Wow?"

"Yes. Wow." Hannah looked back to her daughter. "I mean...even when I saw it coming..."

"Saw it coming?" Maddie's eyebrows flew up. "You SAW it coming?"

"Yes. I mean..." Hannah gave her half a shrug. "I mean when you said you were talking again and then when you made plans to see him when you went to London over the New Year, I figured..."

"You figured?!" Maddie couldn't believe it. Her mother had 'figured'.

"But still. Wow."

"How did you know?" Maddie turned to face her mother. "I didn't even know."

"Oh Maddie," Hannah's voice dipped low, her eyes softening as she smiled at her daughter. "You loved each other...once upon a time." Her fingers reached out to shift a few strands of Maddie's hair. "And things didn't end because that had changed."

"No," Maddie whispered, suddenly overwhelmed with memories and emotions. "They didn't."

"And..." Hannah took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. "And I would imagine that losing Bishop gave Harry some perspective, losing people you love usually does."

"It does," Maddie's voice stayed soft and low, her eyes welling up unexpectedly. "It did."

"It's not that far of a jump to think that...maybe...once you started spending time together..." The smile that danced over Hannah's face was one of wisdom and resignation. "Those feelings might come back."

"Ha..." Maddie shook her head, clearing her throat as she reached for her mother's hand. "I don't know that they're...quite there."

"Maybe not," Hannah conceded, choosing to keep quiet about her wonderings about how easily Harry might agree to that.
"Do you..." Maddie looked out over the lawn, past that onto the dark horizon. "I don't know. Do you think I'm...stupid? Or foolish? Or making a mistake?" She turned wide, scattered eyes back to her mother.

"No," Hannah's answer was simple, her smile reassuring. "I think you're a very smart woman and I think that you've probably over-thought this into the ground..."

"That's just it," Maddie laughed against her emotions. "I didn't. I hardly thought about this at all..."

"Well then I suppose that's even better," Hannah joined in the laughter, sighing as she leaned back against the cushions. "I don't know Madeline. Am I concerned about the fragile state of your heart? Yes, yes I am. Am I concerned about rather or not time and tragedy has truly changed Harry enough so that I can feel reassured that he won't leave you in the same state he left you before?" She looked over to her daughter; open and honest. "Yes. Of course I am. But...not enough that I would ever tell you not to go for it."

"Really?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted, her tears returning.

"Yes, really," Hannah nodded, reaching out to smudge tears from her daughter's face. "Now tell me...why are you crying?"

"I don't know," she laughed, sniffing. "Because I've just...Harry. He's different now, it's different this time and I've been...I've been so happy lately. And I wasn't happy for so long..." She gulped at the lump in her throat. "And I know that coming here, that telling people...it's going to put a dent into all of that happiness."

"Who's going to be doing the denting?"

"Kyle." Maddie answered without thought, her eyes blinking as she answered.

"Psh," Hannah waved her hand dismissively. "Forget Kyle Maddie."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back in laughter. "That's easier said than done."

"No I know it is. I know you love him and that you really value that relationship and...you know maybe he'll surprise you. Maybe he'll be okay with it all."

"Mother," Maddie's eyes narrowed instantly.

"Yeah okay," Hannah shrugged. "You're probably right. He's probably going to, I don't know, overheat or something but..." She shook her head. "Kyle doesn't get to tell you how to be happy Madeline."

Maddie took in her mother's words as she calmed her tears, as she took in a shaky breath. And as she did, she felt it ease the worry away from her body. "You're right. He doesn't get to tell me how to be happy. No matter how much he wants to."

"That's right," Hannah chuckled, watching her daughter as she settled next to her, as she smiled again. "And you're happy?"

Maddie turned bright eyes to her mother. "Yes. I am. Very, very happy."
"Good," Hannah nodded, mirroring her smile. "Good. Now..." Her hands patted Maddie's. "Do you want to...tell me about it?"

"Tell you about it?" Maddie cleared her throat, confused.

"About Harry," Hannah smiled encouragingly. "Do you want to tell me how the two of you reconnected? How this all...came to be?"

Maddie felt her eyes well with tears and her heart warm with emotion and she nodded. Squeezing her mother's fingers tight in her own, she let out a deep breath and she began.

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Despite all of her mother's reassurances, despite how much sense her words met and how true Maddie knew they were—going to see Kyle the next evening made Maddie's stomach churn. Saying she was nervous was putting it mildly; she felt like she was gearing up for battle. She did all of the things she had done with other great moments of her life. She prepared; mentally, physically, spiritually. She went for a long walk over her mother's land. She showered and dressed and fixed herself up. She listened to music that eased her mind, that built her up. And on the drive to Kyle's, she talked herself through her anxiety.

It was ridiculous, but it was necessary.

Harry had called her to talk, but she couldn't. She didn't have the easy sort of chit chat she needed and she wasn't ready to talk to him about it all just yet. She needed to be in her own head—alone—just until this was over. As she stood at Kyle's door, ready to knock, she had the fleeting thought—wondering if this was how Bishop had felt when he had gone to tell Harry about the two of them.

Wondering if she was about to destroy a relationship.

Wondering if she would leave here with metaphorical bruises of her own.

Her eyes shifted up to the stars and with an amused chuckle, she sighed, "Be with me Jamie..."

And then she knocked.

"Maddie!" It was a bright and bubbly Amy who pulled open the door. Her smile was wide as she tugged Maddie right into her arms.

"Hi Amy," Maddie felt her emotions bubble up as she hugged her tight. "It's so good to see you."

"Come in, come in," Amy stepped back, welcoming Maddie into her home, shutting the door behind her. "You look fantastic!"

"Thank you," Maddie laughed as she followed her inside. "You do too. How are you?"

"I'm doing great," she called behind her, leading her towards the kitchen. "I was just finishing dinner and opening wine...would you like some?"

"I would love some."

"Kyle's on his way now," Amy answered the question Maddie hadn't had time to ask. "He's running
late from the office but he called and he's not that far behind you."

"Great," Maddie let out the breath she was holding, grateful for the glass of wine Amy handed her. "What are you cooking? It smells amazing."

"Roast, potatoes, carrots," Amy shrugged. "Nothing fancy. It's just been cold and it warms the house..."

"I love it," Maddie took a sip, smiling as the wine eased down her throat, warming her inside and helping her relax. "Was there a problem at the office?" She tried to sound casual. "For Kyle I mean?"

"No, no," Amy shook her head much to Maddie's relief. "Just walked out the door later than he thought. Something about one of the buildings and..." She paused, her eyes glancing in the direction of the garage, a knowing, happy smile lighting up her face. "He's here." With a nod towards the door, she turned to check on the food.

And Maddie's eyes slipped down to the wine in her glass, sucking in a deep breath and wishing she could stop the roller coaster her stomach seemed to be stuck on. She could hear Kyle's progress to them, the sound of his footsteps, of doors opening and closing revealed the path he was taking.

"Lucy..." He called out from downstairs, his voice taking on his best rendition of Desi Arnaz. "I'm home from the club!"

"Lovely," Amy murmured under her breath, turning a blushing grin to Maddie. "We're up here darling!" She called out to him.

"We?" He laughed, dropping his bag and his keys before heading up the stairs towards them. "Maddie's here?"

"Maddie's here!" Amy answered as he bounded into the room; loose tie, rolled up sleeves, and not an ounce of embarrassment. "Welcome home."

"Thank you," Kyle went right to her, hugging her close, bending to kiss her. "Dinner smells amazing."

"Thanks," Amy kissed him back, patting his back as he stepped away, turning his grin to his cousin.

"Maddie," he moved to hug her, his eyes and his smile bright. Clearly happy to see her, he hugged her tight; close. "Glad you made it."

"Thanks for inviting me up," Maddie hugged him back just as tightly, pressing her eyes closed for a long beat, taking it in–unsure how much longer it would be before this happened again. With a wink and a grin, she added, "Desi."

"Nice," he shook his head at her, stepping back and clapping his hands together. "Tell me. What can I do?"

"Nothing," Amy answered. "It's ready. Fill up your plates and we can eat at the table. I have wine and Kyle, there's beer in the fridge."
"Thanks," he reached out as he passed her, his fingers skimming over her hip in a loving gesture as they all moved about the kitchen; readying their plates and heading to the table.

Settling in, they jumped into the food, into conversation; catching up on all of the details they missed because they were all apart. Amy's job, Kyle's projects, Maddie's new initiatives at work. They asked about Hannah, Maddie asked about Patrick, and everyone praised dinner.

About midway through their meal, as they were all into glass three of whatever respective drink they were sipping, Maddie took a deep breath and leaned back in her chair. Her fingers pushed her plate forward not even an inch and, glancing between the two of them, she decided it was time. Reaching for her glass, she took one last, long sip and sat it down. The corner of her mouth curled up just a bit and Kyle knew her well enough to know that something was up.

And he jumped right ahead of her. Swallowing the beer in his mouth, he nodded to her with curious eyes. "What is it?"

"Hmmm?" Maddie blinked, looking over to him, caught off guard for just a second.

With a shrug, Kyle took another drink. "You just looked like you were about to tell us something."

"I..." Maddie stammered, her cheeks flushing slightly. "I was." With a light laugh, she rested her empty glass on the table and cleared her throat. "I was about to tell you something."

"Oh?" Amy was intrigued, smiling as she settled into her seat; content and interested.

"Mmm," Maddie nodded, her fingers smoothing over the cloth napkin in her lap.

"What is it?" Kyle asked again, his eyes not leaving her for a second, his mind noting the details of her smile, the look in her eyes, the way she fidgeted, her posture. "Jesus..." He breathed. "You're not moving back to Bendal are you?"

"What?" Maddie laughed, her eyes lifting and meeting his, catching the intensity of his gaze. "Why would you ask that?"

"You look..." He waved his hand at her, laughing as he shook his head. "I don't know. You look like you did when you told us you were moving to Bendal the first time."

"And how's that?" She blinked.

"Nervous," he offered. "Uneasy...ready for a fight."

"A fight?" Amy looked over to Kyle. "Did you fight when she moved to Bendal?"

"No," Maddie shook her head.

"Kind of," Kyle tilted his head from side to side.

"Kyle just..." Maddie started to explain to Amy, a lump catching in her throat. "He sometimes thinks he knows better than I do what's best for me."

"Ah," Amy nodded, a knowing smile spreading over her lips as she reached for her glass.
"Ah?" Kyle glanced between the two of them. "That's because sometimes I do."

"No you don't," Maddie sighed, feeling the conversation slipping away from her before it had even started.

"Yes I do!" He laughed as he looked to her, eyes wide as though he were surprised by her answer.

"Kyle," Amy groaned, rolling her eyes in amusement.

"I do," Kyle nodded to Amy and then returned his focus to his cousin. "I do and you know it and..." His smile faded only slightly. "What is it?" His eyes zeroed in on her. "I know there's something going on and I know you're avoiding it and I know what that means..."

"Alright," Maddie sighed loudly. Sitting up in her chair, she let the laughter fade from her smile, her eyes taking on a serious glint. "There is something. And I honestly don't know how you're going to take it but I'm just going to..." In her head she told herself that she had this, that she could do this. And then in a clear, easy voice, she spoke out loud. "I've decided to start seeing somebody."

"Seeing somebody..." Amy seemed the more surprised of the two of them. "You mean...dating?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded to her, feeling the weight of Kyle's gaze. "It's not a huge deal you know. I've dated since Bishop..." She took a breath. "Remember Charlie?"

"I do," Amy smiled into her glass.

"Hey," Kyle turned his eyes to his wife for only a moment.

"Sorry," she shrugged with a snicker.

"Maddie..." Kyle's gaze swung back to Maddie, but his words stopped short when her eyes returned to his. He could see it. She watched as his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat as his shoulders tensed. "Who?"

He knew. Maddie could see it in the set of his jaw. Even if he didn't know, he knew. Without looking away, without backing down, she answered. Simple. Easy. Clear. "Harry. I'm dating Harry."

Everything between Maddie and Kyle seemed to freeze, just as it was. He didn't blink and he didn't breathe and she didn't flinch away from him.

"Harry..." Amy's voice was soft and confused and sounded further away than it was. And then it snapped together and her eyes grew huge, looking right at the two of them. "You mean..."

"Yes." Kyle answered for her, his voice deep and dark and angry. Balling up his napkin, he tossed it to the table with much more force than necessary. "She means that Harry."

"Kyle..." Maddie began.

Pushing back from the table, he rose to his feet, his face growing redder with every second. "You don't know how I'm going to take it?!" He shook his head at her in disbelief. "Bullshit Maddie. You know exactly how I'm going to take it."
"Listen..." Maddie started again.

"No!" He shook his head again, this time laughing. "I really do not want to hear anything else about any of this."

"But..." Amy was stunned, still trying to sort it all out. "How did you two...and when?" She looked wide-eyed at Maddie.

"Not too long ago," Maddie turned to her, ready to explain. "We started talking after..."

"No!" Kyle cut them off as he moved back to the table, standing next to them as he leaned his hands on the table. "Didn't you hear me?! Just stop Madeline. I don't want to hear any of this bullshit."

"Bullshit?" Maddie turned to him, her heart racing in her chest.

"That's what I said," his eyes held hers. "Bullshit."

"Kyle!" Amy turned an accusing glare in his direction.

"What?!" He laughed again, standing tall and holding up his arms in an exaggerated shrug. "What?" He turned back to Maddie, his eyes darker, the anger inside of him growing. "What could you possibly tell me about him that's going to make me think this is anywhere near okay."

Pulsed for just a moment, Maddie had to breathe, had to blink, had to gain her strength. "I didn't come here tonight to get your permission Kyle..."

"My permission?!!" His voice grew. "My permission for WHAT?! To waste more of your time? To have your heart broken again by that selfish, fucking prick of a bastard..."

"Would you please watch your mouth," Maddie warned, moving her napkin from her lap, pushing back from the table and rising to her feet.

"No!!" He yelled, his hand balling into a fist. "No! I will NOT watch my mouth! What did you come here for Maddie?! To tell me that the first time that piece of shit tossed you to the ground and shattered your heart wasn't enough?! That you're going back for more?! Is that what you came here for tonight?!

"If you'll just let me..."

"Let you what?!!" He yelled and then calmed; a strange, eerie sort of calm that came with a light laugh. "Let you what? Explain it to me? Make me understand?!!" He laughed louder.

"Yes!"

"Ha!" He shouted out the word. "Please! This ought to be good." His arms crossed over his chest and his voice dripped with sarcasm. "What is it Maddie? He's changed? He's realized the wrong in his ways?" He laughed at her, right in her face. "Tell me you haven't heard that from your clients before. Right before they go back to their husbands who cheat on them or abused them or..."

"Harry did none of that and you know it!"
"No. You know what I do know?" He moved in on her then, his voice lowering darkly. "I know that man nearly fucking broke you. That's what I know. I know that there was a moment in time when NONE of us knew for sure if we were going to get you back! I know that if it weren't for BISHOP..." His voice cracked as it rose, and just like that, emotion flooded into the room. "If it weren't for Bishop, I don't know what would have happened to you."

The mention of his name, as it probably always would, drew sentiment fresh to the surface and gave Maddie just a moment of pause. "Look, I know that once, a long time ago, he broke my heart..."

"Broke your heart?" Kyle's eyebrows lifted, the worry inside of him winning out over the anger for just a brief moment. "He destroyed you Maddie."

"He did NOT destroy me," she shook her head; a solid, firm shake. "Look at me. I am not destroyed."

"Yeah," he huffed. "Thanks to Bishop."

"No." She shook her head again, blinking at the tears that began to well. "Not thanks to Bishop. Bishop didn't save me after Harry. He didn't keep me together. He was there. He was an important part of the equation. But I pulled myself up and I pulled myself together and if he were standing here today, Bishop would tell you the exact same thing."

Kyle held her gaze for a moment, trying to get his own heavy breathing under control, trying to check his own emotions. "What else would he say? If he were standing right here..." Kyle waved his hand around, taking a step towards her. "What would your husband have to say about you dating Harry again? I'm sure he'd appreciate the fact that Harry's 'changed'."

Maddie swallowed the anger building in her throat and stood tall, holding her ground. "I know you think you knew Bishop well. But you did not know him better than I did. And I know that he wouldn't want me to be alone forever..."

"I didn't say I thought you should be alone forever. I just..."

"Bishop loved Harry and I think that he would be elated to know that he's changed, that he wants to be happy again, that he's living his life differently, that he's..."

"Fucking his wife?" Kyle didn't even blink as the words spit from his mouth.

"Kyle!" Amy's hand pressed to her chest, her eyes wide as she looked between the two of them, the conversation getting heavier and heavier with every word.

"I'm not so sure he'd be elated about that." His wife's voice hadn't even registered as he pressed forward. "In fact, if it were me..."

"It isn't you!" Maddie's efforts to keep calm were failing spectacularly as she shouted out into the room. "It ISN'T YOU! This is me! Me and Harry and...and don't you DARE bring up Bishop like this! Don't you dare toss his name into this conversation! If you think I haven't thought about what Bishop would WANT then you have lost your mind!"

"I'VE lost my mind?!" Kyle's face was growing redder and redder as he yelled back. "You're telling..."
me that you're DATING the man who was going to marry you, the man who made you famous and then DROPPED you flat on your ASS after some lunatic attacked you! You're telling me that you're going to have a RELATIONSHIP with the man who made a SPECTACLE out of you in front of the entire fucking world! And I'm the one that's lost my mind?!!" He laughed, his breath coming out in puffs. "Jesus Christ Maddie! What are you thinking?! There aren't enough men in the world that you can't get your ass out of England?!

"Fuck you Kyle!"

"No! Fuck HIM Maddie! Go ahead and..."

"ENOUGH!" Amy's voice charged out into the room; loud and clear and higher than theirs. Stunned by the sound, by the sheer volume, both of them stopped and looked to her. Short and petite and steaming, the look on her face meant nothing but business. "Enough..." She breathed, lowering her voice as her glare passed between the two of them. "You're not going to stand in my house..." Kyle opened his mouth but she cut him off with nothing but a look and a pointed finger. "MY house and talk to each other like that. Now clearly the two of you love each other..."

"Oh is that what's happening here?" Maddie's voice was harsh and sarcastic as she shot a glare to Kyle.

"I think you've made it very clear that you're having a hard time understanding the meaning of the word..."

"Kyle Grant Forrester I swear to God," Amy stepped up to him, his focus instantly shifting to her. "If you don't back down right now..."

"But..."

"RIGHT now." She raised her voice and his mouth snapped shut. They both took a breath and when she spoke again, she spoke only to him. "What are you doing right now? What is your plan? You want to never speak to Maddie again? Want to drive her away and never see her?" She reached out, her fingers soft and cool on his hot, red skin. "I know that you're upset and thrown off here but you love her and..." She shook her head. "I think you should step outside for a minute. Get some air. Take a break."

"I really don't want to..."

"Please," she smiled sweetly, her fingers rubbing at his tense muscles, hoping to relax him. "Just...take a minute. For me?"

Still and silent, Maddie counted to ten in her head, taking deep breaths in effort to calm the rage that was boiling inside of her, to keep herself from pummeling him as he turned and did just as Amy had asked. Taking his beer with him, he didn't even look at Maddie as he spun around and headed for the deck. As the door slide closed behind him, Maddie's eyes lifted to look at the ceiling, her chest and her throat growing tight as she fought against all of the emotions welling up.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to Amy, afraid that if her voice rose any higher, she would crack.

"You don't have to apologize," Amy shook her head, offering a sweet tone and a soft smile. "You two just..." She laughed then, shrugging her shoulders. "You're all so fierce with each other. The competitiveness, the playing, the loyalty...the love..." She ran her fingers through her long hair.
"You're all so...fierce. You're that way with the protectiveness too, with the way you want to take care of each other..." She looked down at the floor, taking in a deep breath. "I know that he's out of line, that he shouldn't be saying these things and acting this way..." She lifted her gaze to Maddie then, smiling as she met her eyes. "And I'm not trying to make excuses for him...he's just trying to...

"Protect me?" Maddie raised her eyebrows, tears building in her throat.

"Protect himself," Amy corrected.

"What?" Maddie's eyes blinked in confusion.

"He hurts when you hurt," Amy shrugged. "In a very literal sense....he just...it's like what you usually see with twins or maybe even siblings...but when you hurt, he hurts. And God, I've seen him nearly destroyed twice because his heart broke when yours broke..." Amy offered a smile with her explanation.

And Maddie smiled back. A soft, wavering smile that cracked just as the tears began to fall.

"Hey, hey," Amy was moving to her side, her hands reaching out to comfort her. "I didn't mean to make you cry..."

"I know," Maddie laughed lightly, shaking her head as she wiped at her tears. "I know. I'm sorry I just..." She sniffed and sighed. "I don't want to hurt him...I don't want to hurt anyone. This is just...." Looking off in the direction of the deck where Kyle had been exiled, she shook her head.

"This is just what?" Amy asked.

"It's the first time I've felt...settled," she breathed the word in relief and happiness. "It's the first time I've felt settled in a long time..." She looked down at her hands. "Probably since I lost Bishop..." With a deep breath in, she smiled to Amy. "I know that it's crazy and I know that...people aren't going to necessarily agree with my decision but I just...I want to be happy again, Amy."

"I know," Amy nodded, swallowing back this uncontrollable urge she had to cry, thinking of how hard it had all been when Bishop had died. "And you think...I'm sorry, you think that will happen with Harry?" She wasn't trying to fight, wasn't trying to disagree, there was nothing but genuine concern and interest.

Maddie's lips curled into a smile, her fingers swiping at her tears as she nodded. "Yes, I guess I do."

"Okay," Amy nodded, pushing a smile to her lips and nodding towards the door to the deck. "Then you should go tell him that."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back. "Clearly he's not wanting to hear much of anything from me tonight."

"He'll listen," Amy assured her. "He's had a few minutes outside in the fresh air, he has a drink. He's calmed down. He'll listen." Shrugging, she added. "Besides, what do you have to lose?"

Maddie's eyes stayed fixed on the door as she considered Amy's points. "Fair enough..." Turning to
kiss Amy's cheek, she hugged her close. "Thank you Amy."

"Anytime," Amy hugged her back, watching as Maddie stepped away from her.

Reaching to the table, she finished off what was left in her glass, took a long, deep breath and then, standing tall, she headed right towards the deck. No matter the outcome, she was going to say what she had to say to Kyle. And no matter his reaction, no matter what he tossed at her, once all was said and done, she was that much closer to Verbier, that much closer to stepping right into Harry's arms.

She felt the smile warm her face at the thought of that. But first. She opened the door and stepped out into the cold night air, the chill rushing around her as she closed the door behind her. And her eyes fixed on Kyle. He stood at the end of the deck, his back to her as he leaned his arms against the railing, his eyes focused out and upward as he drank from the bottle in his hands. She could almost see the tension in his shoulders as she watched him.

Clearing her throat, she took a step towards him. "She's good for you, you know?" She saw his muscles flex at the sound of her voice, but he stayed silent. "Amy's a...really fantastic match." Stepping up next to him, she kept her eyes off in the distance like his, her fingers reaching out to the railing. "I mean...I don't know that I've ever seen somebody quiet you down quite like that..." A small smile teased at her lips. "It was impressive."

Fighting the laughter that bubble up underneath the surface, Kyle held onto his cold, gruff exterior and took another drink of his beer. Breathing in the cold air a few times, his eyes shifted to the side to look at Maddie. When he saw the tears that still lingered in her eyes, when he saw the streaks from those that had already fallen, the wall of defiance he had put up began to crumble and he softened.

"I didn't mean to upset you..."

"No?" Maddie's voice was soft, the corner of her mouth twitching up as she looked up to him. "Then the yelling was..."

"Damn it Maddie," he exhaled, his head shaking as his fingers tightened on the railing.

"Stop," she whispered, her hand moving over his, soft and warm, a move that drew his eyes right to her. "Just for a minute, would you stop and just...not be mad at me?"

Kyle watched her for a moment, his heart thumping in his chest as his mind worked overtime. He had so many emotions about all of this and the fact that he cared so much was surprising even him a bit. Finishing off his beer, he sat it on the table and turned around. Leaning back against the railing, his arms crossed over his chest and he took a breath. "I'm not mad at you. Maddie's eyebrows lifted. "I'm not! I'm just...I don't understand."

"Yeah..." Maddie exhaled, her head nodding slowly. "I know."

"So what is it?" He asked with a wave of his hand. "Help me understand. Are you...lonely?"

"What?" She blinked. "No. I mean..."

"I know we all have...needs..." Even in the dark, she swore she saw him blush.
"Needs?" She snickered. "Needs?! You think this is about SEX?"

"It isn't?"

"NO!" A laugh pushed from her lips. "Jesus Christ Kyle. You think I went back to Harry to get LAID?!"

"I think sometimes it's easier to go back to something familiar and..."

"Oh COME ON!" She cut him off with a roll of her eyes. "I'm smarter than that! And listen, if I wanted no-strings attached sex, there are plenty of places I could have gone and..."

"Alright." Kyle held up his hand, his voice flat. "That's enough."

"Hey. You brought it up."

"Just so that I could say this..." He pointed a finger at her. "If you're wanting...somebody, I have plenty of friends and colleagues and..."

"And while I appreciate you trying to arrange a booty call for me, I think I'll go ahead and take care of this myself."

"Fine." He shrugged, dismissing it as he turned back around to look out at the night.

"And just so you know," Maddie leaned against the railing, following his eyes as she lowered her voice. "I was having pretty great sex with Charlie before he moved so..."

"Good God, woman," a groan fell from his mouth. "Would you just..."

"It's not about sex Kyle," she cut him off, the laughter fading away. "Harry...being with Harry, it isn't about sex."

"Then what's it about Maddie?" He looked to her, his eyes wide with curiosity. "Love? Are you in love with him again?"

"I..." Maddie blinked as her cheeks flushed, completely thrown. "I don't...I..." She shook her head, taking a breath and trying to pull it together. When she spoke, her voice was lower; heavier with the emotion of it all. "I want to love again Kyle. I want to have all of those things again; a friend and a partner and a lover and...I know it won't be exactly like things were with Bishop but...I want that again, all of it."

"But...Harry?" His forehead pinched together. "It can't happen with anyone else?"

"Of course it could happen with somebody else," Maddie shrugged, her tone matter-of-fact. "I'm sure there are a lot of people it COULD happen with but..."

"But?"

"But maybe I don't want it to happen with anyone else." It was honest and genuine and even Kyle who hated the idea could see the sincerity in her face, could hear the resolve in her voice. He could see the same flicker of feeling she had had for Harry years and years ago.
"Sure," she nodded, wanting him to get it all out now so that they could exhaust it there on the deck.

"This...this has nothing to do with Bishop?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean...you don't think there's a chance you're settling for Harry because of his ties to your husband? That maybe there's a chance that part of the appeal is because he was so close to Bishop? That maybe it's your way of...holding on to him a little longer?"

Even though tears rose to her eyes, Maddie was smiling. Taking a breath, she looked out into the night. "I'm not going to lie to you Kyle...it helps that he knew him. It helps that he loved him. And it helps that I'll never have to explain why certain things make me cry or why there will always be that part of me that belongs to somebody else..." She swallowed at the lump in her throat. "He gets that, he understands that and...honestly, there's a part of him that died with Bishop too. I don't need Harry to hold on to Bishop, to keep my ties to him. I'm going to do that regardless....and it's an enormous comfort that I'll never have to...try to make that all make sense to Harry. He knows, he's there too. But...but that's not why I want to be with him, that's not what's drawing me back to him..."

"Then what is?" His voice was a whisper, his mind ripe with curiosity, knowing just how much hurt she had felt at the end.

"Come on Kyle," Maddie's head tipped to side, her smile sweet and soft. "I was very much in love with Harry at one point in time, he was going to be husband..."

"I remember."

"And our relationship didn't end because I stopped feeling those things for him. And it didn't end because he stopped feeling those things for me..."

"Why was it that it ended again?" His jaw tightened as he remembered, his voice bitter.

"Because he was scared," she answered quickly, ignoring his sarcasm completely. "He was terrified of loss then."

"And now?"

"And now...now he's had enough of it to realize there's no point in fighting it...no point in trying to sacrifice being happy in order to avoid it. It's going to happen, eventually. All we can do now is...be happy."

The air between them was quiet and heavy and blanketeted with so much history. Kyle took a deep breath, ran his fingers over the back of his neck and thought for a moment. "You know..." He cleared his throat. "If this situation were reversed, you would feel the same way I do about all of it."

Pausing for a moment, Maddie nodded. Maybe he was right. "And how is that exactly? How do you feel about all of it?"
"I don't like it," he shook his head. "I don't like it at all. I don't like how things ended between you, I don't like how he treated you when it was over, I don't like what he did to you or to Bishop when he found out about the two of you...I don't like any of it really." He turned to face her, his eyes wide as his hand pressed against his chest, over his heart. "But I love you." His voice cracked just a little, his mouth curling up just a tad.

"Yeah..." Maddie nodded, fresh emotions swirling around inside of her. "I love you too." She sucked in a breath, trying to keep herself from crying. "I hate when you're disappointed in me Kyle..."

"I'm not," he was quick to shake his head, hating the look on her face, in her eyes. "I'm not disappointed in you. I...I don't support this choice, I don't think this is a good idea, I don't think this is going to work out in the end, that this is going to make you happy. Maddie...hey..." He leaned in closer, his hand rubbing at her shoulder. "I could never be disappointed in you."

Nodding, Maddie swallowed back the lump in her throat, forced the tears back away from the surface. "You're right," she whispered. "What you said about the situation being reversed. If it were you and Amy, I would..." She shook her head. "I wouldn't want you with her either." She let out a long breath. "But I really hope that I would open my mind, that I would take a minute to see that...that she loved you, that she wanted you to be happy. I would hope that I would be able to set aside my anger and see that there might be a chance that you could love her again..."

Kyle nodded, squeezing her shoulder and sighing. "Is that what you're saying here? About Harry? He...he loves you again? That's what he's telling you?"

"No," Maddie whispered, a smile tugging at her lips as she shook her head. "He isn't...telling me that but..."

"But?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"But he does," she felt her skin flush warm as she admitted it to him, to herself. "He...he does. I, I know he does." She looked down at her hands, noticing the way her whole body reacted to the realization, the way her heart thudded in her chest.

"And you?"

"Me?" She lifted her smile up to him, not trying to keep the hazy blissfulness from her eyes. "I..." She shook her head at him then, not really sure how to explain it to him.

But she didn't need to. He saw it; plain and clear and written all over her face.

"Okay," he nodded, his head dropping a bit in resignation.

"Okay?"

"Yeah, okay," he took a breath. "I don't like him Maddie and I can't say that that is going to change anytime soon..." He shrugged his shoulders and swallowed his pride. "But I love you and you're...you've been my best friend since we were toddlers and I'm not going to stop being protective of you or looking out for you or...I'm just not going to stop."

"I'm not asking you to," she reached out to squeeze his hand. "I'm just asking you to...still be my
best friend, even while I do this. Even if it really does blow up in my face..." She shrugged. "Even if it actually works out." The hope on her face was so apparent, even Kyle had to smile. "Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes," he sighed. "Yes of course I can do that, Maddie."

"Yay..." She let out a relieved laugh, clapping her hands before she moved to hug him. "Thank you..."

"Don't thank me yet," he shook his head as he hugged her back, kissing the top of her head. "I guarantee you if this blows up in your face, I won't hold back the I Told You So."

"I would expect nothing less," she smiled against his chest, settling closer.

And even then, tucked up in Kyle's arms with his doubt looming overhead, she knew. This wasn't going to blow up in her face, there would be no time for I Told You So's. Because somewhere in the world, on his way from London to Verbier was the man who was next for her, the man who she knew—without a doubt—was never going to walk away from her again.

Unless she made him. And she had absolutely no intention of doing that.
Chapter 20

Though the conversation with Kyle hadn't gone exactly as Maddie had hoped, it had gone as well as it possibly could. She had known he would have an adverse reaction. She had known he wasn't going to be thrilled and she hadn't set out with the purpose of convincing him. So she took what gains she had made and she continued on her journey.

Telling the rest of the family was a breeze in comparison. Though Jenna was certainly intrigued, her concerns were written plainly across her face. Gary was more in line with Kyle though not nearly as forceful or outright. And Derek and Dena—bless them both—they were in the land of neutrality, even slightly in favor of Maddie seeking happiness wherever she thought she might find it.

Even if it was with Harry.

As she boarded the plane to cross the ocean, she felt a sense of relief, some of the tension easing from her shoulders. But she wasn't done; not quite yet. When she landed in Paris, she felt the rush of nostalgia, memories of falling in love with Bishop drifting into her mind. Instead of shaking them off and pushing them aside, she embraced them. She let them warm her heart and give her strength and she forged on.

She had always felt at home with Collins and Khenda, had always felt a particular sort of kinship with them. Since the day she had set foot on the red soil of Bendal, she had loved them both and returning to their home, to their dinner table, came with a sense of peace and belonging, even if she was about to reopen the can of worms she had shared with Kyle.

"So listen..." Maddie took a long sip of her wine and sat it on the table, leaning back in her chair; full and satisfied and overly content. "There's something I need to tell you."

"Yeah?" Collins lifted his eyebrows, leaning back, his arm moving easily around the back of his wife's chair.

"Yeah," Maddie nodded, smiling at the both of them. "But it's probably going to make you mad."

"Make us mad?" Khenda's face twisted in confusion. "What could you possibly tell us that would make us mad?"

"Well...maybe not so much you..." Maddie's eyes shifted to Collins who seemed just as surprised as his wife. He liked to think of himself as somebody who rarely got mad, much less mad at Maddie. But Maddie had already gone rounds with her family and she knew what was coming. With a deep breath, she continued. "I've started seeing somebody."

"You have?" Khenda's voice slipped high as smiles crept onto both of their faces.

"I have," Maddie nodded, finding their wide, nearly identical grins adorable, finding their natural happiness for her to be touching.

"Why in the world would that make me mad?!" Collins shook his head, sitting up in his chair as he chuckled at her. "That's great news Doc!"
"It is!" Khenda nodded along. "We're happy for you, Maddie. We want you to be happy, you should know that."

"I do," Maddie felt her heart warm in her chest.

"Well, tell us who he is," Collins waved his hand encouragingly.

"Okay," Maddie nodded, sitting up tall in her chair as she tossed it out. "It's Harry." As the air between them seemed to pause, she looked down at her hands and then right back up to them. "The person I'm seeing...is Harry."

"Harry?" Khenda blinked, the swell of emotions in her stomach mixed. "You mean..."

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "I mean that Harry." Swallowing back her nerves, she looked right at Collins. "You're mad now?"

"Ha." His laugh was short, pointed, as he rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. His eyes were dark and his jaw was set and Maddie imagined he was remembering the night she had come to stay with them after everything ended. "I'm...." He shook his head almost in disbelief. "I don't know what I am."

Maddie nodded her head, she understood that, had expected that. Leaning forward, she took a deep breath. "People change Collins, they do. They learn from their mistakes and they grow and sometimes they deserve a second chance..."

"I'm not sure he does," Collins shook his head. "You...Doc. You know I love you...like a daughter. And you...you were on my couch for weeks. Weeks. Because of him. Because he offered you everything and then jerked it all away."

"I know," Maddie nodded, remembering it all for herself.

"There were moments when I honestly thought you weren't going to get up, that you weren't going to recover, that maybe we had lost a part of you..."

"But I did get up," Maddie smiled across the table to him, blinking at the raw emotions that were being pulled to the surface as she remembered it all again. "I got up and I recovered and I didn't lose anything. In fact, I only gained..."

"And now he gets to reap the rewards of that?" His eyebrows lifted in question. "I'm not sure he deserves that, Maddie. I'm not sure he deserves a second chance with you, that he deserves..."

"To be happy?" Maddie's voice was soft and calm as she cut in. "You're not sure he deserves to be happy?"

With a deep breath, Collins looked away from her, trying to make clarity out of the muddled mess in his brain. "I didn't say that. I didn't mean that." Running his hands over his face, he turned to look at his wife who was remaining, shockingly quiet. "You haven't said anything..."

"I don't know what to say," she reached out to him, her fingers warm on his arm.

"You're happy," He nodded up to her, a slight accusatory tone to his voice.
"Well I'm not angry, if that's what you mean," she smiled softly.

"You think that after all he's done to her, he should get to just walk right back into her life, like nothing happened..."

"I think that it's more complicated than all that," Khenda shrugged.

With a groan, he sat back. "And I think you're about to defend him..."

"Hold on," Maddie cut in, seeing them squaring off. "I didn't tell you this so that the two of you would fight about it. I don't want that," Maddie shook her head. "Nobody has to defend anyone. Least of all Harry. He's...he's not asking for that. He would never ask for that. I mean..." She chuckled lightly. "If anyone thinks that he doesn't deserve a...second chance...it's Harry."

"Well at least he's smart enough to know that."

"Collins..." Khenda shook her head.

"What?" He lifted his eyebrows to her. "Tell me you don't remember the way she looked when she showed up here with Bishop. Tell me you weren't worried."

"Of course I was worried!" Khenda shot back. "Of course I was worried about her. And I was worried about him."

"Please."

"Please," she countered. "I was worried about him, about what he was doing to his life, about the mistakes he was making! I've been worried about him for as long as I've known him, which—as you know—is quite a long time."

"Okay..." Maddie held her hand out, wanting to draw them back from this fight they seemed to be having. "Please stop. Please. I don't want you two to fight over this. And I don't want you to debate over how deserving or not deserving Harry is of a second chance," she took a deep breath. "I'm going to give him one. I...I am giving him one."

And the two of them drew to quiet, their eyes shifting back to her, their thoughts running crazily over their collective pasts. Collins was the first to speak. Sitting tall in his chair, his hands stretched out to hers.

"Doc...you know I adore you," he gathered her fingers into his. "And I have seen you go through more shit than you should have to deal with; your father, Harry...losing Bishop..." His voice cracked as he said his name, his heart aching for his friend. "And of course, all I want is for you to be able to find happiness again. For you to smile and live again and love again..." He sucked in a breath and held her eyes. "Harry? Harry?"

Blinking at the tears in her eyes, she squeezed his fingers and, with an easy, happy smile, she shrugged. "Maybe." Her voice was a whisper. "I think so..." She laughed, wiping at her eyes. "I don't know what's going to happen and you know...it may very well blow up in my face but...I'm gonna try it. I'm just...I'm going to go for it." She sniffed and leaned closer, her eyes twinkling as she nudged his foot under the table. "And I do hope you won't be mad at me forever."
"Oh damn it all..." Collins groaned, rolling his eyes. "I'm not mad...not now...not at you." With a struggling deep breath, he sighed. "And I will...try...to give him the benefit of the doubt."

With a nod, Maddie stood up from her chair and, leaning across the table, she kissed his cheek. After the fallout with her cousins, that was more than she had dared to hope for. "Thank you."

And as soon as Maddie pulled away, Khenda was right there in line, pressing her own kiss to his cheek. "Thank you my love."

"Oh alright," Collins rolled his eyes again, pushing away from the table. "I'm going to go get more wine. Though..." He paused, turning to look at them both. "If he pulls that shit again, I might have to kill him."

Maddie nodded, solemn and sweet. "Only after I'm finished with him." With a satisfied smirk, Collins turned back on his way to the kitchen, in search of more wine. And Maddie's eyes settled on Khenda. "And you? You're...okay...with all of this?"

Khenda's voice was soft and quiet as she nodded, "I am."

"You sure?" Maddie noticed the tears in her eyes, the emotion in her voice.

"Absolutely," she swallowed and nodded reassuringly. "I'm...ha..." She let out a small laugh, meeting Maddie's eyes. "You remember when we were all in Bendal and you were struggling with what to do next; stay in Bendal or move to London?"

"Yes," Maddie replied.

"And I...I encouraged you to go. I told you to go, to follow him to London and to love him and..." She glanced away for a moment, drawing her wits back to her before she looked back at Maddie. "For the longest time after it ended, I felt just...incredibly guilty." She laughed at the way it made her want to cry. "I felt terrible."

"What? Why?"

"Because...because I told you to go with him and you did. You gave up your career and your home and something you loved so much and I pushed you to do that! And I thought it would be worth it and then in the end it just...it blew up." Khenda shook her head. "And it wasn't worth it. Not at all."

"Hey..." Maddie shook her head. "Just because it didn't work out the way I thought it would when I left Bendal, doesn't mean it wasn't worth it."

"Maddie..."

"It was absolutely worth it," she cut her off. "If I had stayed in Bendal then I would never had had Bishop. We wouldn't have become friends, things wouldn't have blown up with Harry and I wouldn't have had the chance to be with Bishop..." Maddie smiled wide as she thought of him. "I don't know what's going to happen with Harry. I don't know how this is all going to pan out but I will tell you this..." Her eyes were bright and shining and certain. "It was absolutely worth it."

"Yeah?" Khenda's voice cracked.
"Completely," Maddie nodded. "No regrets Khenda. You were right to push me to go...and you were right, just now, to support him."

"Yeah well..." She took in a breath. "I've always loved Harry and I've always known he was happiest with you and I've always known that he's been making colossal mistakes since the moment he sent you away..." She smiled then, easing up on herself. "But I agree one hundred percent with Collins. If it happens again..."

"I know," Maddie chuckled, growing thoughtful and introspective for a moment. "But you know what? It won't happen again."

"Oh I know," Khenda agreed, knowing it in her heart. "I know. Tell me..." Khenda leaned in closer. "Are you ready for that?"

"For what?" Maddie was a little confused.

"For the other option," Khenda's head tipped thoughtfully. "I would imagine everyone's been stressing and preparing for what happens if it ends again....and I'm just wondering, are you prepared for what happens if it doesn't?"

"Ah," Maddie nodded, understanding rushing through her veins; hot and heavy. "Ah." Swallowing, she took a breath and looked right into Khenda's eyes. "You know...I think I just might be."

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When the car slowed to a stop outside the snow-covered chalet, the smile on Maddie's face was genuine. She had taken her moments of sadness, she had cried on the plane; tears of release and the tiniest bit of loss. She had done what she had set out to do, she had told her family and friends about Harry. It had been heavy and it had been hard but it was done. And she was well past it by the time she landed in Switzerland. Pushing Kyle from her mind, shaking off Collins' voice, she stepped out of the car and onto the crunch snow beneath her feet.

She was happy to finally be there; relieved in fact. The cold, fresh air hit her face, filling her lungs and sharpening her senses. She felt alive and awake and as cold as it was outside, her entire body felt warm as she looked up at the enormous house in front of her.

Because Harry was there. He had been there for a few days, skiing with his friends and waiting for her. And after all that had been said and done over the last week, all she really wanted to do was to see him, to be reminded with that smirky smile of his why it was she had done all of it.

Hurrying up the walkway to the front door, the driver followed behind with her bags. Though she had insisted she could manage, he was intent on seeing her safely inside before he would leave. So Maddie had relented, offered a small smile and knocked on the door. Barely a second had passed when the door swung open, revealing a bright eyed and most assuredly tipsy Kiki who, if Maddie had to guess, must have been just waiting for Maddie to arrive.

As Kiki pulled Maddie into the house, into a hug, the driver sat her bags in the entryway and excused himself.

"Thank you very much," Maddie had smiled at him, watching him disappear down the walkway as she shut the door behind him.
"I can't believe you're finally here," Kiki shook her head, looking her over with a wide, approving smile. Maddie could tell, out of everyone who had learned about the new state of her and Harry's relationship, Kiki was probably the most excited.

And God knew she needed somebody to be excited. "I can't believe it either," she sighed, feeling the chill from outside slipping away from her bones.

"You know..." Kiki began and stopped, catching sight of her husband in the hallway. "Oh! Sean!" Her voice was the funniest mix of a whisper and a command. "Come here!" She waved him over, taking him from his path to the kitchen.

"Hmmm?" He moved slowly, finishing the last of his drink as he eyed his wife with amusement. And then he saw Maddie. "Well look at that..." His smile spread wide as he leaned to kiss her cheeks. "I know somebody who is going to be thrilled to hear that you've arrived."

"Is that so?" Maddie kissed his cheek and stepped back, an uncontrollable flush spreading up her neck to her cheeks.

"Speaking of," Kiki nudged her husband. "Why don't you go let Wales know she's here? Maybe he can take her bags to her room and..."

"Oh I can do that," Maddie shook her head at Kiki.

"Please." Kiki rolled her eyes, dismissing Maddie with a wave and giving Sean a light push. "Go tell him please?"

"Got it," Sean nodded, shrugging at Maddie as he moved backwards away from them. "You owe me Kiki."

"Well then that works out well for the both of us," she tossed him a wink and turned back to Maddie who was laughing. "Sean!" She called out quickly. "Don't make it obvious okay? Not everyone needs to help Maddie with her bags."

"Of course," he called back to her, waving his hand as he made his way down the hallway.

"So..." Kiki pressed her hands together as she grinned at Maddie. "How was the flight?"

"Perfectly fine," Maddie answered, the anticipation beginning to build.

"And the drive?"

"Great actually," Maddie's eyes narrowed slightly as she remembered. "Nice and smooth. It nearly put me to sleep."

"Mmm," Kiki nodded, almost as happy as Harry was that Maddie had decided to come. Almost.

"Did you guys take in a couple of runs today?" Maddie asked, trying her best to keep up the small talk, all the while wondering how far Harry had been and just how slow Sean was moving.

"We did," Kiki's eyebrows lifted. "The snow was nice; fluffy."
"Great," Maddie's smile slipped higher as their conversation slipped to a standstill.

With a sigh, Kiki broke, stepping closer, lowering her voice. "He's been going crazy waiting for you to get here." Maddie laughed, leaning in as Kiki waved her closer. "He's been pacing all afternoon and the second the sun went down, he glanced at his watch nearly every seven seconds."

"Oh yeah?" Maddie felt giddy at the news.

"Absolutely," Kiki shook her head. "I honestly can't believe it's taken him this long to get up here and..." Both women turned towards the sound of commotion coming towards them; shuffling feet rounding the corner.

When Maddie finally saw him, his wide smile surrounded by that scruffy red beard, any remnants of sadness or upset drifted away. All that was left was happiness and this immense realization of just how right this was. And every single moment of the fight she had had with Kyle, every single second of the words she had taken up with Collins—it was all worth it. And she knew in her heart of hearts, this is exactly how Bishop would want her to feel.

Of course, it didn't hurt that Harry looked so warm and cozy in his hooded sweatshirt, the front unzipped and open, almost begging her to tuck her arms inside and around his waist. It didn't hurt that he was looking at her with such obvious adoration. And it didn't hurt that over all this time, she had missed him a great deal.

Seeing the look between the two of them, Kiki cleared her throat and took a step back. Her smile was knowing as she looked to Harry. "I thought maybe you could show Maddie up to your room," she nodded her head towards the back of the house. "Maybe help her get settled in..."

"Yeah," Harry breathed, tearing his eyes from Maddie in order to nod a smile at Kiki. "Thank you. That's a great idea."

"Mmm," Kiki smiled, knowing that it was. "And nobody knows she's here yet so you can...take your time. Getting settled."

Harry's eyes had turned back to Maddie, his excitement at finally having her there evident in the stretch of his grin, in the brightness in his eyes. "Here," Harry took a few steps forward, bending and reaching for her bag. "I'll take this." His eyes shifted up to her.

"Thank you," Maddie watched him move, wondering if this childlike giddiness at seeing him would wear off, wondering if she would stop feeling nervous like this. Blushing under his gaze, even more so at the assuming smirk on Kiki's face, Maddie nodded her head and turned a sweet smile to Kiki. "Thank you so much Kiki, for letting me crash the party this weekend..."

"Think nothing of it," Kiki shook her head, waving her hand at Maddie. "We're happy to have you. Harry, more than the rest of us..."

"Thank you," Harry chuckled.

"But we're happy too," she clapped her hands together and took another step back towards the hallway Harry had just come from. "Okay. You two get settled and we'll see you...when we see you." With an unashamed shrug of her shoulders, Kiki spun on her heel and disappeared down the hallway, leaving Maddie and Harry standing alone.
"She's right you know," Harry's smile was sweet on her as Maddie looked up to him. Her eyebrows lifted in question, his voice dropping as he answered. "I am happier than the rest of them...to have you here."

As Maddie snickered, he leaned in to kiss her cheek, the soft red bristles of his beard brushed against her pink skin, her eyes closing as she felt his lips press to her cheek. The warmth that came with him, the closeness she had craved since she had boarded the plane rushed over her and as he moved to pull back, to take her hand and show her to their room, Maddie's instincts kicked in.

"Wait," she whispered, her cheeks flushed as her fingers reached out to hold onto him. That soft blue zippered hoodie bunched in her fingers and she turned her face up to him. Tipping on her toes, she kissed him—passing by his cheek and going straight to his lips.

He was grinning as he kissed her back and he tasted warm and slightly salty with just a hint of the beer he must have been drinking when Sean had pulled him from the room at Kiki's request. Letting go of her bag, his arms moved around her, shifting up under her coat and gathering her in, holding her close.

"Mmmm..." Maddie sighed into his mouth as their lips slowed, as the kiss drew to a sweet, natural—though much too soon—end. Kissing him once more, she pulled back just a fraction, not quite ready to step from his arms. Biting her bottom lip she opened her eyes and, catching him smiling down at her, she grinned. Her cheeks were pink and her whole body was warm and she was so happy to be there. Right there. "Hi."

"Hi," his grin pulled higher.

With a light giggle, one of Maddie's hands moved down from around his neck, her fingers reaching up to scratch at the scruff on the bottom of his chin. "I saw pictures of this..."

"Yeah?" He lifted his eyebrows, his hands running up and down her back, still hugging her to him, making no effort to pull his face from her hands. "Did they make you want to shave it off?"

"No," she shook her head. "They made me want to do this..." As her fingers stroked up higher on his face, she leaned up to him nuzzling her nose, her cheek against the silkiness, loving the way it was both soft and rough against her skin. "Mmmm..." She sighed, bringing her lips back to his. "I love it..." Her words were muffled by his lips, by the kisses he had been waiting to give her, but he heard it all the same.

And he decided right then and there—he was never shaving again.

"Come on," Harry kissed her once more, taking her hand in his as he reached for her bag. "Let me show you our room. You can take off your coat, freshen up..."

"Snuggle up with your beard a little more?" She arched an eyebrow, smiling suggestively as he shook his head at her.

"If you want..."

"Oh I want," she laughed, following along as he lead the way up the stairs, down a long corridor and finally to their room. They were on the back corner of the home, Maddie guessed because the room was kind of off on its own, her eyes glancing at the rooms close by that must have been for
his protection detail.

Harry pushed open the door, stepping inside and tugging at her fingers. Following him inside the warm, cozy, spacious room, Maddie took in a long, slow deep breath and she felt the rest of her tension slip easily from her shoulders. Smiling at her, Harry sat her bag down on the large, fluffy bed and moved to shut the door behind her, giving her a moment to decompress.

Standing in the middle of the room, Maddie looked around, taking in the space, taking in the colors and the textures, looking over the things that were his already strewn about the room.

"You can unpack however you'd like," he offered, his hand gesturing towards the large dresser to her right. "There's plenty of space in the closet if you need to hang something..." His words drifted for a moment, the look in her eyes catching him off guard.

Nodding, Maddie offered him a smile and turned to look at the far end of the room, at the enormous windows that lined the far wall, showcasing the magnificent view of the alps they had from their room, from the private deck just outside. Pulling off her coat, she tossed it onto the bed, unwinding her scarf from around her neck as she moved towards the windows.

"Good God..." She breathed, her gaze fixed on the view. "Sometimes...I feel like I've seen some of the most beautiful places on earth, you know?" She glanced back to Harry who was watching her with warmth and intrigue and then back to the windows. "Mountains and valleys and beaches and oceans and deserts and..." She shook her head and paused, her bottom lip pulling between her teeth as she took in the bright white peaks, the impressive angles. "And then I see something like this..."

"Mmmm," Harry nodded moving slowly to her side, completely in agreement with her. "I'm really happy you came Maddie."

Smiling up at him, she reached out, her fingers stroking the back of his hand. "I am too. I felt...so much better, the second I landed," she sighed. "Instantly relaxed and at ease..." Her eyes turned back to the view, though her fingers moved to tangle with his, wanting to hold his hand. "This is exactly what I needed."

Holding onto her fingers, Harry's thumb ran over the tips of them, beyond content to do just this; hold her hand and look at the view. "Do you want to talk about it?" He glanced at her out of the side of his eyes. "About Kyle and Collins and..." They hadn't really hashed it out yet and he knew that it had been hard for her.

"No," she cut him off with a shake of her head, a soft chuckle from her lips. "I mean...eventually, yes. We can talk about it tonight. I just...right now? I want to do this," she nodded out the windows. "And..." The corner of her mouth curled up. "And I want to do this..." Turning to face him, she pulled at his hand until he turned to face her. With rosy cheeks and a twinkle in her eye, she lifted her fingers back up to his face and, as he laughed at her, she pushed them up into his beard, scratching at the thickness of it–leaning up on her toes to kiss him again.
"Mmmmm..." Maddie stretched her arms high above her head, her fingertips reaching the headboard. Her lips curled higher on her flushed face as she watched a very naked, a very well loved Harry return from their bathroom. "I think maybe I like this view even better than the one outside..."

With a laugh, he slipped back in next to her. The way she was stretched out in the bed, tumbled onto the pillows and twisted in the sheets–she wasn't quite ready to rise and dress and join the crowd downstairs. "Well..." He propped himself up on his elbow, looking down at her as he reached for her. "You can have access to this view whenever you like."

"Is that so?" She grinned up at him, her fingers stroking against the softness of his beard. She loved the way it felt against her fingers. Her cheeks flushed hot as she remembered the way it felt between her thighs. She loved that too.

"It is," he nodded, catching the way she bit her bottom lip, the haze in her eyes. And he wanted her all over again. He was just about to tell her so when the fingers of one of her hands wrapped around the back of his neck. Pulling him down to her, she lifted up off the pillow to kiss him.

Her lips were soft and hot and moved against his with well-practiced perfection. "Can I ask a favor?"

"Mmmm..." He nodded, not really able to grasp his voice just yet.

"This beard..." She had to pull her lips from his, had to take a breath. "Never shave it?" Her eyebrows lifted in question, her eyes wide as they watched for his reaction.

He smiled; in that wide way that crinkled the corner of his eyes. "You like the beard that much?"

"Ahh..." She sighed, nuzzling closer to it, to him. "I love it that much."

"Is that right?" His eyes flashed bright as he looked her over, noticing the flush of her skin, the way she squirmed in his hands.

"Mmm Hmm..." She nodded, biting at her lower lip to keep the massive grin from taking over her face.

"Done." He answered simply; easily. "I'll never shave."

"Yay!" She lifted her hands over her head in victory.

With a warm, rumble of laughter in his chest, Harry bent down to her, moving his lips and the beard into the soft bend of her neck–making her giggle. The laughter continued and the squirming increased as he moved down her body; kissing and tickling his way to the bare, pink skin of her chest.

"Harry!" She called out, her hands grasping his head and holding him still.
"Yes?" He paused, resting his chin on her stomach, smiling up at her around the curves of her body.

Sighing, her fingers pushed into his hair, her head tipping to the side as she smiled down at him; sincerity taking over for a moment. "I missed you."

Swallowing at the emotion that surged when she said that, he placed a soft, chaste kiss to the skin under his chin. "I missed you too."

"Good."

"Good." He agreed. Watching her for a long moment, his fingers smoothing over warm skin, their bodies molding around each other. "Maddie..."

"Hmm?"

"Can we talk about it?"

The haze slipped from her eyes and he felt her tense below him. "It?"

"How it went..." He reached for her hand, pulling her fingers into his. "When you told them."

Without pulling her eyes or her hand from him, she took a deep breath in and let a long breath out. "Okay," her voice was soft and quiet. "We can talk about it. Of course we can talk about it..." She offered him a smile, though it hardly hid the sadness in her eyes. "What do you want to know?"

"You told them?" He lifted his eyebrows, knowing the answer but wanting to start out easy.

"I did," she nodded.

"All of them?"

"I told everyone in Colorado," she smoothed her hand over his mussed up hair. "And I told Collins and Khenda right before I came here."

"Yeah..." He nodded, gearing himself up for the answer to what he was about to ask. "And? How did it go?"

She paused for a moment, her gaze locked with his. "How do you think it went?"

"Bad," he breathed. "I think it went badly."

"It did," she nodded, not wanting to hurt him but unable to lie.

"Yeah..." He exhaled, his eyes shifting down, looking at the patterns his finger was tracing on her skin. "Of course it did."

"Harry..."

"With everyone?" He looked back up to her, his mind processing it all at breakneck speed. "Nobody took it...okay?"
"Well," Maddie took a breath. "My mother took it okay. I'm sure she has her concerns and issues but she didn't voice them. She...she wants me to be happy and she knew...knows this is something I'm going to do. So she took it okay. Better than the rest of the family I suppose."

"Sure," he swallowed and nodded and she knew he was stewing; about their past, about their now.

"And Khenda," she smiled as she said her name, her hand moving to cup his face. "She's always loved you Harry and she's happy for us; genuinely happy."

"And the rest of them..."

"Varying degrees of confusion and upset and anger..."

"Anger." He repeated the word with gravity. "Kyle?" He asked, not needing confirmation.

"Yes." She gave it anyway. "He just..."

"Don't," Harry shook his head, holding up his hand as he moved to sit up. "You don't have to explain why he's angry Maddie. I know why he's angry."

"Harry..." She sat up to, reaching out to him. "He's just overprotective. He thinks he knows what's best for me and he doesn't want me to be hurt again, not like I was before."

"I know," he nodded.

"He's just mad because I'm not doing exactly what he thinks I should do," she continued. "And he's...sad." Harry looked up to her in confusion. "And when he's sad, it comes out as mad and..."

"Why is he sad?" Harry's eyes narrowed, momentarily sidetracked.

She took a quick breath, thinking maybe she shouldn't have said that. Blinking, she sucked it up; honesty was the way to go here. "Bishop." She said his name with a smile. "He's sad about Bishop." Breath pushed from Harry's lungs and she watched as his shoulders slacked and she hated the way that hit him. "Listen...please. Please don't freak out and just...listen." She reached for his hand again, pulling it into both of hers. "When Bishop first came around, Kyle was...not a big fan. He didn't like him, didn't want to give him a chance at all..."

"Why?" Harry shook his head, not really understanding.

"Because he was your best friend," she answered with a slight shrug, a small smile. "He was British and upper class and Kyle was generalizing his biases to the lot of you."

"Ah," Harry nodded, feeling a wave of guilt settle in.

"He gave him a hard time. He...he told me I should maybe stick to Americans for a while. He..."

"I get it," Harry held up his hand, a bitter chuckle pushing up from his lungs. "There was a point in time where I was hoping somebody was giving him a hard time."

Maddie smiled then, finding genuine humor in his moment of honesty. "You were." Her voice was soft, quiet; reflective.
"Of course I was," he nodded, only slightly ashamed of himself. "I figured it would be Kyle. He never thought anyone was good enough for you. I figured I could count on him to put up issue with Bishop."

"Ha!" Maddie clapped her hands together, the tears that were pooling in her eyes not entirely born of sadness. "Well he did. So, you know...well done."

"And now he's putting up issue with me." His eyes shifted back to serious.

"He is," Maddie nodded, her own smile fading.

"A bigger issue, I'm guessing."


"Okay," he sucked in his breath. "Okay. I expected that. I did. I knew there would be some push back and I knew he would lead the way..." He let out his breath and nodded for her to continue. "Anyone else?"

Maddie's eyes softened. "Collins." She watched as he flinched, having known this one would hit him harder than the others because of his connection to his past.

"Collins," he whispered his name, swallowing and adjusting his weight; his body taking the hit of what she said.

"Yeah...but, you know, his has more to do with his...worry for me than his issues with you."

"He's worried I'll hurt you." His own heartache washed over his face. "Again."

"He is," she nodded.

"Of course he is," Harry nodded, leaning back and away from her; taking in deep breaths as his mind drifted back.

"You have to understand, Harry. That's where I went after..." She let out a soft laugh. "That's the first place I went. That's where Bishop took me. Collins and Khenda were there at the very beginning when I was just..."

"Oh I understand," Harry nodded, tears of self-loathing filling up his eyes. "I'm sure if anyone else had delivered you to my home like that..." He trailed off, angry and upset and sad—all at himself, all because of himself. "I'd hate them too."

"He doesn't hate you," she shook her head quickly. "He doesn't. I swear he doesn't. He just..."

"You don't have to explain," he reached for her then, his hands warm and comforting on her shoulders, his mouth curling into a smile as he shook his head. "You don't have to explain and you don't have to try to...defend them. I expected this to go over poorly. I expected the people who love you...to hate it. I'm sure I would if I were in their shoes."

"Okay," she blinked at the tears in her eyes. "So what now?"

"Now..." He took a breath, smiling as he wiped at her eyes. "Now I just need to know..." He
glanced away from her for a minute, gathering his courage. "Does any of that, any of what they said--any of it--make you want to not do this?"

"Harry." She laughed then; loud and genuine. "Come on."

"What?" He narrowed his eyes at her, even as his lips curled higher. "It's a valid question."

"Sure it is," she rolled her eyes. "You think I flew to Verbier just to take you to bed one more time before I decided to agree with Kyle about the nature of my love life?"

"Ha. Well. When you put it that way..."

"When you put it any way." She shook her head. "No. You big, bearded fool. None of what they said changes anything about my wanting to be here, about my wanting to do this."

"Okay." He nodded.

"Okay?" She stressed the word, her eyes intent on his.

"Okay..." He took in a full, deep breath; finally.

"And you?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"Me?"

"Anything any of them said make you not want to do this?" She had been joking when she asked, already expecting his answer.

But she wasn't expecting his reaction; the intensity of it. His arms were around her body in an instant; gathering her in, drawing her near. "Nothing." His voice was deep and heavy, just like his eyes as he looked down into hers. "Nothing could make me not want to do this, Maddie....nothing."

Leaning into him, she lifted her lips to his and she kissed him, a smile pulling at the corner of her mouth. "Even if..." She kissed him again. "I grew a beard too?"

"Ha!" His head tipped back in laughter, his mind successfully pulling out of the shadows it had dipped into. With a wag of his eyebrows, he buried his face in her neck, drawing fits of giggles from her as they fell back into bed. "Even then!"

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"So..." Maddie pulled her soft sweater over her head, her hair fuzzing out as she settled back into her clothes. "We're going back downstairs?"

"Well," Harry laughed, shaking his head as he put on his t-shirt, reaching for his hoodie. "We don't have to. We can stay up here for the rest of the week if you want to."

"No, no," Maddie smiled, moving over to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "That's not what I meant."

"No?" He lifted his eyebrows, hugging her tight.
"I mean, I enjoy the thought..." She sighed as she looked him over, pulling herself back on track. "I just meant...are there people down there who don't know?" Her head tilted to the side in question.

"Ah," he nodded his understanding, his hands spreading flat and warm against her back. "I haven't told everyone, if that's what you mean. I didn't make an announcement or declaration or..." He chuckled as he thought of all of them gathered downstairs. "Kiki and Sean obviously know, Leo...Anna, Penelope. But there are a few who don't. Leo's sister, a handful of others." His smile slipped serious for just a moment. "Are you ready for..."

"Oh absolutely," she nodded happily. "I wanted to tell...who I wanted to tell before it got out any further. But..." She took a deep breath. "But now those people know...and there could be a reporter from the Daily Mail down there and I wouldn't care."

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back, the brightness returning to his smile tenfold because of her conviction. "I think you're being a little loose with the definition of reporter when it comes to the Daily Mail, but I get your point."

"Good." Her hand slipped down and smacked his ass. "Come on Captain. Let's go downstairs and have a few drinks."

"Done," he leaned to kiss her before he reached for her hand. Pulling it from around his waist and into his, he lead the way out of the room and back down to his assembled friends.

When the two of them stepped back into the room, hand in hand, smile for smile, all eyes shifted right over to them. And there was quite the mix of reactions. There was Kiki with her smug, knowing grin, asking Maddie if she was "nice and settled." There was Anna and Penelope, genuinely happy to see Maddie again, even if it felt the tiniest bit strange to see Harry holding her hand, to see him looking at her with that look on his face. There was Leo, kissing her cheeks, welcoming her to Verbier as he moved to pour her a drink, wanting her to feel welcome in the group. There were the people who were new-ish to Maddie. Anna's husband who rose to his feet to greet her, to ask about her travels. There was Penelope's boyfriend, completely oblivious to any of the former group dynamics.

But then there was Leo's sister.

"And this..." Harry gestured to the blonde sitting next to Anna, her eyes fixed thoughtfully on Maddie. "This is Leo's sister Lexie. Lexie, this...this is Maddie."

When Maddie turned a smile to the young woman, she caught the look on her face for a split second before her well-constructed smile moved into place. Rising to her feet, she looked right at Maddie. "Maddie...Bishop, isn't it?"

Without blinking, Maddie nodded. "It is." She reached out to shake her hand, her smile only deepening. "Good to meet you."

"You too." Though Lexie smiled, though she shook her hand and welcomed her to the party, there was something that caught Maddie's curiosity.

The way her eyes had shifted back to Harry, the way her smile seemed a bit too forced, a bit hard. The way she had swallowed and took a deep breath as she settled back into her seat.
Maddie wasn't entirely sure what it was but something made her think that maybe, just maybe Lexie wasn't quite as happy to see her as the others might be.
Chapter 22

Harry waited until they were both settled onto the ski lift, the seat sweeping them up and off the ground, into the sky. He waited until they were back into the slow climb up the mountain before he lifted his goggles onto his helmet and turned smiling eyes to her.

"Well, well, well..." He chuckled as he shook his head. "I had no idea it was possible for you to become more competitive."

"Please!" She rolled her eyes with a groan, her lips already pulling high into a smirk. "Just because you've lost some of your skills over the years..."

"Excuse me?" There was laughter on his lips as his eyes shot wide. "Lost some of my skills?"

"That's right," She nodded, showing no signs of flinching or backing down. "Maybe it's your age? Or lack of practice or..."

"Wow..." Harry shook his head slowly. "My age? My practice? I don't even know what to say."

"There really isn't anything to say," she smiled sweetly, loving the way it got under his skin; loving the way he puffed up. She could already see him strategizing their next run, she could already see him hoping to beat her down the hill. And damn it if that didn't make her want to haul him right back to their room at the house. "Here..." She shifted her poles to one hand and reached inside her ski jacket. "Maybe this will help your pride." With a slight, sympathetic shrug, she held out her hand to him.

"A flask." Harry's voice went flat, his eyes blinking as he looked down to what she had pulled from her coat. "You carry a flask?"

"I carry The flask," she corrected, nodding her head down to it with a warm smile. "Go on, take a sip. The whiskey will help take the edge off."

"The edge off of what?" He chuckled, taking the familiar flask from her fingers.

"The shame you feel," she couldn't help herself. She loved the way his eyes lit up with fire, loved the way the red in his cheeks deepened; loved the way his shoulders squared. Though he was absolutely puffing up with every intention to prove her wrong, to take her down a notch--she found it unbelievably sexy. "The hit your ego has taken all morning..."

Holding her eyes in his gaze, he opened the flask and took a long sip of the hot, spicy liquid and then he leaned in closer to her; his voice dropping in a way that might be menacing if she hadn't known better. "I know you think you're better at this than I am..."

"Well, I can't help it if the evidence clearly points in that direction..." Her lashes lowered as her eyes focused on his lips.

"Ha!" He laughed, handing the flask back to her. "You don't think there's a chance that maybe I've decided to go easy on you today? Maybe I'm taking it slow since it's our first day out together? Maybe I'm letting you get the best of me so that I can see that...amazing smile you get when you're
"Winning?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie's grin pulled higher as she leaned in closer. "Maybe..." She shrugged, taking in a breath as she dared a quick kiss to his lips. "But maybe you should be more ashamed about that then the way you've been skiing." Her eyes were full of a teasing sort of fire as she took the flask from him and took a quick sip. "Fortunately for you, it looks like you get another chance to try to catch me."

"Easily one of my favorite activities," he tossed a wink in her direction before he pulled his goggles back over his eyes.

"One you've gotten better at over the years," Maddie stuffed the flask back in her coat and zipped it up, gathering her poles and getting ready to ski off the lift. "Last one down has to buy drinks tonight?"

"You're on," he nodded. "Also, just so you know, the view today...." He watched as she skied out in front of him, his gaze settling on her ass. "Remarkable."

"Ahhhh..." Maddie exhaled heavily as they stepped into the heat of the lodge when they broke for lunch. A sharp chill had settled over the peaks bringing a bright pink to any bit of exposed skin. But she could feel the warmth seeping into her bones, relaxing her skin as they shed their layers, following the hostess to a table on the far side of the bar where their friends were already seated.

"There they are," Harry nodded, stuffing his gloves into his coat pocket and reaching back for her hand.

"Hey hey!" Sean perked up when he saw them, rising up from his seat and waving them over. "What took you so long?"

"So long?" Maddie's lips curled into a smug smirk. "We came to ski and clearly you came to...." She waved her hand at Sean as Harry laughed.

"Drink whiskey and flirt with my wife," Sean answered without batting a lash. "Clearly."

"Ha!" Maddie clapped her hands together, draping her coat over the back of the chair Harry had pulled out for her, glancing to him as he did the same next to her. "Maybe we should come in out of the arctic chill for awhile and do the same?"

"Drink whiskey and flirt with Sean's wife?" Harry raised his eyebrows as they both sat down.

"Why not?" Maddie shrugged, turning her smile across the table to Kiki.

"Hell, I'm in." Kiki giggled, reaching for her drink.

Laughter bubbled up around the table as they all settled in, reaching for menus and deciding on drinks. "Is it just the two of you?" Harry asked without looking up from the beer list.

"No," Sean shook his head, nodding towards the bathrooms. "Lexie's in the loo. Should be back any minute now."
"Great..." Harry nodded, flipping over the menu as he glanced up to Maddie. "Hungry?"

"Starving," she felt her stomach awaken at the thought of eating. "I think I'm going to go for soup."

"Soup?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Warmth," she grinned, waving her fingers at him. "I'm freezing."

"Here..." Putting his menu back on the table, Harry reached for her fingers. "Let me." Sandwiching her hands between his, he rubbed heat back into her skin. Soaking it up, Maddie wasn't quite sure if his hands were actually that hot even after coming in from outside or if it was simply this friction that had been building up between them again. Either way, she was infinitely grateful when her fingers slowly moved back towards room temperature.

"Thank you," she sighed as he bent to kiss her hands. "Thank you." When Harry lifted his lips from her fingers, he grinned up at her and turned his attention to the waitress who was there to take their orders.

Lexie returned to the table just as the waitress was finishing up. Though she quietly slipped into the chair across the table from Harry, Maddie couldn't miss the way her face lit up just a tiny bit when she saw him. Turning her order into the waitress who smiled and slipped away, Lexie leaned forward on the table, reaching for her drink and grinning across the table. "Tell me Harry...did you run better today than yesterday?"

"Ha." Harry laughed, nodding his head as he took a drink. "A little better."

"A little better?" Maddie snickered. "If this was better, I can't imagine what yesterday looked like."

"Easy," He glared playfully at her through the corner of his eyes. "Yesterday was rusty."

"You should have seen him," Lexie tossed a smile to Maddie, though her attention stayed focused just next to her. "We've been coming to Verbier for what? Twenty years?" She shrugged her shoulders, tossing her long blonde hair back. "I don't think I've ever pulled you up out of the snow as much as I did yesterday."

"What?" Maddie nudged him lightly. "What was wrong with you?"

"I don't know," he shook his head, his eyes lifting to hers, an apology all ready for the cheesiness that was about to come out of his mouth. "Maybe I was waiting for you to get here. Maybe I function better with you close by."

"Smooth." Sean snorted as Kiki rolled her eyes.

"Oh really now?" Maddie laughed.

"Laying it on a little thick, Wales?" Kiki took a drink from her glass and while laughter made its way around the table, it never really reached Lexie. With a frozen grin, her eyes blinked slowly; looking from Harry to Maddie and back again. And though Maddie thought maybe she was seeing things, it really did appear as though Lexie was slowly stumbling upon something previously unknown.

The arrival of their food gave her a moment to collect herself, to cover her confusion and bring
back her wide smile. And, as Maddie dug into her food, her thoughts drifted away from Lexie. It seemed as though the moment had passed; at least until the meal drew to an end and the bill had been paid.

"Well." Harry clapped his hands together and leaned back in his chair. "What's on the itinerary for the afternoon?"

"I think we're headed back to the house," Kiki waved her hand between her and Sean. "It was freezing outside before lunch and it doesn't look like it's clearing up anytime soon. Sean?"

"Absolutely," he nodded his head quickly. "Whiskey...the hot tub. Maybe some cards? What about you?" He looked to Harry but before he could answer, Lexie spoke up; leaning forward. Her fingers stretched out as though she were reaching for Harry.

"That sounds lovely, doesn't it?" She looked up to him with wide eyes. "What do you say Harry? Come on back to the house? Hit the hot tub?" Her eyebrows rose, her lips curling up invitingly. "Join us?"

As Kiki turned wide eyes to Lexie, Sean snorted, trying to keep his beer from coming up his nose. Next to Harry, Maddie didn't even move. She stayed still and quiet, her smile still in place on her lips.

With a laugh that was only a tad bit nervous, Harry cleared his throat and shook his head and turned his attention, and his body towards Maddie. "I don't know. Madeline? What are our plans for the afternoon?"

"Well..." She took a deep breath, leaning in closer to Harry, her hands settling easily on his thigh. "The hot tub sounds nice..." She nodded and grinned up at him. "But I thought maybe a few more runs? Settle that little bet we have going on?"

"Perfect," his arm moved around her shoulders as he answered the question that still hung out there. "Maddie and I are going to ski a little bit longer. But we'll meet you all back at the house."

"There you go," Kiki leaned forward, her eyes pointed as she glanced at Lexie. "You two enjoy your time out there. Stay warm and remember..." She leaned in closer and lowered her voice. "Harry's been spotted but you..." She pointed to Maddie. "They haven't figured you out yet. So if you keep your hands...and your lips...to yourself..."

"Lovely." Harry narrowed his eyes at her.

"Then nobody will catch on," Kiki shrugged and patted Maddie's hands. "We'll see you later."

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"Okay..." Maddie sighed resolutely as she and Harry began up the ski lift. "I have to ask...can I ask?"

"Ask what?" Harry's lips curled up as he looked to her, situating his poles next to him. "You can ask anything."

"Okay," she nodded. "You and Lexie..."
"Lexie?" Harry's forehead scrunched up.

"Is there...something going on there?"

"Excuse me?" Harry's eyes flashed wide, his voice full of astonishment.

"Sorry," Maddie couldn't help the chuckle that came at the look on his face. "I didn't necessarily mean right now. Just...I don't know. Before I came along, was there something going on between the two of you?"

"No." His answer was quick and certain and bubbled with a shocked sort of laughter. "No, of course not. She's Leo's little sister!"

"So!" Maddie laughed. "I was Bishop's wife! And before that I was your fiancé! It's not like 'cardinal rules' haven't been broken in this group before."

Harry's laughter faded into a smile and a flash of seriousness crossed his face. "Yes. I know. All kinds of boundaries have been crossed when it comes to you but..." He shook his head. "I swear to you, nothing is or was ever going on between Lexie and I."

"Okay," Maddie smiled, nodding her head; believing him. "Okay."

"Why do you ask?" He sat back a bit, his arm moving around behind her shoulders.

"I don't know. I just saw...something..." Maddie thought for a moment and shrugged her shoulders. "Last night when I arrived, she gave me this....look. And today at lunch when she asked you back to the hot tub..."

"Yeah, that was strange," he nodded.

"Strange," Maddie repeated. "So I just assumed that maybe something was happening and she wasn't too thrilled that I'm here."

"Hmmm..." Harry shook his head. "No. I mean. Nothing's ever happened between us. To be completely honest, I've never even entertained the idea. Maybe she's just....I don't know, curious about you and I? After all that's happened?"

"Maybe," Maddie nodded with a smile, seeing that they were near the top of the slope. "Anyway. I thought I'd ask."

"I'm glad you did," he picked up his poles. "Just to be clear...the only place I have something going on...is right here."

"Oh?" She grinned. "You mean with me?"

With a wide, bright, warm smile, he nodded. "I mean with you."

"So tell me..." Harry's breath was warm in Maddie's ear as he leaned closer to her. His arm draped around her shoulders in the backseat of their car on the way to dinner. "Did you want to buy me that drink before dinner...or after?"
"Ha." Maddie bit her lip as she turned her eyes to him. Even in the darkness of the car, she could see the smug look on his face. "I still say I was hustled."

"Hustled?!" He sat back in mock offense.

"That's right," Maddie nudged him lightly in the ribs with her elbow, leaning closer into the curve of his arm. "You were slow as it goes down that mountain all morning. Right up till we laid down a bet. And suddenly you remembered how to ski."

With a chuckle he leaned in to kiss her cheek, his beard soft and tickly as he nuzzled close to her. "Maybe I was just warming up."

"Mmmm." Maddie's eyes narrowed, her ability to remain perturbed drifting as she turned her lips to his. "Maybe you're full of it."

"Maybe." He grinned and shrugged, his arm dropping down from the back of the seat, moving around her shoulders and drawing her closer. "But either way, you owe me a drink."

The group of friends piled from the small parade of vehicles they came in, filing into the restaurant/bar where they had reservations. Harry stepped from their car first and, turning back to Maddie, he lifted his eyebrows and offered his hand to her. Knowing these moments, however small they seemed, were big steps. Skiing next to him all day? Taking his hand in public? They both knew the possible ramifications of their actions. And he more than understood any potential hesitance she might feel at reaching out for him.

But Maddie's smile was easy and her fingers were steady as she placed her hand into his and stepped from the car. Not even thinking about pulling away. Tightening her fingers around his, she fell into step with him, moving in closer as the group moved inside. They were greeted by the hostess, escorted quickly to their long table tucked away in the back of the place. Harry took Maddie's coat, hanging it up with his before taking his seat next to hers.

Lexie, still holding onto a more muted look of confusion, took a seat next to Maddie. Maddie offered her a smile, a kind hello. And though she returned both, Maddie could see that something was still weighing heavily on her mind. Though Maddie absolutely believed Harry when he told her nothing was going on between them, she also couldn't deny the tension she felt coming off of the woman next to her. Maybe she didn't like her, maybe she wasn't happy that Maddie was back with the group of friends, maybe she simply had questions. Maddie wasn't sure what it was, but she knew for sure that something was brewing behind that beautiful smile of Lexie's. After drinks had been delivered and orders had been placed, Maddie's assumptions were confirmed. With a deep breath and a tight-lipped smile, Lexie turned to the newest addition to the group; intent on getting some answers.

"So Maddie..." She folded her hands together in her lap. "You're still living in New York?"

"Mmm," Maddie nodded, finishing a sip from her drink as she turned her attention to Lexie. "I am still living in New York."

"That's wonderful," Lexie's smile pulled higher. "In the same place you lived with Bishop?"

Maddie blinked at the mention of his name; blinked and smiled. "Yes. In the same place I lived with Bishop. It's a wonderful home. I can't imagine leaving it."
"Ah," Lexie nodded, the corner of her mouth twitching. "So, no big plans for moving?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "Not any time soon." Though Harry was in conversation with Sean across the table, his ears pricked up, listening in on what was being said.

"I've always been fascinated with New York City," Lexie reached for her drink. "So big and bustling and the men..." She chuckled. "Dating must be fantastic! So many men to pick from."

Maddie laughed lightly, her forehead creasing a tiny bit in confusion as Lexie turned questioning eyes to her. "Oh...sure..." Maddie shrugged, dismissing it with a wave of her hand. "I suppose it must be."

"Ah come on," Lexie leaned in, an air of conspiracy in her voice as it lowered. "The last I heard you were doing quite fine in that department."

"The last you heard?" Kiki had tuned into the conversation, her eyes narrowing in on Lexie; instantly catching the tone of the moment.

"Yes," Lexi nodded, innocence settled in her wide eyes. "You and the sexy as hell actor."

"Sorry?" Maddie swallowed the drink of wine in her mouth, coughing as she raised her eyebrows to the woman next to her. She could feel Harry's eyes swing over to the two of them, could feel his attention shifting.

"Yes! I could have sworn I read something about you and Charlie Hunnam." With her wine glass in her hand and a devious grin on her face, she forced herself not to look at Harry who was absolutely watching their interaction. "Was that true? Are you seeing Charlie Hunnam?"

"Ha..." Maddie blinked, taken off guard. "Well, I mean...it was true. I saw him for a while, but not anymore. Not for a while."

"No?!" Lexie's eyebrows shot up. "Goodness, I don't know why not...."

"Lexie," Kiki laughed, her head shaking as she glanced over to Harry. "What are you talking about?"

"I just meant that he's...you know...really fucking sexy."

"Wow..." Maddie looked down at her hands, her tipsy mind working overtime to try to wrap itself around what was happening.

"Are you kidding me right now?" Kiki asked, her eyes pointed and fixed on the youngest member of the group.

"What? No!" Lexie laughed. "He was like a sex God. At least he was on TV. Jesus..." She shook her head, swallowing back some of her drink. "Tell me," she leaned closer to Maddie. "Was he as gorgeous in person as he was on TV?"

Maddie could feel the heat rise to her cheeks as she glanced at Harry. Harry with a bemused smirk on his face and a bit of fire in his eyes. "Yeah, Maddie..." He took a drink. "Was he as gorgeous in person as he was on TV?"
Shaking her head at him, Maddie shrugged and turned her steady gaze to Lexie. "I don't know. I actually never saw him on TV."

As a smattering of laughter rounded the group, Lexie sat back in her seat, momentarily paused in whatever effort she had been focused on. Kiki, seizing the opportunity, was quick to redirect the conversation; desperate to pull it away from this uncomfortable place it was heading. And everyone followed her lead, jumping right into the debate over after-dinner plans. But even as Maddie settled into her seat, even as she pulled Harry's hand into hers, she couldn't quite let go of Lexie's questions.

What was her motivation? Was it about Bishop? Was it about Harry? Was it just an intense curiosity about this new woman who was drawing attention? Was it dislike? Maddie still wasn't completely sure. It truly could have been any of it. And it wasn't until much later, after dinner, after drinks, after some dancing had begun, that Maddie's questions narrowed in on an answer.

Maddie was coming back from the bathroom, ready for another drink. But when she stepped around the corner, when she approached the table, the scene before her drew her to a standstill. While she was gone, Lexie had quickly, and quite strategically, moved right into Maddie's seat. And, though Harry was in an animated conversation with Sean across the table, it was very clear what–or who–was the focus of Lexie's inquiries.

The moony look in her eyes, the swoony smile on her face, the angle of her posture leaning towards him.

This was about Harry. Oh man, Maddie sighed as she heard a giggle peel from Lexie's lips. This was really about Harry.

Instead of going the route of a jealous girlfriend out to mark her territory, Maddie took the highroad. Moving right past Harry and Lexie, she slipped into an empty seat at the end of the table near Kiki.

And she was rewarded for her decision. Once Harry spotted her back at the table, he smiled and nodded politely to Lexie and, reaching for his drink, rose from his chair and made his way to Maddie. Moving an empty chair next to hers, he didn't look back once as he took a seat; didn't even blink as he leaned in to kiss her shoulder.

As much as Maddie tried to ignore it, the stone cold glare coming from Lexie couldn't be missed. Maddie knew that eventually she was going to have to address it. But it wasn't going to be this night.

No, tonight Maddie's mind and her efforts were going to be on the way Harry's lips were moving closer and closer to her neck. They were going to be on the way his beard tickled her skin, the way the warmth from his mouth drew goose-bumps to her flesh. As she bent her head down to meet his lips with hers, she could feel her heart patter at just how risky this was and, for the moment, all efforts to keep this from happening were forgotten.

At least for this night.

"Harry..." His name pulled from her lips like honey; soft and sweet and slow. They were making
their way up the stairs to their room, the chill from the night slowly moving from their bones.

"Yes?" He answered her wide, tipsy smile with a bright grin of his own. His arm was around her; steady and warm. And all thoughts of Lexie had disappeared from Maddie's mind–even the cold glare she had tossed her way when Harry had told the rest of the crew that he and Maddie were going to forgo the games and late night drinks for a little festivities of their own.

Tucking in closer to him, her hands slid around his waist. "I'm cold." With the sweetest of smiles, she blinked up at him.

With a deep chuckle, he drew her closer, his hands rubbing her arms, his lips pressing a kiss to her temple. "Well then, I suppose I should start formulating a plan to warm you up."

Sighing happily, Maddie nuzzled in closer to him. "I suppose you should."

"I do have to warn you though," Harry released his hold on her only to open the door to their room. "I'm fairly certain that all we have to drink in here is champagne."

"Oh..." Maddie's smile slipped higher as she moved in past him.

"Mmmm," he nodded, stepping into the room but pausing before he shut the door. "If you'd like, I could run back down and fetch some tea or hot coco or..."

"No," Maddie shook her head slowly, moving further into the room, turning to smile at him. "I would rather not risk losing you to the party crowd downstairs."

"Aw come on," his voice lowered as he pushed the door closed behind him. "You should know by now...you'll never lose me."

"Ahhh..." Maddie could feel the heat flushing her cheeks, her eyes darting off to the side. "Is that so?"

"Yes," Harry's voice came up scratchy. Clearing his throat, he reached back to lock the door. "But if you want me to stay..."

"I do."

"Then I will." He shrugged his shoulders and moved into the room. "And we'll just have to make do with champagne."

"This beautiful bottle right here?" Maddie's hand fell on the iced bottle that had been set up in the room. "I think we'll manage."

"Perfect," Harry answered, his eyes drawn and locked on her as she pulled the bottle from the ice and went to work on the cork. Moving right to her side, he scooped up the large fluffy blanket off the back of the couch and, as she poured the bubbly into the glasses, he draped the blanket over her shoulders.

"Thank you," she turned to face him, a glass in each hand. "Champagne?"

"Yes," his hands were warm on her shoulders. "Would you mind taking them over to the settee by the fireplace? I think I'll start it up and..."
Maddie giggled into her glass, swallowing the champagne in her mouth before smiling up at him. "You're going to start a fire?"

"Yes," he pulled back, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Why? You doubt my ability to start a fire?"

"No," she laughed, shaking her head as she moved over to the settee, still holding two glasses of champagne. "I have no question that you would be able to start a fire..." Sinking down onto the settee, she took another sip from her glass. "It's the management of the fire I'm concerned about."

"The management of the...wow..." Harry shook his head, his hand rubbing at his chin as a spark lit in his eyes. "I can't believe..."

"Oh come on now," Maddie's smile curled up at the sides. "You think I don't...know?" Her eyes were teasing as they looked up at him over the rim of her glass.

"Don't know what?"

"You know what." Maddie snickered, took a long sip and tucked her feet up underneath her. Glancing over at the fireplace, she tilted her head and smiled up at him. "He told me."

"He told you..." Harry trailed off, confused for only a moment before it hit him. Taking a step back, he looked her over. "He told you."

"About the time you nearly burned down Highgrove? Yes. Yes he did."

Harry's laugh was loud and booming. "That bastard."

"Yes," Maddie snickered. "Yes sometimes he was."

"I can't believe he told you that," Harry's mind drifted back to that moment in his teenage years, a hint of embarrassment creeping across his cheeks.

"Yes well, it's a wonderful story..." Maddie sighed and rose from the settee. The blanket fell at her feet as she held the glasses out to him. "But maybe you let me handle the fire?"

"Oh and what? You're the great fire-starter now are you?" He tried to glare at her but failed miserably; the heat in the room and the heat in his cheeks making him wonder if they really needed a fire at all.

"That's right," Maddie nodded, moving over to the fireplace, looking it over with a smile on her face. "The only time I ever burnt anything down it was on purpose."

"Sorry?" Harry sputtered, nearly choking on a mouthful of champagne. "The only time you ever burnt anything down..."

"Mmm," Maddie nodded, realizing the fireplace was gas and reaching for the switch. "Well, would you look at that. we're saved."

"Funny." Harry crossed his arms, completely amused by her. "But you were saying..."

"I wasn't," she shook her head, standing tall as her head cocked to the side.
"But you really should."

"Fine," she sighed, reaching to take a glass from Harry's hand. "Once. When I was a teenager, all of my cousins went off to the mountains on an Eagle Scout retreat where they pitched tents and started fires from scratch and had to locate berries and...and I desperately wanted to go only I couldn't..."

"Why not?" His voice was soft as he watched her, totally engaged with her words, with the way she spoke them, with the animation in her face, in her hands.

"Because I was a girl," she rolled her eyes, though she smiled at the memory. "They teased me mercilessly for DAYS before they left, telling me over and over and over how I couldn't go because I was a girl and how girls couldn't do the same things boys could." She paused for a drink.

"What did you do?" Harry's lips quirked up to the side, knowing this was going to be good; knowing the competitive streak she still had in her had only been stronger when she was younger.

"While they were away at the retreat..." She took a deep breath and, in the sweetest way possible, she confessed. "I burnt down their fort."

"What?!" Harry's eyes flashed wide. "You burned down their fort?!"

"I sure as hell did." She nodded emphatically. "It was neatly done, well contained, and when they got home, all they had was ashes..."

"Jesus..." Harry shook his head.

"They deserved it!"

"Of course they did," he nodded with a smirk.

"Should have known better than to antagonize me like that. Leaving me out, telling me that girls couldn't start a fire from scratch. Please." She puffed air out of her lips. "Burned down your whole damn fort with a finely chiseled stick and some dry grass boys."

"Oh my God..." Harry couldn't stop laughing as he soaked up her energy, her spirit.

"Assholes." Maddie grumbled through her own laughter, sinking back down to her seat.

With a shake of his head and a sigh, the words just slipped right from his mouth before he could even think of stopping them. "God...I love you."
Chapter 23

She knew that she shouldn't be surprised, that the words shouldn't stun her like they did.

But they did.

With a rush of wonder, her breath sucked into her lungs and her body flushed warm. In the millisecond it took for her to blink, she knew that this particular revelation shouldn't be a shock.

But it was.

With heat in her cheeks and a flutter in her stomach—it was.

"I'm sorry." The words he spoke cut into the haze of heaviness that had settled between them with his last revelation.

"Sorry?" Maddie looked to him, a puff of laughter caught between her tipsy lips.

"It...slipped." He explained with a wave of his hand. "I didn't meant to just..." Looking down at his shuffling feet, he tried to cover for his hasty, unplanned admission. "Blurt it out like that and..."

"It's okay," she offered him a smile, offered him an out.

"It's okay?" He looked up to her, his eyebrows drawing to center.

"That it...slipped," she used his word, a casual shrug dismissing it with ease.

"I..." He could feel his cheeks reddening as his mind worked way too fast for this time of night, for the amount of drinks he had enjoyed. "You were telling that story and...and you're so fucking adorable and it just..."

"Slipped," she smiled; she knew, she understood.

Gulping at the unexpected emotion in his throat, Harry nodded. "I didn't mean to freak you out."

"You didn't," she assured him. "It happens, you know...people blurt it out all the time without thought, without meaning behind it." She took a sip of her drink. "It's not a big deal. Don't worry about it."

"Okay."

"Okay?" She lifted her eyebrows to him, checking to make sure.

"Okay." With a long, slow exhale, Harry sank into the oversized chair across from her. "Okay."

With a soft, more than amused chuckle, Maddie rose from her seat, moving to pour more champagne into her lacking glass.

And Harry watched her.
He watched her move in that casually graceful way she had about her. He watched the tilt of her head, the smile on her lips, the look in her eyes that was this wonderful jumbled mix of sleepy and thoughtful and happy and curious and...and he could feel it take over—that time in his life when he had known exactly what he wanted to say to her, a time in his life when he felt no anxiety whatsoever about saying it. A time in his life when telling her had been so second nature; like breathing.

He watched her and the gravity that had returned to his life when she had, only intensified. His heart, his weathered, battered, all-too-often-ignored, heart was tight in his chest, pounding in his ears. And though he was trying to ignore it, though he was trying to brush it all aside until morning, until he was more sober, until he wasn't so caught up in this moment that he might not be thinking clearly—though he was trying, it wasn't working.

He really should have known better than to try. He had always had a weakness when it came to her, when it came to this. And as much as he had tried over the years to stuff it down, he hadn't stood a chance. Not then, not now.

And somewhere, in the distant corners of his wild mind, he could have sworn he heard his best friend calling him "chicken."

"Harry?" Maddie was watching him, curiosity deep in her smile.

This time, when he blurt it out, it was intentional. "I meant it."

Maddie blinked, her heart hammering to a stop. "What?" Her voice was soft and small.

"I..." He cleared his throat and sat up in the chair, leaning forward with his forearms on his knees, he brought his hands together and looked right up to her. His eyes locked right with hers, intentionally heavy, serious. "It slipped out, it did. And I didn't necessarily mean to say it then and like that...but God...Maddie..." His lips twitched up into a soft smile. "Of course I meant it. I've...I've never stopped meaning it. Even when I did a horrible job showing it. Even when I didn't deserve it...I meant it."

"Nothing," he shook his head, his smile stretching further. "You don't have to say anything. I just...ha..." He exhaled. "I just wanted you to...know."

But her mind and her heart were scattered and among the happy brand of chaos, she simply couldn't find words that felt right. Blinking at her emotions, her voice came out in a whisper. "I don't know what to say..."

"Sorry..." Setting her glass on the table, she wiped at her eyes and took a deep breath and she moved back to her spot across from him. Her eyes were kind, gentle, as they stretched across the space, holding onto his. "I want to, you know..."
"Want to?" His voice was quiet, as though he didn't want to disrupt this moment, didn't want to disturb it.

"To fall in love again," she sighed, her smile curling higher, her tears fading. "To get caught up in it all, to lose myself, to just...jump."

"Head first and fully clothed?" Harry offered, his eyebrows lifting as he invited her into the humor of the moment.

"Is there really any other way?" She took his invitation.

"Not really," he shook his head.

"No..." She agreed. "I want to do that again. I want to feel all of that again..."

"With me?" He whispered, too afraid to say it any louder, afraid that his hope just might shatter at his feet.

With tears in her eyes and the warmest of feelings in her chest, she nodded, her voice just as soft as his. "With you."

"But?" He held his breath.

"No but," she gulped, stunned by her own revelations. "I just need...time. Some time to feel settled, to manage my own demons, to resolve....everything..." She breathed. "Can I have some time?"

"Hey..." He reached out to her then. "From me...you can have anything you want. Anything you want."

"A little time," she looked so innocent, so nervous as she reached out to take his hand. "And patience."

"Of course." He collected her fingers into his hand, bending to kiss her knuckles. "Is it okay...if I do?" He looked up to her with hope in his smile. "From over here?"

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, the nervousness slipping from her voice. "Yes...though..."

"Though?" He felt his whole heart pause.

"Though it might be better if you did it from over here..." With a curl of her lips and a tug of her hand, she was pulling Harry from his seat, pulling him from the last bit of will he had left when it came to her.

And he went. With a laugh, with a sigh, with his heart in his hands, he went right to her. He probably always would.

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Maddie was carefully quiet as she slipped from their bed. It was later, much later, and though Harry had passed out long ago–worn from the late night, from the love making, from the champagne and the emotions–Maddie was wide awake. In fact, she hadn't been able to fall asleep at all. So she had
laid there in his arms as their heartbeats settled, as their breathing evened out, as he drifted off to sleep next to her. And then, once she was sure he was out, she slowly slipped from under the covers and stepped away from the bed.

She needed some air. Even with the frigid chill of the late night, the deep winter, she needed some air and some space. So she pulled on her sweats, her woolen socks. She stuffed her feet into her boot slippers and wrapped herself up in her robe and then the blanket and as quietly as she possibly could, she stepped from their room out into the clear, crisp night.

Taking a deep breath, the air stung as it passed into her lungs, her nose freezing at the chill. But she moved further out anyway. Standing at the edge, at the railing, she leaned against it and turned her eyes up to the sky. The snow had stopped for the briefest of moments and the break in the clouds allowed the moon to shine through. The brightness of it reflected off the mountains of snow and the stars lit up the sky.

It was beautiful. Even as the cold crept into her bones, it was beautiful and it was just the kind of soul-clearing moment she needed, just the right kind of quiet, the right kind of space she needed to let her brain and her heart mull over all that had happened that night.

And just that easy, she was back in the room with Harry—back in the moment when he laid it all out in front of her and told her he loved her.

"Wow..." She exhaled, the slight trace of tears in her eyes stinging against the cold air.

He loved her. Harry loved her. Again. Still? Her mind, never really quite at rest, rushed forward, a flurry of thought and emotion; running it all over and over again. Her brain, her heart, it was all such a wild contrast to the peaceful stillness around her.

And her emotions...all of the feelings she had, all of the feelings that she knew were there, that had been revived since Harry had stepped back into her life...all of them had been stirred up. It was so easy to fall for him, she knew that to be true. She had done it before; quick and hard and so completely. But there were still so many hurdles for them to cross—so many things that might shake them.

That might shake him.

Tugging the blanket tighter around her, she took in a slow, deep breath and she looked out over the snow covered world before her and she asked herself the question that had been balled up in a lump in her throat nearly all night.

Did she love him?

Turning back towards the house, she looked in through the large, glass windows and her eyes danced over him; shirtless and sleeping on his stomach, his broad shoulders exposed and vulnerable. Tears filling her eyes and a warmth filling her heart, deep, deep down she knew the answer to that.

But.

Turning her eyes back to the wide spread of mountains before her, she swallowed back the taste in her mouth at that word.
But what? That voice in her head that sounded like her late husband challenged. But what?

But she was afraid. But she was scared. But she had before and he had before.

But look what had happened.

She shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut and she tried, with all of the spirit of Bishop she had inside of her to push away the fear.

But it was there.

The question was, what was she going to do about it? Turning back to look at Harry, her lips curved upwards and her nerves relaxed just a little bit.

Time and patience. She needed to give herself what she was asking of him; time and patience. She needed to stop worrying, to give herself a break, to let herself be in this moment, in this relationship, to let herself fall. To jump.

As a chilled shiver ran through her body and a yawn pushed its way from her lips, she sighed.

She needed to get back inside; back in the warm room, in the comfy bed. Back in Harry's arms.

So she stuffed aside any of the lingering fears she had and she did just that.
It was their last full day in Verbier and when Maddie woke, she found a strong, steady snow falling outside their windows. It was heavy and white and fluffy and it took up nearly the entire view, obscuring the mountains and the town below in a way that made her sigh into a smile. Turning on her pillow, her eyes sought and found Harry. Still sleeping, he was sprawled out next to her in a casually careless way that made it clear just how at ease he felt with her; how safe. Tucking her hands up under her pillow, she curled up on her side and watched him.

He was so...handsome. Tall and lean with those infamous broad shoulders. His hair, that unmistakable burst of red stuck out in every which way. Her eyes moved to his face; the scruff of his beard, the slope of his nose, the curve of his lips; turned up just enough at the corners that it looked like he was smiling.

He probably was, Maddie thought, muffling a giggle with her hand. He had fallen asleep the night before with a ridiculous grin, maybe it hadn't faded much as he slumbered. Sighing again, she nestled deeper into her pillow, her mind drifting over the night before, over the last week, over the last few months.

"Hmmm..." The soft sound pushed through her lips as she thought about all of these wonderful moments, about all of these new experiences.

And next to her, the smiling, sleeping Duke stirred. "Hmmm?" He smiled without opening his eyes. "Care to let me in on what's making you sigh over there?"

"Mmmm..." Maddie's smile deepened as she scooted closer to him. "You."

"Me?" His eyebrows lifted, his eyes pulling open as he turned to face her, to see her. "I'm not even awake and I'm making you sigh? That's bound to do crazy things to my ego."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back in laughter as he reached out to her, pulling her closer. "I was just....I'm happy." Her eyes welled up just a little as her hands landed softly on his chest, as his wrapped around her.

"Happy?"

"Very, very happy," she nodded. "Happy that I'm waking up next to you, happy that I'm here in Verbier with you, happy that..." She blinked and swallowed and went for honest. "Happy that you're back in my life...I'm really happy about that."

With a wide, easy smile on his face, he leaned in to kiss her; barely able to contain just how giddy that particular confession made him. "Good..." He spoke softly against her lips. "I want you to be happy Maddie..." He kissed her again.

"Mmmm..." She smiled as his lips lingered just a little longer, as they pressed forward just a little more. "Do you know what would make me...even happier?" Her eyebrows rose over her eyes as she lifted her leg up and over his hip, a move meant to bring him closer to her.

"Ha...." He chuckled, his large, strong hand moving down over her hip, sliding hotly down to her
knee where he tugged her leg higher, tighter against him. "I think I might be able to guess..."

With a sigh, Maddie's fingers worked up into his hair. "I think you just might." With a soft tug to his hair, she brought his lips back to hers. With a groan and a chuckle, Harry moved over her, pressing his body down over hers, guessing exactly what might make her happier.

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The snow continued to fall well through the morning, hampering their attempts to spend their last day on the slopes. But they had given it their best shot. Eventually rising from their warm bed, Maddie and Harry had geared up and set out—even though they were the only ones in the house to do so. By the time they finally surrendered to the weather and returned to the house, they found the party inside already in full-swing. Shedding their snow gear, they made their way towards the raucous laughter and loud voices. With pink cheeks and chilled toes, Harry held onto her hands, doing his best to rub heat back into them.

"There they are!" Kiki's voice rang out above the rest. "I see you've survived the great blizzard and have returned home to the merriment."

"The merriment?" Maddie snickered at the makeshift drinking games stationed throughout the room. "Are you playing beer pong?"

"Why yes we are," Leo answered with hazy eyes. "Though some of them have Scotch in them." He nodded towards the cups lined up on the ping pong table.

"Of course they do," Maddie laughed, pulling her hands from Harry's in order to take the drink Sean was offering her.

"Try this," he smiled, still appearing mostly sober. "It'll chase the chill right out of you."

"Thank you," Maddie grinned, bringing the cup to her nose for a sniff. "Should I be afraid?"

"I would be," Harry laughed, his hand moving warmly down her back as he stepped away. "Beer?"

"In the fridge!" Kiki pointed towards the kitchen. "We made a run this morning so we're freshly stocked for our last night."

"You made a run this morning?" Maddie laughed, watching Harry disappear into the kitchen before she took a deep breath and took a sip. Though the liquid inside was warm and spicy, it tasted amazing. "Wow..." She looked up to Sean, pleased. "You were right. I'm warmer already."

"See," he winked at her, moving back to his wife's side. "I know what I'm doing."

"Don't get ahead of yourself love," Kiki winked up at him. "Come on Maddie. Play some cards with us?"

Glancing back towards the kitchen, she saw Harry being pulled towards the ping pong table with Leo, his wife and his sister. When he looked up and tossed her a smile, she tossed one back and nodded. "I'm in." Taking her seat next to Kiki, she took another drink and sighed as they dealt her in.

As the day wore on and the drinking continued, the games shifted and switched but the laughter
only increased. When they paused for lunch, a group of the boys, including Harry, began to pull on their coats and boots, ready to head out to collect a few more provisions for what appeared to be an entire day snowed-in.

As they gathered up requests and readied themselves to go, Maddie spotted Lexie sitting off to the side, watching as everyone geared up. Taking a deep breath, she made an alcohol-assisted decision and moved towards the young girl. She had been pleasant throughout the entire morning, not once shooting Maddie a dark look, not once making overly flirtatious advances at Harry and Maddie had decided that maybe she had been wrong.

Maybe she should extend a peace offering.

"Hi," Maddie smiled as she stepped up to her, her arms folded across her chest as everyone watched in amusement while Leo looked for his wallet.

"Hi..." Lexie glanced to Maddie out of the corner of her vision, the smile that was already on her face seemed to have frozen in place.

"Hi," Maddie repeated, clearing her throat as she shook her head. "So I was thinking...you and I haven't really had an opportunity to talk at all since I've been here. Maybe while the boys are out..."

"Ha..." Lexie let out a small laugh, her posture straightening tall and stiff as she shook her head at Maddie. "I'm not sure it's necessary that the two of us...have the opportunity to talk."

Caught off guard by her harshness, Maddie blinked her eyes. "Sorry?"

Lexie turned to face her then, her eyes steady as she met Maddie's gaze. "We don't have to do...this. Make small talk, be friends. I know that the rest of the group seems to...really like you and that's fine. But I know why you're here and as unfair as that might be..."

"Unfair?" Maddie was shocked, stunned really. "I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean..."

"Of course you don't," Lexie spoke under her breath, looking down at her feet as she shook her head. "It doesn't matter." She lifted her eyes and shrug to Maddie. "It doesn't matter." And then, in the most dismissive way possible, she turned her attention to the larger group, taking steps away from Maddie. "You know what...I'm coming with you! Wait for me!"

Without so much of a glance back at Maddie, Lexie was hurrying forward, into the laughing group of boys. She was finding her coat and poking fun at her brother.

And all Maddie could do was watch; with wide eyes and an absolute lack of words.

And then she began to stew.

With Lexie's quick, harsh response to her attempt to bridge whatever gap it was that laid between them, the words had stung, the way she had brushed her off had been a shock. But after she left, after she hurried out the door alongside Harry and the others, all Maddie could do was sit there with her words, with her inflection.

And it simmered.
She felt foolish for having allowed her guard down, silly for having believed that maybe she hadn't been judging things correctly up until then. She should have known better than to question her first gut instinct, but she had wanted to give Lexie the benefit of the doubt.

And she had been wrong. In the next few minutes, Maddie reached for another drink and she made up her mind. She was going to talk to Lexie again and this time, she wasn't going to be able to brush her off so easily.

She wasn't mad, she wasn't looking for a fight, but she wasn't going to shrug it off and let it slide. Not anymore.

But before she could stew in it for too long, before she could let it shade her mood a little darker, Maddie's phone buzzed in her pocket and the name on the screen drew her instantly from the irritation she was headed for.

With a fresh, deep breath and a wide smile on her face, she slid her finger across the screen and pressed the phone to her ear.

"Charlie."

When the group returned to the house, ready to settle in for the afternoon into the evening, Maddie's smile had widened, her face had brightened and she had all but forgotten about her momentary run in with Lexie. In fact, she didn't even give her a second glance as they all poured into the living room, shedding coats and passing out fulfilled requests. Completely unaware of anything that had been brewing in Maddie's mind, Harry moved right to her side, bending to kiss her lips, his nose cold against hers.

"Miss me?" His eyes were wide and hopeful as her hands curved around his cheeks, pulling him back for more.

"Absolutely," she kissed him again. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Of course," he nodded, pulling her hand from his cheek and kissing her palm. "I'm going to grab another drink if that's okay?" She nodded. "Want anything?"

"I'm good," she lifted her glass of Scotch to him.

"Perfect. I'll be right back." He reluctantly let her fingers slide from his as he went to fetch his drink. He was back in no time, a drink in hand as he followed her from the room, in search of a quiet place to talk.

"So listen..." Maddie pulled him into a reading room on the top floor of the house, windows on every wall showcasing the view and, at that time, the still falling snow. "There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Yeah?" He took a sip from his drink, leaning back against a desk that sat underneath a window. "Everything okay?"

"Yes," she nodded quickly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as she faced him. A slight nervousness running through her as she sorted out what she wanted to say. "Everything's great."
"Okay," he smiled up at her, catching the thoughtfulness in her eyes, recognizing the look on her face. "What is it then?"

"Well..." She sucked in a big breath and pressed her hands together in front of her, her fingers twisting together as she returned his smile. "Do you remember Charlie?"

Finishing his sip, Harry's eyebrows drew up and together. "Charlie?" He sat down his drink, searching his mind. "Charlie..." His head shook slightly as his eyes pulled to hers. But when he saw the nervous sort of smile on her face, when he caught the look in her eyes, it dawned on him. "Ah. Charlie."

"Yes. Charlie."

"The actor." As much as he tried, he couldn't keep the slightly jealous tone out of his voice. "The one who's sexy as hell on and off tv?"

For the moment she was going to ignore the words he was repeating from Lexie and focus on what was in front of her. With a slight chuckle, she shrugged. "He IS an actor. Yes. His name is Charlie Hunnam...he's from Britain."

"Yes I know," he took another drink, watching her as she began to pace. "You dated him for a while."

"I did," she pointed at him as she nodded. "Just for awhile. And it was quite some time ago."

"Sure," Harry took a breath, trying to prepare for whatever it was she was working over in that brain of hers. "You want to talk to me about Charlie?"

"I do," her head nodded quickly, her eyes wide and innocent as she fidgeted.

"Is there something going on with Charlie?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "Well...yes. He called. While you were all out just now, he called."

"He did?" Harry's focus shifted away from his drink, the heat in his neck rising up into his cheeks. "He did."

"He did," she took a deep breath and a sip of Scotch. Clearing her throat, she continued on with her explanation. "The film he was working on when he was in New York is getting ready to premiere and it's going to open in the city first. And he called to see...well..." She took a breath. "He called to see if I would go with him. To the New York City Premiere." She paused, watching the way that information sank in, the way his face seemed to harden just a little bit, just enough.

"I'm sorry..." Harry laughed, shaking his head as he tried to tamp down his naturally jealous tendencies. "He called you up to ask you on a date?" His eyebrows lifted high. "Is that what you're telling me right now?"

"No, no," she shook her head quickly, stepping closer to him, her fingers stretching to rest on his arm. "Not a date. He...he knows that I have...that I'm seeing someone. I told him all about you. He just...I don't know." She shrugged. "I think I'm the only one he knows in the city and...he just...I don't know. He wants to take a friend. And I am that...a friend." She bit her bottom lip as she
watched him. "Only a friend."

There was a long beat of quiet between them, Harry watching her thoughtfully, her watching him as she tried to read his thoughts. As his hand ran over hers, still resting on his arm, he tipped his head to the side with a smile. "I'm not sure what you're wanting me to say here..."

"I guess I don't know either," she looked down that their fingers folded together and she took a deep breath. "I want to go. With Charlie, to the premiere. I want to go and I guess...I don't know...I thought I should talk to you about it...I..."

As Harry sucked in a breath, he turned his face from her, clearing his throat as he looked out the great big windows, trying to reel in his scattered thoughts and emotions. "Wow..." He laughed. "I don't know Maddie...a date with an ex?"

"It's not a date," she shook her head. "And he's not an ex, not really..."

"No?" He looked back at her, eyebrows up, eyes curious. "Did you date him?"

"Yes," she nodded. "You know that I did but..."

"Did you sleep with him?" His voice slipped softer, unable to help but ask.

"Excuse me?" Maddie couldn't help but balk at that, couldn't help the snicker that came with it. Her hand pulled away from him. "Are we really going to catalogue the people we've slept with?"

"That's a yes," Harry nodded, tipping his drink to his lips.

"So what if it is?" Maddie's arms crossed over her chest defiantly. "Does it make a difference?"

"Would it make a difference to you?" He countered. "If I told you I wanted to go out on a date with an ex? Would it make a difference if I had slept with her or not?"

Maddie's argument paused, her reasoning stalled. Blinking her eyes, she looked away, taking a breath and trying for calm. "I suppose it would."

"I suppose it would."

"But this isn't a date," she eased her stance and took a step forward. "It's an old friend who wants to spend time with me and...and who I want to spend some time with." Standing tall, she didn't hedge away from him. "Yes. I slept with him. If you must know...I slept with him. He was...he was the first after Bishop. He was the...only after Bishop..." She swallowed back a lump in her throat. "Until you." Her eyes locked with his. "I don't want to be in a relationship with him and he...he doesn't want to be in a relationship with me. We had what we had, when we had it and it was important but...that's all it was. And now he's going to be in town and he wants to spend some time with me and that...that's all it is." She took a deep breath. "That's all it is Harry."

"Hey..." He reached for her, seeing the emotion that was invoked by thoughts of her husband.

"I'm not really asking for permission here," she shook her head. "This is something that's important to me, something I want to do and...I don't know. I just thought I should talk to you about it first."

"So that's it then," he pulled his hand back, straightening up and standing tall. "No discussion?"
"You're going to do whatever you want?"

"I..." She blinked, thrown for just a second. "Yes..." She exhaled. "Yes. I'm going to go. But I thought I should talk to you about it first..."

"Talk about it?" He laughed, taking a step around her. "What is there to talk about? You've decided to go. Doesn't seem like there's much left to say after that."

"Harry..." She turned to watch him, catching the tone in his voice. "I wanted you to hear it from me, not from..."

"The newspapers?" He offered, his shoulders squaring as he looked out the windows. "The internet? The pictures of my..." He shook his head, his laughter bitter. "Of you on his arm at some big movie premiere...smiling for the cameras and...Ha. What's left to talk about Maddie? You want me to help you pick out a dress?" Harry lifted his drink to his mouth and finished it.

"Yeah..." She exhaled. He was mad, clearly. This hadn't been exactly how she had hoped it would go. "You know what, I think I'm going to take a walk."

"A walk?" He spun around to face her.

"Before this goes somewhere neither of us really want it to go," she nodded, crossing her arms tightly over her chest. "We've been drinking and you're mad and I don't know...I don't want to fight with you on my last night here. So I'm going to take a walk and cool off. I'll be back, we'll pick it up where we left off. I just..." She shrugged her shoulders, a long, drawn out gesture. "I'll see you in a bit."

"Maddie..." Harry called out for her, taking half a step to reach for her but falling short. She slipped away from him and he let her go. Maybe it was for the best, maybe she was right. Maybe they both needed a second to breathe, to calm down.

Turning back towards the windows, he looked down at his empty glass and he sighed. He already hated himself for snapping. But he couldn't help it. The woman he loved was telling him she was going to spend a long, glamorous night on the arm of a man who she had been involved with, a man she had had enough feeling for to take to bed, to a bed she had shared with her husband.

And he believed her—that things with Charlie weren't like that—not anymore. But he also knew enough about her to know better. Things had been serious between them at one point, otherwise that man wouldn't have been such an important part of her past. He wouldn't still be a part of her present.

But he was. As crazy with jealousy as that made Harry, he was.

He sat up there in that reading room for a few minutes, debating something in his head he already knew the answer to. When he left, he told himself he was going to get a drink, going to go back to the party and wait for her to come to him.

But he knew better than that too.

As his feet moved him from that space, he knew he was heading out to find her—to make this right. He really didn't have it in him to leave too much time to them being apart. He loved her too much for that. And they had been apart long enough.
With her hands stuffed into the pockets of her coat, Maddie had decided to brave the weather and head out to the deck. Hoping the chill from the wind would calm her hot nerves, she had pulled on her coat and stepped outside. Leaving behind the noise and festivities of the rest of the homebound group, she closed the door behind her and welcomed the stark, cold silence.

The iciness in the air was sharp as she took in a deep breath, but it was welcomed. She needed to calm down, needed to back away from the red angry place she had been headed during her argument with Harry. The snow on the deck crunched under her feet and as she rounded the corner towards the back, she saw that she wasn't alone.

"Lexie," Maddie exhaled her name, the heat instantly returning to her cheeks. Perfect, she thought. Exactly what she needed. Taking in a slow breath, Maddie ignored the voice in her head that told her to just go back inside, to let this go. There may have been a time when she would have listened, but this wasn't it. Instead, she pulled her head taller, her back straighter and she walked right over to Lexie, riled up and ready to go.

"You want to tell me what you meant?" Sidestepping any stab at pleasantries, she went right to the point.

"Excuse me?" Lexie barely glanced over to her, choosing instead to focus on her drink.

"You know why I'm here?" Maddie stepped even closer, her eyebrows lifting. "What did you mean by that?"

"Just what I said," Lexie turned to face her, not at all afraid to stand up to her. "I know why you're here."

"And why is that?"

"Oh come on," Lexie rolled her eyes. "Anyone with eyes can see you...chasing after Harry all over the Swiss countryside..."

"What?" Maddie laughed. "Chasing him?!"

"Don't do that," Lexie shook her head. "Not with me. I see right through you."

"I beg your pardon," Maddie was flabbergasted, her words were failing her.

"Nah," Lexie shook her head again, her voice echoing in her glass as she took a drink. "I see you trying to move right back in. And it's not quite fair..." Lexie looked down at the glass in her hands, swirling it around as her lips curled up at the corners. "Not really fair at all, don't you think?"

"Fair?" Maddie questioned, still thrown by where this was going.

"Yes." Lexie took another drink and sat her glass down on the railing with a clatter. "Fair." Crossing her arms over her chest, her eyes bore into Maddie's. "You know...it's not like you haven't already had a shot at him."

"A shot at him?" Maddie nearly laughed, her eyes widening as she tamed her smile.
"A shot at him. A turn. A chance," Lexie repeated, not nearly as humored by it all as Maddie. "You and he...you tried it once already. You were with him before. And for whatever reason, it didn't work out..."

"Listen," Maddie tried to cut in, more than ready to let this girl know all about the whatever she obviously didn't understand.

"No," Lexie shook her head with a huff of a laugh. "You followed me out here. You pushed the issue. You've already had a go with Harry before and it ended. You even got to marry his best friend..." She waved her hand dramatically, her mind more than a little scattered. "And now...just as..." She stopped, biting her lip and looking down at her hands for a moment. "Now you're back? Just like that? And he's just swept up in it all...." She looked to Maddie then. "It's just not...fair. To those of us who might have been next."

And there it was, the answer to the crazy questions running through Maddie's mind. Swallowing back the lump that had gathered unexpectedly in her throat, Maddie tried for calm. "First...I am not chasing him."

"You expect me to believe he's come after you? After all of these years? After you married his best friend right under his nose?"

Maddie could feel her face growing redder, hotter, at the casual mention of Bishop. "I don't expect you to understand the complexities of this relationship..."


"To you, I'm sure it does," Maddie's tone slipped harsh. She had had just about enough of this nonsense. "But whatever it is you think is happening here, you should know that when Harry and I started talking, he was more than clear that he wasn't seeing anyone."

"He wasn't," Lexie shook her head, her cheeks flushing to the same pink that was on the tips of her ears. "Yet."

And there it was. "Yet." Maddie repeated, her insides torn between having sympathy for Lexie and tearing into her. "I saw a picture of the two of you at dinner once and asked him about you, I assumed that maybe..."

"Ha!" Lexie laughed bitterly, growing slightly sad at the memory. "He SWORE up and down that nothing would ever happen, that I was his best friend's sister and..." She laughed again; disappointed. "But we were spending time together and I just know that if we had had a little more time, a little more fun, a little less...You." She took a breath. "But here you are...following him to Verbier..." She reached for her glass and, finding it empty, pushed it aside with a huff. "It's just not fair," Lexie looked up to her with a mix of anger and frustration. "You had your shot at Harry and you missed." It all sounded so simple to her, so cut and dry. "You really shouldn't get another shot at him. The right thing to do would be to step aside. Your time has passed. It's somebody else's turn."

Maddie shook her head, looking out to the snow as her mind worked overtime to process it all. Her natural inclination to fight, to toss back something sarcastic was at battle with this overwhelming urge she had to feel sorry for her. Because she so very clearly didn't get it; didn't get him. But before any of that could happen, a warm, deep voice spoke up, surprising the two of them and
pulling them both right back from their thoughts.

"Somebody else's turn?" Maddie and Lexie both looked directly to the source of the voice; Harry, bundled only in his zipped up hoody and a slight smirk on his bearded face, was standing just at the corner of the house, just out of their direct line of sight. With his arms crossed over his chest, he looked right past Maddie, who he had come looking for, and was staring right at Lexie. "Was there a queue I wasn't aware of?" An eyebrows lifted as he took a step forward, the smirk slipping from his mouth. "Like an amusement park ride of some sort?"

"Harry..." Lexie's voice, weighted with shock and embarrassment, was a breathless whisper. Swallowing at the sudden dryness, she stood tall and turned to face him, her eyes a bit frantic. "I was just...I mean...I..."

"Oh I heard," he nodded, pointing his thumb just over his shoulder. "I stepped out in time to hear the lot of it I suppose."

"But..." Lexie blinked, overcome with a swarm of emotions, wanting to explain but having no idea how to really.

Feeling bad for her, Maddie took a breath and cut in. "We were just...talking..." Harry's eyes shifted over to her, surprised to hear her speak up on behalf of the woman he had just heard lay into her. "And..."

"It's okay. I caught it," Harry smiled over at Maddie, shaking his head as his hand rubbed over the back of his neck.

"Maybe I should..." Maddie nodded her head towards the house. "Give you two a minute."

"Would you mind?" She could tell he was unsure about where they stood, his voice holding onto a slight edge.

"Not at all," Maddie shook her head, taking a step to move around him.

"Hey..." Harry reached out to catch her arm. "Don't go too far?" He was asking, not telling. "I actually came to find you and..."

"Sure," Maddie nodded, biting at her bottom lip. "I'll just be inside."

"Thank you," Harry smiled, releasing his hold on her. He watched as she left them standing there on the deck, waited for the door to close behind her before he shifted his focus back to Lexie; red-faced from a mix of anger and embarrassment.

"Harry, listen..."

"No," he shook his head, the word pulling slowly from his lips. "I think maybe it should be you who listens first." Moving in closer, his arms folded over his chest and his voice lowered. "I thought that before, when you...when you made your interests known..." Even in the dark, gray sky, she could see his cheeks blush. "I thought I was clear then about any possibility of the two of us..."

"Harry..." She held her hands out, taking a step towards him. A step he countered by taking one of his own away from her.
"No," he shook his head. "Lexie...please. Let's not make this more difficult than it has to be. There was never anything here for me," he waved his hand between the two of them. "Maddie or no Maddie, there never would be anything here for me. You're Leo's sister and..."

"And she was Bishop's wife," she spat out before she could stop herself, her hand covering her mouth instantly.

His jaw flexed and his eyes darkened and he had to remind himself who she was, had to remind himself how much he cherished his relationship with her brother. Taking a very calculated step forward, his voice drew deep. "When it comes to me and Maddie and...Bishop...you have no idea what you're talking about."

"I..."

"No idea." He cut her off harshly. "None."

"I'm sorry," her eyes shifted down. "I'm sorry. I know that you loved him..."

"I did," he was quick with his response. "I did love him and Lexie...I love her. I have for a long, long time and I still do. Very much."

"Fine," she sighed. "But have you really given yourself a chance to love anyone else?"

"Come on," he shook his head at her. "You know I was married and..."

"I'm not talking about that," she countered, grasping for anything. "I'm not talking about Cassandra. She wasn't right for you. But it doesn't have to be Maddie OR Cassandra. It could be somebody else..."

"But it isn't," he cut in, his hand pressing to his chest over his heart, his eyes pleading; desperate for her to understand what he was saying. "I don't know how I can be more clear about this. It isn't a matter of finding somebody to be with or somebody to love...it's, it's not about Maddie or Cassandra or anyone else. It's Maddie or..." He laughed, a soft, amused puff of air. "It's Maddie or nobody Lexie. Nobody."

"But..."

"No buts," he smiled, shrugging his shoulders helplessly. "That's the way it is. That's the way it will continue to be."

"Harry..."

"No," he shook his head. "No."

"You don't know what you're missing out on. You don't know what your options are...not really."

His eyes were kind, his smile endearing as his head tipped to the side. He knew more about his options than she thought. "I'm in love with her Lexie. I...ha...if anyone is chasing anyone around Verbier, it's me chasing her. It's always going to be that way, Lex. Even if she left me again, that's where my heart is. Me...chasing her."
When Harry stepped back into the house, he had every intention of sneaking off with Maddie so that they could have this out, so that they could resolve everything that seemed to still hang in the air between them. But everyone else around them had other plans.

"What the hell?" Harry glanced around, looking for the mass of people that had been there when he had stepped out. "Maddie? Hello?"

"We're out here!" Kiki's voice called from the main hallway. "We're going out!"

"Out?" Harry stepped into the grand foyer where the majority of them were pulling on shoes and coats. "Out where?"

"The pub," Sean spoke up, his voice muffled by the glove he held between his teeth as he put on his coat. "We're done being stuffed up inside. We're going out."

"Where is..." Harry glanced around the crowded space.

"Over here," her voice was soft behind him and he spun to face her. With a sheepish grin and a shrug, she zipped up her coat. "We're going out."

"You're going too?" He looked her over, trying to discern if this was something she wanted or something she was being gently forced into.

"Of course she's going too," Kiki snorted as she joined them, her arm wrapping around Maddie's shoulder. "Come on Wales. Get your shit together, get some shoes and...fuck. You're probably going to need a coat."

"Here we go!" Sean yelled out, holding Harry's coat out from behind them. "Put on your coat. It's freezing outside." 

"Yeah, okay..." Harry's eyes stayed focused on Maddie as he took his coat from Sean, pulling it on with half reluctance.

"Oh hey!" Leo spoke up. "Has anyone seen...there you are!" His smile widened as he looked behind Harry.

"Hey," Lexie's voice was quiet and surprised as she stepped into the craziness.

"Come along," Leo motioned for her to come closer. "We're heading out. It's time to go out and drink. Tell me Little Sister....would you like a drink?"

"You know what..." She sighed, stepping around Harry and Maddie to get to her brother. "I would like several."

"There you go!" Leo clapped his hands as the group laughed and began to file out the front door.

"Hey..." Harry's voice lowered, speaking only to Maddie. "Are you sure you want to do this? Go out to a pub for a drink?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Not just a drink," Maddie shook her head, amusement in her eyes as she patted his stomach and
moved past him towards the door. "Several."

The ride into town was wild and rambunctious and full of laughter and jokes and nobody, not one of the drunks among them, could even tell that there was tension among them. Nobody noticed the way Lexie sat as far away from the center of the laughter as possible. And nobody noticed the way Maddie and Harry smiled only halfway, the way they weren't entirely sure what to say to each other or where to put their hands as they moved from the car to the pub.

It took him a bit to get them back to where they needed to be, it took a minute to get her as alone as he possibly could in this loud, crowded pub. She was standing next to the tall table they had taken over, left alone when Kiki slipped away, heading to the dance floor with her husband. Seeing his chance, Harry took a long drink from his beer and moved to her side. With one hand moving around her to the table, he leaned in, his voice lowering as he spoke into her ear.

"I hate it." It was low, it was grumbly, but it was honest and it was for that reason that Maddie turned to look at him. Letting out a breath he had been holding all night, he confessed further. "I hate it, Maddie. I hate that you're going to go with him to the premiere. I hate that you're going to get dressed up to be with him. I hate that he gets to spend the night with you..."

"He doesn't get to spend the night with me," she countered.

"I hate it." His voice was short and clipped. "I hate everything about it and everything inside of me wants to tell you not to do it."

"Is that what you're doing?" She stood taller, squaring her shoulders. "Telling me not to do it."

"I don't get to tell you what to do," he shook his head. "You've made that clear."

"You don't," she agreed, taking a breath as she tried to calm the way her heart was beating out of her chest. "But I don't want you to be so mad about it, so upset...."

"Come on Maddie," he shook his head, looking down at his feet. "I don't get to tell you what you can do and you...you don't get to tell me how I can feel about it."

Biting back an unexpected rush of emotion, Maddie nodded her head. He was right, absolutely right. "And how do you..."

"I hate it," he bent his knees so that his eyes were level with hers, wanting her to see that he meant it. "I know you're going to do it. I know you're going to go and...fine. I can't stop you from going..." He held onto her gaze, open and honest. "But you should know that the entire night...the entire night, I'm going to be sitting at home going mad at the thought of you out with somebody else."

"Harry," Maddie groaned under her breath. "I wish you could understand that he means..."

"Don't tell me he means nothing," Harry's voice slipped soft; serious. "We're being honest right now and you telling me he means nothing...that's not honest and you know it."

"He doesn't mean what you think he means," she countered with something closer to the truth.

Harry's eyes stayed on hers as they faced each other then, neither of them ready to back down, neither ready to push the other. And he watched; he watched her watch him and he waited for a
flinch, for a blink. But he found none of it. She was tall and steady and genuine. And that's ultimately what made him soften.

"Okay," his eyes pulled away from hers, shifting out over the crowd for a just enough time as he needed to pull it together. Nodding, he looked back to her. "Okay."

"Okay?" Her eyebrows rose. "Okay....you're okay with it?"

"Ha!" His laughter was genuine. "Darling I do love you but no man is ever going to be okay with the woman he adores spending an entire night on the arm of somebody who looks like that," he took a sip from his drink. "Much less with somebody who looks like that AND has seen you naked." He sighed. "I don't care how much confidence he has...it's asking too much."

Maddie felt tears rise to her eyes as memories of Bishop surprised her; Bishop and his reaction to Matt. And that made her smile, made her soften. Taking a step towards him, she reached out, her fingers falling warm on his stomach. "I don't want to be with Charlie, Harry." Her head tipped to the side as she smiled up at him. "If I wanted to be with Charlie, I would be with him. But I don't and I'm not. I'm here...in some dark pub in Verbier....with you. I'm...I'm with you."

"Yeah..." Harry nodded, despite himself.

"I'm with you," she tugged on his shirt, wanting him closer. "I woke up next to you this morning and I'm going home with you tonight and..." She leaned in, her grin stretching across her face. "And there's a very good chance that you get to see me naked...IF you want to."

Harry held onto the last bit of his pride, the last bit of his hard stance for just as long as it took for him to realize how ridiculous that was. Caving, he moved in closer, bending his head closer to hers. "If?" He lifted his eyebrows, his smile pulling higher across his face.

"Well, I mean...I'm not going to tell you how to feel," Maddie shrugged, giggling at the way he rolled his eyes, the way he groaned.

Sighing at the way he leaned in to capture her mouth with his.

Somewhere across that dark, crowded pub was a small group of mostly drunk women, out to get bleary eyed and a little crazy. They had come to Verbier partly to ski, but mostly to party—and keep their eyes peeled for famous people. They had been there for days and so far had only heard that Prince Harry might be there. But little did they know, tonight was their night because sitting next to them at the bar was a scorned, bitter version of Lexie. Still hot from the argument with Maddie, still reeling from the brutal honesty from Harry, she was doing her very best to shake it off, doing her very best to drink it away.

"Wait..." The drunk woman at the bar next to her pushed her hair back off her forehead, her laughter dying down as she lifted her arm to point over Lexie's shoulder. "Is that..." The woman blinked and squinted and leaned forward, looking to Lexie for affirmation. "Holy shit. Is that Prince Harry?"

Irritated, Lexie glanced back over her shoulder to look, knowing it just might be. The woman was right, there he stood. Tall and broad and completely engaged in whatever Maddie was saying, whatever she was doing. With his arms caging her in, with his body leaning into hers and his attention completely on her, he listened intently as she spoke, laughed when she did, and it was clear to anyone with half a brain that he wanted nothing but her. And in that instant, Lexie hated
everything about this night.

"Yep." She answered with a shrug and a nod. The cat was out of the bag on this one, he was too distinctive not to be noticed. "That's him."

"Holy shit..." The girl shook her head, tugging on her friend's arm to bring her closer. "Look. That's fucking Prince Harry."

"What?!" The friend squinted, trying to make out his face in the dark and crowded bar. "No....." She shook her head. "No. He's supposed to have a thing for blondes. And that woman is no blonde."

Both of them turned a tipsy, accusatory stare to Lexie. With a glance back at the all-too-happy couple, she took a shot of tequila, thought 'fuck it', and leaned closer to the two women, motioning for them to do the same.

"Take a closer look," she whispered, betraying years and years of the secret honor code among their group. "She might not be right now, but she sure as hell was before." With a quick breath in and a toss of her long, blonde hair, she stepped away from them, giving them a moment to figure it out.

And a moment was all it took.

As she walked further away from them, she could hear the shrill squeals of realization as they figured it out and she almost felt bad about her role in this revelation.

Almost.
Leaving Verbier was bittersweet. Maddie had left first, waking Harry in the early morning hours to share the last bit of dawn with him before she had to hurry off and catch her plane back to New York. He had offered to get out of bed, to drive her to the airport, to stand like a lovesick puppy and watch as she boarded. But, as amusing as that might have been, Maddie insisted he stay in the warm, comfortable bed and dream of her instead.

He couldn't really argue with that.

A few hours later Harry was up and packing himself. With Maddie in the air and headed home, it was his turn to leave this winter wonderland that had been their own little escape for a few days. Though the others were staying behind and he would be missing out on a few more days of party and skiing–it wasn't quite the same without her, so he didn't seem to mind so much.

"Heads up Wales..." Leo called out to Harry, stepping into the room with his eyes glued to the phone in his hand. "You've been spotted."

Harry glanced up from where he was situating his bags by the front door, getting ready to leave for the airport. "Yeah I know...they got me on the slopes two days ago."

"No man," Leo shook his head, looking up to his friend as he turned the screen of his phone to show him. "Not just you. They have Maddie too."

Dropping everything he was doing, his eyes snapped up to Leo, instantly concerned as he took a step forward. "What do you mean..."

"I mean...they know." He hand his phone over to his friend, looking over his shoulder as he slid his finger across the screen, taking in what was only the beginning of the fallout.

"Oh my God..." Harry scanned through the headlines, through the photos, through the comments. And his stomach turned. "Oh my God...they know."

"Yeah..." Leo exhaled, sensing the tension that had rushed into the room.

"How in the world did they..." Harry shook his head, trying to remember a moment when things had been a little off, when it had been amiss. He had really thought they had managed to avoid recognition. He couldn't recall a single person doing a double-take the night before.

"Maybe it was the bar last night?" Leo shrugged, glancing at the rest of the group who had gone quiet at this new revelation, knowing what this meant for Harry and for Maddie.

"But it was dark and nobody even seemed to know who the hell I was..." Harry handed Leo back his phone and scrubbed his hand over his face. "Much less Maddie."

"They must be getting sneakier," Sean offered, sympathy for his friend evident in his eyes, in his frown.

"Somebody must have figured out who you were..." Leo concluded with a shake of his head.
"But Maddie's a brunette now," Kiki countered. "She doesn't even look like herself, not from this distance..." She waved her hand at her phone.

"Sure but you were all over her," Lexie spoke up over the mug of tea in her hand, unable to keep herself from commenting. All eyes shifted towards her, some in surprise, some in irritation. "He was!" She waved her hand at him. "And if they figured out who you were, you know they wanted to know whose face you were mauling..."

"Lexie!" Kiki shook her head.

"Sorry," Lexie rolled her eyes, looking up to Harry without trepidation. "I'm just saying. If they knew that you were there and they saw you together...it was only a matter of time before they figured it out."

Harry held her gaze with the slightest of glares before he pulled his eyes from hers and went to retrieve his phone from the charger in his room. "I was just hoping for a little more time before they came after her..."

"Harry," Kiki called after him, rising to her feet with a soft smile. "Maybe you should call her, give her a heads up?"

"Yeah," he nodded, on his way to do just that. "She's in the air right now. I can leave her a message but....fuck...when she lands..."

"Yeah," Kiki agreed, knowing exactly what the possibilities were for when she landed. She had seen it all before; with Chelsy, with Kate. Even Maddie had been on the receiving end of what was about to unravel–but this time was a little different. This time she was in New York. This time she wasn't surrounded by Harry; his friends, his family, his detail. And this time, the world thought they understood a very different version of why their relationship had ended.

And none of that added up to the possibility that this was going to be easy for her.

In thirty minutes Harry had made three phone calls.

The first was to Maddie. Trying his best to keep the frenzied panic from his voice, he left her a message asking her to call him the second she was on the ground–pleading with her to do it before she de-boarded the plane.

The second was to Thomas. Though he had already been alerted to the photos, Harry felt comfort in hearing his voice, he felt in control of something when they made plans to meet up when he landed in London.

And the third was to his father. This was it, it was about to unravel and he wanted to make sure the King was well aware of where he stood, of where Maddie stood.

And then he loaded his bags and made his journey to the airport.

In a little over two hours, the photos that had started on social media had expanded their reach far beyond that. Magazines were pulling in their editors to make last minute changes, websites were linking to the twitter feed faster than you could google Harry's name. And the gossip and speculation were beginning to boil.
When Harry stepped from his car at the Geneva Airport, the expected handful of photographers and paparazzi had already swelled hoping, he guessed, to get a photo of him and Maddie travelling together. With squared shoulders and pride in his eyes, he walked tall through the masses. He chuckled when he realized how disappointed they must be that it was only him. But his humor quickly sobered when he realized what might be waiting for Maddie at the airport in New York.

So he pulled out his phone one more time, to send one more text–pleading one last time for Maddie to call him before she stepped out into view. And then with a deep breath, he was on a plane and in the air.

Maddie had been in the air for eight hours; eight long, sleepy hours. She had taken her standard prescription to ease her anxiety and she had settled in for the duration of the flight. As the landing gear touched down and they slowed to a stop, she pulled herself together and began rounding up the stuff she had spread out all over the place; her bag, her magazines, her sunglasses, her phone. Rubbing at her neck, she tried to wake up as the plane taxied down the runway.

Stuffing her items into her bag, she powered up her phone, ready to make the customary phone calls, to send the customary messages to let everyone know she was safely on the ground. Leaning to pull on her shoes, she nearly jumped when the phone started buzzing and dinging, alerting her to missed calls, to messages received.

"Jesus..." She chuckled under her breath, swiping her finger over the screen and looking down as it came alive.

17 Missed Calls

8 Messages

23 Text Messages

Something had happened. Her heart leapt into her throat and stayed there as she opened her voicemail and listened to the first. When she heard Harry's voice, she immediately sensed the tone and she could almost feel her heart pause in her chest.

"They know Maddie. The press. The paps. They saw us together at the bar and they know it's you. They...ha..." She heard him suck in a shaky breath and she knew he was scared. "They know. Please just...call me. Before you step out in the open, call me. So I know that you know."

As his call ended, she quickly scanned through the phone calls, the texts, the messages. Harry was the majority of them but mixed in there were some from her mother, from Ian Bishop, from her family and her assistant. Breathing a little easier now that she knew the center of the chaos, she dialed Harry and pressed the phone to her ear. He was in the air at the moment so she went straight to his voicemail.

"It's me. I got your messages. Yours and about twenty others." She let out a soft laugh, glancing up at the crew as they readied the plane to de-board. "You know the beautiful thing about flying on your own private jet? You don't have to walk through the terminal. Don't worry about me. I'll make it home without the paps all over me. Call me when you're on the ground and really Harry, don't worry about this. This is...nothing." With a sigh, she ended the call and stuffed her phone in her
bag. The stairs were down and it was time to go.

Thanking the crew, she held her head high and walked directly to the waiting car. Smiling at the driver as she slipped inside, she watched as they went about the business of moving her bags from plane to car and she reached for her phone ready to listen to the rest of the messages as she made her way to her place across town.

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"Nothing?" Harry's voice held only mild humor when he finally spoke to Maddie from the confines of his Kensington home. "This is nothing? There were banks of people waiting for me in London and your picture is already on the magazine stands."

With a small, muffled laugh, Maddie sighed. "Not one person was waiting for me here in New York Harry and I stayed clear of the magazine stands."

"Smart woman," he let out a long, slow breath. "It's blowing up Madeline. Right now. It's happening. People are going crazy."

"I know," Maddie nodded, sinking into the sofa. She didn't need to see the magazine stands to know what was happening. "Wouldn't it be great if people got this worked up about stuff that mattered?"

"Yes," Harry laughed. "Yes it would."

"It's going to be fine," Maddie tried for easy, tried for relaxed. "So they know. They were going to find out eventually. We weren't making a point to hide it..."

"I know," he groaned. "I just...I was hoping..."

"What?" She prodded gently. "You were hoping...that everyone forgot who you were? Who I was? That everyone suddenly lost interest in your love life?"

"Yeah..." He laughed. "I was hoping for all of those things."

"I know," Maddie chuckled softly. "But they've figured us out and now they're going to talk about it for a minute and then it will go away. Right?"

"Ha. I don't know Maddie."

"And really, it's just photos and articles and...gossip." Shrugging her shoulders, she set her gaze out the window. "What's the worst thing that could happen?"

"Don't do that," Harry's voice shifted. "Don't put that out there...what's the worst thing that could happen? I don't even want to think about 'the worst thing that could happen'."

"Sorry," she smiled down at her hands. "I don't want to upset you Harry. I just meant...we've survived worse than this, you know."

"Yeah," he softened. "I know. I just wish I were there."

"I know you do. But there's really nothing you can do from here. It's going to need to just happen.
And really, it's just the paps and the press and some photographers–of whom I've seen none so far."

"You will tomorrow," of this he was certain.

"I know," she sighed, pulling her knees up into her chest and wrapping her arm around them. "I
know. But so what? Some paps. Some photos. It's not a big deal."

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Maddie could not have been more wrong.

The response to her return to Harry's life was most definitely something and the world was reacting in a big way.

Though busy, the first night had been relatively easy, with the multitude of phone calls she had received from family and friends, she had been prepared for that–to be the calm one, the steady one. To ease their worries when it came to her and all that was about to unfold. And she did. She effectively calmed down her mother, Ian, even Harry who was the most seasoned at handling all of this. She was the calm one. She was steady and collected and at ease.

But the next morning, when the sight of the paparazzi pack jostling for positions around the entrance to the building that housed the Bishop Enterprises offices, when she saw the nearly coyote like eagerness on their faces, she could feel that same calm resolve slip just the tiniest bit. With her sunglasses in place and her head held high, she marched right through the masses of people, right through the questions that were too loud for her to make out, and into the building, the doorman standing ready with an open door to her sanctuary for the day.

She could feel her breathing change in the elevator ride to her floor, could feel her chest tighten despite her own voice in her head reminding her of all of the things she had spent reminding everyone else of the night before. With her hand wrapped around the railing, she pressed her eyes closed and took a few deep breaths and she did what she usually did when she needed to summon peace.

She pictured Jamie Bishop's smile. She listened for his laugh.

And then the elevator slowed to a stop and the doors opened before her. When her eyes pulled open, she was greeted by her assistant Jillian who was doing better at putting a smiling face on over the anxiety that was clearly scratching at the surface.

"Good Morning Dr. Bishop," she clutched at the clipboard in her hands but she wasn't frantic, wasn't rushing.

"Good Morning," Maddie took a deep breath and stepped off the elevator. The two women fell into step as they made their way past a few curious stares towards their offices. "Did you have a relaxing weekend?"

"I did," Jillian nodded, following Maddie into her office and closing the door behind her. She watched as Maddie rounded her desk, as she lowered her bag into her chair and took off her coat and then, with a perfect poise and a well practiced smile, she asked. "And you? How was your trip?"

Maddie's eyes lifted to Jillian in time to catch the slight smirk on her face, the amusement in her
eyes, and that alone eased the tension that was beginning to build in her neck. "Ha..." She let out a
breath, a laugh, and she eased up. "My trip was...wonderful."

"Good."

"And it was..." Maddie's hands moved to the surface of her desk, her eyes looking around the room
before they settled back on her assistant whose smile was genuine. "It was what I needed."

"I'm happy to hear that." With the clipboard still folded in her hands, she meant the words she was
speaking. She was happy for her boss, no matter the fallout that came with it all.

"Thank you," Maddie nodded and took a deep breath, straightening up as she glanced to the
clipboard in Jillian's hands. "Why don't you go ahead and give it to me?"

"Ma'am?"

"I'm guessing the gang of people out front isn't the only thing that's new this week?"

"Oh you noticed them," Jillian joked, taking a step forward and looking down to her clipboard.

"I did," Maddie laughed. "And I'm guessing you're about to tell me what they've brought along
with them."

"Mmm," Jillian nodded. "You sure you don't want coffee first?"

"I'm sure I would rather have Scotch first," Maddie laughed, tugging her bag from her chair and
taking a seat. "But it's eight in the morning and I'm in the office, not Belize so..." She waved her
hand to the chair across from her and Jillian, with a smile of resolve, sat down.

"The voicemail was full when I arrived this morning."

"Full." Maddie's eyes blinked wide. "But how many messages can it..."

"Forty," Jillian answered. "Forty before it shifts to an answering service."

"Oh God," Maddie groaned. "And the answering service?"

"They made an executive decision to route all of our phone calls to a pre-recorded message."

"Which said?"

"That there would be no comments on your personal life," Jillian held Maddie's gaze as she
answered. "And that if they had legitimate business calls for Bishop Enterprises, to press one and
they would be put through."

"And?"

"And..." Jillian sighed. "There were no legitimate business calls."

"Shocker." Maddie shook her head. "And how many..."

"Well into the hundreds Ma'am."
"WELL into the hundreds?!!" Maddie's voice went high in surprise. "Surely that many people don't care that..."

"Oh they do," Jillian nodded. "They...they really do." Clearing her throat she looked down at the clipboard in her lap. "Can I ask..." Her voice trailed off but her eyes lifted to look at Maddie, her eyebrows rising in the question Maddie already knew.

"Are you asking for you or for them?" She jerked her head towards the huge windows behind her.

"Me?" Her head tipped to the side, her smile soft.

"Then yes," Maddie's smile returned as she nodded. "Yes I was in Verbier with Harry and yes...we're together now. Again." She sat back in her chair and took a long, deep breath. "And yes...I'm very, very happy."

Jillian had to bite at her cheek to keep her smile from taking over the room, her heart warming at the look on Maddie's face, at the happiness she saw there. "Okay," she nodded. "Okay then. I...wow. I'm really happy for you."

"Thank you," Maddie met Jillian's eyes, matched her smile and then she took a breath and sat up. "But now we have to manage....this." She waved her hand at the clipboard, towards the windows.

"That's okay," Jillian shook her head. "We can manage this."

"Yeah?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted.

"Of course," Jillian nodded. "Security in the building is tight. Nobody is getting inside those doors. The voicemail has been cleared with a new outgoing message. I have a crew on the phones, giving the 'no comment' comment unless we decide otherwise and I would imagine the team in the conference room is going to give us direction as to what to do next."

"Hold on," Maddie's forehead scrunched up. "The team in the conference room?"

Jillian blinked. "Attorneys, a public relations representative and...I'm sorry. I thought you knew," she rose to her feet. "They were here first thing this morning. Mr. Bishop called my cellphone to verify that he had sent them..."

"Ian..." Maddie exhaled, shaking her head with a small laugh on her lips. "I told him he didn't need to send in a team, that we would be fine. But he went ahead and..." She sighed and resigned herself to it.

"Ready for that coffee?" Jillian smiled. "Or Scotch?"

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, nodding her head. "I just might be. Okay..." She rose to her feet and began to collect herself. "I think maybe I should probably head into the conference room and..." Her train of thought was thrown by the buzz of her cellphone on the desk, by the ringtone that sounded out into the room.

"Ma'am?" Jillian glanced to the phone then back up to Maddie.

"Ha..." Maddie smiled down at the phone. "It's Harry."
"Ah," Jillian nodded, moving towards the door. "I'll just step out."

"Thank you," Maddie's smile lifted to Jillian. "For everything. Would you let the team in the conference room know I'll be down in a few minutes?"

"Yes Ma'am," Jillian answered on her way out of the office, shutting the door behind her.

With a sigh, Maddie sank into her chair and swiped her finger over the screen, bringing her phone to her ear. "Good Morning Captain."

"Maddie..." His voice was tense and she could tell he was ready to unravel but she cut him off.

"Good Morning Harry."

She heard him pause, heard him take a breath and then, in the strangled, stressed voice, he gave in. "Good Morning." Despite his obvious reluctance, he smiled. "Maddie..."

"I know." She nodded her head as her eyes shifted to the big windows behind her, looking off towards the east, towards London. And him—as ridiculous as that seemed.

"I've seen more photos of the outside of your office building than I ever care to see," his toned shifted harsh, clipped. "And the mob of people who were waiting for you...Jesus Christ Maddie."

"It's okay."

"It's not okay." He protested. "And you walked right through them! You don't have a back entrance or something?! You couldn't have gone in through the parking garage or..."

"You saw me walk into work this morning?" Her head tipped to the side, finding something about that intriguing.

"The whole fucking world saw you walk into work this morning!"

"Harry..." She laughed and leaned forward. "The whole fucking world is not watching me walk into work..."

"You think this is funny."

"I think it isn't the end of the world," she countered. "And I think I'm not going to shrink away from these people who laughingly call themselves reporters. I'm going to walk in the front door of my own fucking office and I'm not going to let them change the way I live. And if you're expecting something different out of me..."

"No," he cut her off. "No of course not. I just...I don't like you having to deal with this hoard of people without me"

"I know. But what choice do we have? I live in New York and you live in London and..."

"And I should be there. I really don't like you having to face them all alone."

"I'm not alone," she replied. "I'm...ha. There's a team in the conference room right now; lawyers,
PR people, I would imagine a few sharp shooters..." She laughed and shook her head. "Ian sent in a
team of people first thing this morning."

"Good! Maybe they can clear out the hounds in front of the building."

"Maybe," Maddie smiled. "I was actually getting ready to head in there. Are you going to be
okay?"

"Me?" He sighed. "Yes. I'm fine Maddie. I'm just worried about you."

"Don't worry about me Harry," she shook her head, smiling at him through the phone, over the
miles. "Everything is fine."

And everything was fine–mostly. She left the morning meeting feeling ahead of the game. They
could keep the gossip mongers out of the building and they could keep them away from her home.
They could manage the phone calls relatively easily and they were ready and willing to go after
any false claims that were made. In fact, Maddie made a mental note, the attorneys seemed to be
chomping at the bit to go after somebody. She wasn't sure if that was their own personal
motivation or a call to action lead by Ian Bishop but wherever it came from, they were ready to
pounce.

What a difference a day makes, she thought to herself as she managed to get a bit of actual work
done that morning. Just over twenty-four hours ago, she was waking up in Verbier in the warm,
strong arms of the man who–this morning–was most likely pacing the length of his office stressing
over the latest tweets and blog posts.

She chuckled as she shook her head. So far she had managed to avoid looking, she had managed to
resist the temptation to google her name with his and jump into the deep end of the chaos. But she
knew that eventually, she was going to have to look at at least some of it.

Just after she finished eating a lunch she wisely ordered in, her phone lit up and her defenses stood
on alert. Clearing her throat, she took a deep breath and answered her phone.

"Kyle," she felt her lips curl up as she spoke. "What a surprise. I'm guessing you're not calling to
see how my vacation went?"

In true Kyle fashion, he moved right past the humored back and forth and went for the kill. "I see
you're the star of your own three ring circus."

"It's really not that bad," she sat back in her chair with a sigh.

"Not that bad?!” He laughed loudly into the phone. "Do you have any idea how many times I've
seen your picture on the internet?"

"Why Kyle, I had no idea you were such a fan of royal watcher websites." She couldn't help the
smirk that pulled at her lips, at the image of him scrolling through tumblr.

"It's not just the royal watcher websites Maddie." He was less than amused. "Legitimate news
sources have footage of you going to work this morning."
"Do you hear yourself?" Maddie snickered, turning her chair away from her desk so she could look out at the afternoon sky. "Legitimate news sources have footage of me going to work this morning?! That sentence is ridiculous. Legitimate news sources are not covering me."

"You know that they are calling you a whore." His voice was harsh and bitter and the smile faded right from Maddie's face.

"So that's how this is going to be, huh?" She sat up in her chair, all business. "Listen Kyle, I don't care what they're calling me."

"A whore and a home-wrecker."

"They can call me whatever they want. I don't give a shit what they..."

"They're calling you 'Harry's Camilla'."

And the world went silent on both sides of the phone call. Rising to her feet, Maddie's eyes hardened, her jaw tightened. "I think that's enough. If you think..."

"This isn't me Madeline," he countered her, not backing down one bit. "This is the press. This is the world. This is..."

"If you think that I'm going to be offended that they are comparing me to a warm, wonderful woman who has been nothing but kind and generous and lovely to me, then you are out of your fucking mind. And I'd like to remind you that you're speaking of the sitting Queen of..."

"Again, it's not me. It's..."

"And just for the record, you have no idea what was going on in Harry's parent's marriage all those years ago. You have no idea what was happening between people you've never met, behind walls you've never even crossed."

"Again..."

"And neither do they!" She yelled, pointing towards the windows.

"You think that matters?!" Kyle's retort was flip. "You think anyone is thinking about the truth right now?! You think anyone cares about what really happened all those years ago?!" Maddie's mouth opened to respond but he moved past her. "No. They don't give a shit! No more than they care what really happened between you and Harry."

"Kyle..."

"Have you seen this Maddie? Have you seen what they're saying?"

"No!" She laughed, shaking her head. "And I'm not going to. I don't want to give this anymore weight than I've already given it. I..."

"You're acting like a foolish child. Walking around with your head in the sand—that's what you're doing."

"Excuse me?" Maddie felt her face flush with a heated anger. "Did you call me at work just to call
me names and criticize my choices?"

"No. Actually, I called to see if you were okay. I called to see if there was something I could do, if you needed anything from anyone. I called to let you know that even though half the world thinks that you were still fucking Harry while you were married to Bishop..."

"That's enough," Maddie's voice came up weaker than she had intended, her heart jumping into her throat.

"Open your eyes Madeline." Kyle was who he had always been with her–bluntly and brutally honest. "Get your head out of that cloud you've been living in and see what people are saying, see what people are reading. I know the truth and you know the truth. But I guarantee you that nearly everyone else who is seeing this unfold...their version of the truth is much, much different."

Kyle was right. Maddie groaned as the sick feeling in her stomach grew. Leaning forward, her eyes squinted at the screen as she scrolled through story after story, as she looked at picture after picture; headline after headline.

Kyle was right. The internet had exploded with one crazy theory after another. And this was nothing like the first time around. The fluffed up version of the fairytale where an American doctor fell in love with a British Prince was nowhere to be found. In its place were a multitude of theories and any sort of happy version was all but lost in the craziness.

There were people who thought that Harry must be incredibly desperate to go back to Maddie after she had cheated on him with his best friend all those years ago. There were people who were angry with him for stooping so low, for giving up so easily. There were people who felt sorry for him, for having his heart trampled by these horrible women. They were painting a portrait of a defeated man, his spirit deflated by one woman after another cheating on him and tearing him down.

Then there were the people who thought that Harry had never gotten over Maddie, that he had never loved Cassandra. There were people who thought maybe his love for Maddie had been what had driven Cassandra to the arms of her lover. That even if Maddie had moved on, he most certainly had not.

And then there were the people who thought that even though Maddie and Harry had ended their public relationship, that they had never ended their private one. There were people who theorized that both of their marriages had been for show and that they had continued to see each other over all of these years. There were people who thought maybe Cassandra hadn't been the only one who cheated in that marriage.

There were even those who thought that Maddie and Harry's recent public reunion was only due to the convenience of Cassandra's adultery and Bishop's death.

And that made her the sickest of all.

"You shouldn't be looking at this," she reminded herself, even as she clicked on the next link. "You really shouldn't be..."

The picture that popped up made her heart stop, brought tears to her eyes. There, next to the fuzzy images of her and Harry in Verbier, was a photo of Maddie and Bishop and in big, bright, bold
letters— "Royal Farce! Did she ever really love him? Were they ever really married?"

Pushing away from her desk, she turned her eyes from the screen and she rose to her feet. With her arms wrapped around her middle, she began to pace, her head shaking slowly as she tried to rein herself in, as she tried to bring herself back from this crazy edge she had driven herself to.

Taking a slow, deep breath, she reached for her phone. Ignoring the call from Harry, bypassing his concerned texts, she slid her finger over the screen and she dialed the only person she could really think of at the time. The closest thing to Jamie as she could get.

"Madeline," his voice was deep and smooth and the way he said her name reminded her so much of his son that it brought fresh tears to her eyes. "If you're calling to chastise me about the team I sent in this morning..."

"I'm not," she shook her head as her voice cracked and he knew in an instant she was crying.

"Oh my darling..." His heart filled with sympathy. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," she sniffed, laughing at herself as she wiped at her eyes. "I'm sorry to call like this. I just, I had to talk to you."

"There's no need to apologize," he was so sweet with her, so genuine. "You can call me any time you like. What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"Yes," she nodded, taking a deep, cleansing breath. "I've just been looking at all of the stories that are flying around, all of the headlines..."

"You probably shouldn't be doing that right now."

"I know. I know. But I couldn't help it and now...it's swallowed me up." She felt her heart break a little as she continued on. "And I just have to...I had to call you."

"Madeline..." He already knew what was coming.

"Ian," she cut him off, her voice heavy with emotion. "There are stories out there that...that Harry and I have been together this whole time. There are stories out there that my marriage to...to Bishop was a front, that I was sleeping with Harry throughout my time with him, that I..." She blinked at the tears in her eyes, the tears that she hated. "That I never loved him."

"Please," the scratch in his voice gave away his own emotions. "Madeline my darling please don't tell me that you thought you had to call here and tell me..."

"It wasn't a front," she shook her head, pressing her eyes closed tightly as she spoke the words. "It wasn't fake. It wasn't pretend. It was real, so very, very real. And I loved him so much."

"I know you did."

"He was my whole world. And our relationship was steeped with loyalty and faithfulness and I was so madly in love with him..." And somehow saying it out loud helped.

"Turn off the computer love," he instructed her in that fatherly way he had. "Turn off the computer and stop reading this nonsense Madeline."
"I just had to call and tell you..."

"You have to do no such thing," he was trying for firm but it was heavy with love. "You do not have to call me and reassure me of anything. I know you loved Jamie and I know how important your marriage was to the both of you. I saw you together. I was there to witness it all. Now I know that the world is coming down on you right now and that people are taking great liberties with their own versions of your past. But I'm telling you that you need not worry about reassuring me about any of it. I know what happened. I bore witness to it. And I'm absolutely certain about who you are."

"I don't care what they say about me," she whispered, trying to sound convincing. "I just hate what they're saying about him."

"And he wouldn't care in the least what they're saying about him."

"I know." He was right. Even when they came after him, he could not have cared less.

"But he would care a great deal that you're sitting in that office caught up in this, that you're upset by it all."

"I know." It was true. Bishop would hate this the most.

"Turn off the computer Madeline." He smiled as he gave her the order. "Take the rest of the afternoon off; go home, have some dinner, maybe some wine."

"Ha," she sniffed. "Maybe some Scotch?"

"Even better. And maybe you should call Harry..." At the same time that her eyes filled up with tears, her heart filled up with warmth. Ian Bishop encouraging her to call Harry, sending her towards what he knew would make her smile. "Maybe it would help to hear his voice."

"Maybe," she felt her breath come easier. "Thank you Ian. Thank you for...everything really."

"Of course darling. Anytime," he waited a beat. "If there's anything I can do for you, please just ask. If you want to come to the house...or if you want us to come there. I can send the jet or we can get on it and come to you."

"No, no," she shook her head, pulling it together. "Thank you but no. I'll be okay. I just wanted to make sure that you knew..."

"I know," he assured her. And he did. He had no doubt in his mind. "I promise you that I know and that nothing that anyone could possibly say would ever make me doubt that."

"Okay," Maddie felt relief in her shoulders, in her heart. "Okay. Thank you Ian."

"You're welcome Madeline. I love you my dear."

"I love you too," she smiled through the lingering sadness, through the uneasiness in her stomach. "Very, very much."

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She tried not to think about it, to think about them.

Following Ian's sage advice, Maddie left the office early. Though there were other ways out of the building, she insisted on going out the front door, she insisted on facing them head on. Behind the shade of her sunglasses and with the image of Bishop tucked into the back of her mind, she walked right out into it. She went home to dinner and Scotch and then to a nice, hot bubble bath in her enormous tub.

And she tried not to think about them. She tried not to think about the fact that the size of the crowd had doubled. She tried not to think about the fact that she could make out their questions, that she could make out the names they were calling her. She tried not to think about how different this was than the first time, tried not to think about the ominous feeling in her stomach and what it might mean.

She tried to push all of that out of her mind and she tried to relax. This wasn't a big deal. This was nothing.

She was fine.

Letting out a long, slow breath she had been holding, she sank further into the bubbles and reached for her glass of Scotch. But she couldn't close her eyes, she couldn't completely let go because she couldn't help but think about them.

"Goddamn it," she chastised herself, more angry at herself than anything that she couldn't seem to let it go, frustrated that she couldn't figure out how to let it go or why she couldn't let it go. Just as she was about to talk herself through it all again, her phone rang out and his name flashed on her screen. Setting her glass aside, she dried her hands and answered her phone. "Harry."

"Hi..." His voice was soft and quiet and he sounded just as tired as she felt. "I was beginning to worry you were never going to call me back."

"I'm sorry," she shook her head. "I wasn't avoiding you I was just..."

"It's okay."

"I was working," she continued. "Or trying to work and then...ugh..." She sighed and gave in. "Then I looked at the internet."

"Ah." There was an instant understanding. "Maddie...are you okay?"

"Yes," she laughed lightly. "I mean...it's five o'clock and I'm in a bubble bath with my third glass of Scotch so..."

"You're not okay."

"I am," she reached for her glass and took a sip. "I'm just...it's different than the last time."

"I know it is."

"It's meaner."
"I know that too," his voice dropped heavy. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," she spoke into her glass. "Don't be sorry, Harry. I'm not."

"No?" She could hear the worry in the crack of his voice.

"Of course not," she smiled through the phone. "I'm just...trying to wrap my brain around all of it, trying to manage it."

"And how's that working out?"

"Ha!" She laughed, her head tipping back. "Well, I called Ian Bishop a few hours ago a crying, blubbery mess."

"What? Why?"

"Because," she breathed. "Because I read this article which supposed that my marriage to Bishop had been..." She blinked at the tears, gulped at the lump in her throat. "That I hadn't loved him, that it had been for show."

"Oh Maddie..." Harry felt sick.

"And the last person I want to believe that is Ian and..."

"And he certainly doesn't..."

"No," Maddie smiled. "No he doesn't. But I was already on the edge as it was and I had to call him and..." She sucked in a deep breath and let it out. "And after he was finished reassuring me about it all, he sent me home early for the day. So here I am."

"In a bathtub with a glass of Scotch."

"Yes," she nodded, taking another sip. "Yes I am."

"Is there room in there for me?"

"For you?" Her smile pulled higher. "Are you somewhere nearby?"

"No. But I could be. In a second I could be there Maddie."

"Harry..."

"Do you want me there?" He held out hope, crossed his fingers. "Because I have to tell you, I really want to be there."

"I know," Maddie's voice cracked, unexpected tears rising to the surface. "But it's only the first day and if we just hang tight, it'll blow over...right?"

"Yes," he answered softly, conviction missing from his voice.

"And if you show up here, now...it's only going to blow up...right?"
"Yes," he sounded sad. "I suppose you're right."

"Then I think...I think you stay there." Even as she said the words, she wasn't sure if she believed them, if that's what she really wanted.

"Okay," he agreed reluctantly. "If that's what you want..."

"Ha..." She laughed, taking another sip from her drink. "What I want?"

"I know," he sighed. "I know."

"And you Harry? How are you? Are you okay?"

"Yes. I mean, it's crazy over here but I have a system around me that's been in place for decades making sure it doesn't reach me if I don't want it to."

"Lucky," she smirked into her glass.

"You could have that too," he offered with a shrug. "You could come to London and hide in my house. I'm sure Ian would let you work from here..."

"Yeah..." She was sure he would too and there was something very appealing about that option. But she didn't want to flee her home, she didn't want to run from her life. She didn't want to give in. And she just hoped beyond hope that all that was happening around them wouldn't cause too much damage, that it wouldn't shake them too much. "Harry?"

"Yes?"

"We're going to be okay...right?" She heard him suck in a breath and she knew he had caught it, that he had read between the lines of her words.

"Maddie," his voice was strong and clear. "I'm not going anywhere. No matter what they say, no matter what they...do, I'm not going anywhere."

"Okay," she whispered, his response stirring up more emotions than she anticipated.

"I'm here baby..." He slipped soft. "I love you, so much and I'm right here. No matter what."

Maddie's eyes pressed closed and her head nodded and despite what she knew, despite his reassurances, she hoped that he was right. She hoped that what was going on around them wouldn't get big enough to shake her resolve, that it wouldn't get big enough to scare him, that it wouldn't get big enough to take the both of them down.

"Okay," she opened her eyes and reached for her drink. "Okay."
When Maddie woke the next morning, she had a stubborn headache and a stiff neck. Her night had been restless, her mind working over about a hundred different things in about a hundred different ways. And for the first time since she could remember, the Scotch she had drank did nothing to calm the frantic nature of her thoughts.

But she pulled herself together as best she could and she made it out the door in time to make it to her first meeting being held across town. One of the bonuses of scheduling an off-site meeting meant that she had time to really wake up before she was confronted with the still growing masses seeking her photo, coveting a comment. But one of the downsides was that she was faced with Jillian's worried demeanor before they even step foot in the office.

"Okay," Maddie took a deep breath, turning to her assistant as soon as the meeting was over and they were in the car heading back to the office. "What is it?"

"What?" Jillian blinked, covering her concern.


"Well," Jillian took a deep breath and sat up straight and tall. "The crowd outside the office..."

"Yeah?" Maddie felt her stomach stir.

"It's growing."

"Ah," Maddie nodded. "Are they staying behind the barricade?"

"Yes, but..."

"Are they harassing you? Or anyone else in the building for that matter?"

"No, no. But..." Maddie opened her mouth to cut her off again but closed it, waiting. "But it's...growing."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded. "I know it is."

"I thought that today it might be smaller, you know? That the newness would have worn off by now and they would be starting to go away."

"Sure," Maddie agreed, she had held onto her hopes that that would be true. "But it's only the second day and they haven't been able to get what they want."

"What do they want?" Jillian's gaze focused inward, as though she were in deep thought, trying to sort it out. "I thought they wanted a picture of you...which they now have. I thought maybe they wanted a comment, which you aren't going to give..."

"Doesn't mean they're going to stop wanting it," Maddie shrugged. "And I think they're hoping
When the car pulled up outside Bishop Enterprises, Maddie could see exactly why Jillian had looked so flustered. The crowd was most definitely larger, seeming to push at the seams of the barricades. And she could tell that the group wasn't just made up of gossip reporters and photographers. She could see that the fringe paparazzi had joined in, that even a handful of mostly normal everyday citizens had stopped by to be a part of the madness.

"Are you sure we shouldn't go in the back?" Jillian watched with wide eyes as they pulled to a stop and the crowd began to buzz.

"You can if you would like," Maddie smiled at her, gathering her bag and readying to step out. "But the more boring we can make this..."

"Ah, sure," Jillian nodded, collecting her items and following her boss's lead. "I'll follow you in."

"Perfect," Maddie reached for the handle and with a big, deep breath, she stepped from the car and out into the flurry of activity.

In a blink the crowd stirred to attention.

In a blink the cameras began to flash.

In a blink the questions and comments began to fly.

And though she heard them, though she could make out the harsh words that were being tossed, Maddie refused to acknowledge them, refused to let them get to her.

But she hadn't thought about Jillian behind her, she hadn't even thought to prep her for what might happen. She had been so on top of it all since it began, Maddie hadn't thought to give her a quick rundown before they stepped out into the open.

So, when a man standing near the front of the barricade, towering nearly a foot over both of them, took out his camera and called out in a deep, loud voice, "You must really suck a good cock..."
Maddie hadn't even thought to tell Jillian to ignore it.

And she didn’t–or more accurately she couldn't.

Spinning on her heels, she shot a glare directly at him. "What did you just say?!" Her voice was sharp and drew Maddie's immediate attention.

"Only the truth, sweetheart," the man sneered at Jillian who only stood taller.

"I don't know who the hell you think you're talking to but..."

"Apparently quite the piece of ass," his eyes shifted to Maddie who was already reaching for Jillian.

"Come on," she grabbed her arm and gently tugged. "Don't engage. Don't bother."

"Jesus Christ," Jillian spoke under her breath, following Maddie's direction and turning around. "You should really show a little respect," she looked right at the man as she spoke and then followed Maddie into the building. The doorman and security were right there waiting for them, shutting the door behind them and ushering them to safety.

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Her phone was buzzing before she even made it into her office, before she could even take a breath. Sliding her finger across the screen, she sank down onto her sofa.

Her stomach was already in knots before she even answered. "Hello."

"What did he say to you?" Harry's voice was rushed and heated and she knew he was mad.

"Harry, listen..."

"What the hell did he say to you Maddie?!” He wasn't meaning to be so demanding but his anger level was at a high. "I saw your assistant's reaction and I saw the way the crowd responded so don't tell me it was nothing!"

"Harry..." Maddie exhaled his name, shaky and weak. "Please. Please just calm down for a minute."

"Trust me when I tell you this, this is calm."

Leaning forward, Maddie's head sank into her free hand, her stomach twisting and her heart thumping. "Shouldn't you be in meetings Harry? Shouldn't you be doing about a hundred different things other than watching me walk into and out of my office building?! Things that are so much more important than..." Her voice was growing louder and louder with every word.

"What the hell did he say to you?"

"You must really suck a good cock!" She yelled out into her office, her head lifting up and her eyes wide. "There! That's what he said! Are you happy?!!"
"Am I HAPPY?!" He yelled back and she could almost see the steam coming from his ears. "Jesus CHRIST Maddie."

"You must really suck a good cock..." She said it again, this time with less force, this time with a small bitter laugh at the end. Sighing, she fell back against the cushions of the couch. "You know what...I really do." And with that, the tears flooded her eyes.

"Okay, that's it," Harry softened instantly at the sound of her crying. "I'm coming out there."

"No," Maddie shook her head, wiping at her eyes. "I'm fine, I'm just..."

"Fine?" Harry repeated. "You're fine? You're being harassed on the way to work and..."

"And there's nothing you can do about that, even if you were here."

"But..."

"But nothing. If you show up now, it'll only get crazier."

"But..."

"But then they'll be getting what they want and..."

"But you're crying," Harry's voice cracked. "You're crying, in the middle of the day, in your office and I can't do anything about that from here and God, Maddie...I'm not sure I can live with myself if I don't do something about that."

Wiping at her eyes and reaching for a tissue, Maddie took a deep breath and nodded her head. She could hear the ache in his voice; this was hard for him too and she knew that. But before she could continue the conversation about that, a soft knock came to her door. "Hold on..." She spoke to Harry first before she called out. "Yes?"

With a small smile and eyes full of concern, Jillian stepped in. "I'm so sorry to interrupt. But the PR and Security teams would like a few minutes with you about a new plan?"

"Okay," Maddie nodded and Jillian stepped back out. "Did you hear that?"

"I did," he cleared his throat. "I should probably tell you that I met with Thomas this morning. He thinks that maybe we should try a different tactic."

"Which is?"

"Confronting it head on," Harry answered, still unsure of his own feelings on the matter. "He thinks maybe I should issue a statement, that we should come clean with our new relationship, maybe even explain what happened before..."

"Wow..." Maddie breathed, her eyes blinking as that sank in.

"Yeah," Harry agreed with her unspoken sentiment. "I don't know what I think about it but...you can run that by your team if you want."

"Okay," she nodded, rising to her feet and taking a deep breath. "Don't get on a plane in a fit of
"Okay.

"I want to be thoughtful about this and not reactionary and honestly..." She let out a long, ragged breath. "I'm not sure I can stomach you being in the air right now."

"Okay," his heart sank in his chest. "Will you call me when the meeting is over? Let me know what they think?"

"Yes of course."

"Maddie...are you going to be okay?"

"I...yes. Yes Harry. I'm going to be fine." But even as she said the words, she wasn't entirely sure if she meant them.

Maddie's head was spinning when she came out of the meeting. Everyone had something they wanted to put in front of her. The security team was making changes, her driver was being switched out for another with more defensive training. The legal team was ready to go after any and all publications alluding to infidelity in her marriage. The PR team was making suggestions that were similar to Thomas', suggesting that she and Harry consider making a statement and coming clean about all of it.

Though all of it seemed to make sense, seemed to be sound advice, Maddie could feel it all getting a little too out of her control. And, as with all things that were outside of her control, it didn't sit well.

When she returned to her office, she sat down at her desk and looked down at the cell phone she had left behind and though she knew what she needed to do, it made her nervous.

And she couldn't quite wrap her brain around why it made her nervous--telling Harry she wanted him there, that she needed him there, that there was no way she could begin to make all of these decisions about the two of them without the TWO of them sitting down about it.

But it made her so incredibly nervous.

Doesn't matter, she told herself as she took a deep breath. Nervous or not, she needed to do it, she needed to call him and let him in.

Taking another deep breath and preparing for the slew of emotions she knew this phone call was going to illicit, she dialed his number and pressed the phone to her ear.

"Maddie," he was so quick to answer, she guessed his phone must have been in his fingers at the time. "Tell me you're doing better."

"I am," she smiled. "I am doing better."

"Thank God," he exhaled with relief. "And the meeting?"
"It went well," she shrugged. "They have some ideas, similar to Thomas; a statement, that sort of thing."

"Yeah?" He was being soft with her, gentle. "And what do you think about that?"

"I think..." She took in a breath and blew it out slowly. And as hard as it was for her to admit, she went right ahead and did it. "I think that maybe I need you here..."

"You do?" She could hear the uplift in his voice, the joy and the hope that came with it.

"Yes," she nodded, despite the emotions that stirred almost instantly. "I don't know why I'm so scared..."

"Of the press?" Harry asked.

"No," she shook her head. "Of you. Of...us. Of this breaking what we have and..."

"I'm on my way," he cut in, already in motion. "This is not going to break what we have Maddie. It isn't. I won't let it. I'm leaving my office right now and I'm booking a flight and I'm coming to New York. We'll figure this out together."

"Yeah?"

"Yes," he could barely talk over the rush of feelings he was having. "Yes. I'll be there when you get home from work."

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Mind?!" He laughed. "I've been hoping for the last two days that you still need me Maddie..."

"I do," she blinked at the tears that were coming. "I need you here."

"Then I'm on my way."

"Be safe. Please don't rush so much that you're not safe."

"I swear it."

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She shouldn't have been surprised at the relief she felt that Harry was on his way, but surprised she was. As she tried to return to her work, she found she could breathe a little easier, that her headache wasn't as strong, that her shoulders weren't as tight. She had spent so much time convincing herself that she could handle all of this alone that she had completely forgotten that there was really no need to.

Harry was on his way and together they would figure out what to do next.

Until then, all she had to do was get through an afternoon of work and get home to her place. She had enough food and Scotch at home to sustain them for as long as it would take to come up with a plan. And that made it all seem a little lighter.
She actually managed to get a good deal of work done; moving through emails and memos and even reading over a couple of applications for some intern coordinator positions that were opening up. All things considered, the afternoon was much more uneventful than the morning.

And as it drew to a close, as the day gave way to the evening, she found the anxiety slipping away and in its place—excitement. After all, she got to see Harry again; very very soon.

"Ma'am?" Jillian's voice called into the office, into her thoughts and Maddie looked up from her computer screen.

And the second she did, the second she saw the look on her assistant's face, her anxiety came screaming back. "Oh God." Her stomach turned and her throat grew tight. "What is it? Is everything okay? Is everyone...."

"Everyone's fine," Jillian was quick to reassure her, quick to comfort.

"Then why the look?" Maddie nodded, reminding herself to breathe.

"Not much of a poker face, huh?" Jillian laughed at herself as she moved over to Maddie's desk.

"Not really."

"Okay," she nodded and took a breath, cutting to the chase. "Harry was spotted boarding a flight from London to New York."

"Oh God," Maddie groaned.

"There are photos and first-hand accounts verifying this to several social media websites and a few news organizations."

"Fuck," Maddie exhaled, pushing back from her desk and leaning back in her chair.

"Needless to say, it's only increased the hysteria."

"Of course it has," Maddie's fingers rubbed at her temples. "So they know he's coming here."

"They do," Jillian nodded. "And as a result, the crowds have increased."

"Crowds?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, not sure if she really wanted an answer to the question she was asking.

"The one outside the office building..."

"And?"

"And the one at the airport."

"They're at the airport now?" Maddie sat forward. "Of course they're the airport now. Who doesn't want a photo of Prince Harry arriving in New York to see his home-wrecking girlfriend?"

"Yes," Jillian nodded. "Also."
"Also?" Maddie's eyes focused across the desk, trying to read her face. "There's more?"

"Yes," Jillian's eyes were sympathetic as she broke the news. "They're at your apartment building."

"NO!" Maddie groaned, her entire face twisting in displeasure. "No. They can't be."

"They are. I don't know how they figured it out, but they did."

"Damn it," Maddie slapped her hand on the desk, having hoped for one last line of sanctuary. "So we have cameras waiting for us downstairs, at the airport, AND at my place?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Well then I suppose they'll all be pleased to finally get the shots they've been waiting for."

"Actually," Jillian's mouth curved into a smile. "The security team has a bit of a plan."

"What kind of plan?"

"One that involves switching cars and some creative navigation."

"I don't know if I like the sound of that," Maddie shook her head.

"One that gets you home without a gang of assholes shouting lewd questions at you..."

Maddie held her gaze for a moment, her mind working it over and then, in the resigned way that was becoming second nature, she rose to her feet and followed Jillian out to the conference room, ready to hear this plan for her trip home.

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The vast majority of Harry's flight over the Atlantic was spent tucked up in his own mind. In casual clothes and a ball cap covering his telltale red hair, he found his seat and settled in. With Jim to his right and his earbuds in place, he slouched down in his seat mostly out of the view of others and he closed his eyes.

And he did his level best to keep the smile from his face.

It was tough, much more difficult than it should be given all that was going on in his world at the moment. The news had only dropped two days ago and it was already spinning out of control. All of the rumors from before had reignited; all of the stories, all of the speculation. And now it was even worse, even bigger.

The buzz was insane.

The press was ruthless.

And the love of his life was at the center of an enormous amount of scrutiny, an unbearable amount of pressure.

He was probably going to have to do something he swore he would never do and issue a statement about his love life. He was probably going to have to let the world in in a way he had been hoping
to avoid.

He hadn't slept much since he had left Verbier and most of his days were spent worrying about what was going on across the pond. He was running on fumes at best and he guessed if he snapped at Jim one more time, he was probably going to shoot him himself.

But that damn smile continued to rise to the surface.

Because she had called, because she needed him, because she had asked him to come. Without knowing just how hard that would hit him, she had asked for him.

And there he was. On a flight over the Atlantic, stuffed into a window seat trying his best to get some rest, to relax—to keep the grin from his face.

The flight was an easy one, lacking in turbulence and in people who easily recognized him. As the wheels touched down and the plane began to taxi into the terminal, he and Jim rose from their seats and stepped off to the side, back into the flight attendants galley where they would wait out of sight to de-board after everyone else. Tucking his earbuds into his bag, he pulled out his phone and powered it up, wanting to let her know that he was there, that he was on the ground.

As his phone buzzed to life in his fingers, as the screen lit up, he saw that he had missed a few phone calls, a handful of texts. Clearing his throat, he opened the first of seven from his brother and the smile he had been fighting began to slowly slip away.

"Call me. Right now. Before you take another step."

"What the hell," Harry muttered under his breath, bringing Jim's attention back to him.

"What is it?" He moved to look down at the phone, his face tightening up as he read the words, seconds before Harry dialed his brother.

"I don't know," he shook his head and took a step back, suddenly wishing he had taken a private flight, wishing he had some space to process whatever message he was about to receive. "It's me." He spoke low into the phone, turning towards the wall of the plane as Jim stepped in place between him and anything else.

"Where the hell are you?"

"My flight just landed in New York," he had told everyone he was leaving, had told everyone where he was going. "What's going on?"

"I mean...where are you?"

"I..." Harry glanced around, the ominous lump in his throat tripping him up. "I'm in the back galley waiting for everyone to de-board. Will, what the hell is going on?"

"There was..." Will began and stopped. And Harry felt his entire body slip into protection mode. His big brother—his calm, stoic, strong big brother had sputtered to a stop. "Harry, there was an accident."

In his chest, his heart stopped.
"...she was leaving work and heading home..."

In his lungs, his breath halted.

"...they were all over her car, they were everywhere..."

And he wasn't sure he was going to survive hearing anything more.

"...some kind of evasive maneuver and the car came out of the alley and..."

"Will..." Harry whispered, his head shaking, needing it to stop, needing to know if she was okay, needing to know where she was–needing to catch his breath.

"Sir?" Jim's voice called out to Harry as Will's began to fade. "Sir?" Harry looked up to him then and the panic that was in his eyes, the stark white color to his skin, shook Jim to the core. "Jesus, what is it?"

"Maddie," he held the phone out to Jim as tears fell from his eyes and bile rose from his stomach. "It's Maddie." Just as Jim snatched the phone from his fingers, Harry turned towards the closest trash bin he could find and he threw up.
"Jesus Christ," the color had returned to Harry's face in splotches of red and fury. Pacing the small, confined space on the plane, he was chomping at the bit waiting for Jim to get off the phone, for him to put the plan he was cooking up in motion. "What in the hell is taking so..."

"Sir," Jim turned to face him, sympathy in his eyes. "I'm going to need you to take a deep breath and calm down..."

"And I'm going to need you to get me to the goddamned hospital!" Harry was well past patient. "We have been on the ground for..."

"Sir," Jim cut in, taking a step towards him and placing a firm hand on his shoulder. "I am working with airport security and NYPD right now trying to get you out of here without causing a scene."

"Jim..."

"The last thing anyone wants right now is another accident." His voice hit home and his gaze moved Harry a step back.

"Fine," he gave in, holding his hands up and taking a deep breath, trying to calm himself down; trying to focus on his priority at the moment–getting to Maddie's side. "Fine. I just...I need to be there, Jim. I hate that I'm not with her right now."

"And I am going to get you to her." He vowed; solemn and serious. "But I'm going to get you there safely."

The anxiety and tension that Harry felt in those next few minutes was more than he had carried on his shoulders in a very long time. Squeezing his eyes closed and pressing his fingers to his temples, he tried to recall Will's voice, tried to recall his words. And he tried, desperately, to not let the fact that Maddie had been in an accident, that she was somewhere out there in the city in an emergency room all alone–he tried not to let that explode what was left of his mind.

He tried not to let it break his heart.

"Okay," Jim's voice cut into his thoughts and Harry opened his eyes, wide and hopeful as he looked to Jim. "They're sending a car around back. We're going to de-board the plane and instead of going out to the terminal, we're going to go down the service stairs and into the car at the bottom."

"Finally," Harry breathed, tired and fragile.

"We have a police escort ready to take us to the hospital," he continued to explain.

"But won't that draw more attention than not?" Harry lifted his eyebrows.

"Maybe," Jim nodded, leaning to look out into the main cabin of the plane. "But it'll clear traffic away which will get us there faster."
"Thank you," Harry felt his chest tighten, his eyes well up.

"And it'll keep the paps from surrounding us," Jim finished up, clearing his throat as he stepped out into the aisle. "Okay. We're clear. It's go time."

With every step he took off that plane, every step he took towards her, Harry could feel his emotions swelling higher and higher and he really had no idea what it was going to look like when they finally boiled over and broke the surface.

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"Tell me again," Harry spoke to Jim who sat next to him in the backseat of the car. With the lights and sirens in front of them, they flew through the streets of the city, not pausing long enough for any of the passers-by to have time to think about who might be inside. "Please," he looked down at his hands. "Tell me again."

Nodding, Jim looked out the window and then to Harry. "There were no fatalities." Everyone in the car could hear Harry exhale in relief, as though that weren't the fifth time Jim had told him that. "The driver of her car was making evasive maneuvers to avoid the onslaught of press and paparazzi and he made a turn too quick. At the same time another vehicle was speeding through an alley."

"Do we know if that driver was press?"

"Not yet," Jim shook his head, subconsciously patting the phone in his pocket. "That car struck the Doctor's on the broadside of the car." Harry sucked in a breath and closed his eyes, struggling with the images, with the twist and knots in his stomach. "Sir...there are no fatalities. There are no life-threatening injuries."

"I know," Harry whispered, his hands balling up in fists as he did his level best not to think of how different the news had been when he was twelve, not to think of the way his heart had sank the last time there had been an accident, the night Maddie had called him with her heartbreaking news.

"We're almost there," Jim sat up in his seat, his training kicking in as he surveyed the approaching scene, taking stock of who was there and where they were and what that might mean for their trip from the car to the building.

Harry's eyes opened and he did the same. "Jim, I swear to God if one camera gets shoved in my face, I'm going to kill whomever is on the other side of it."

"No cameras," Jim shook his head quickly, readying himself for a quick exit as the car slowed to a stop outside a mostly private entrance to the hospital. "Straight in those doors and to the right. Hospital Security is waiting for us."

Harry nodded and gulped at the lump in his throat. "Jim?"

"She's fine," Jim reassured him, reaching for the door handle. "It was a hell of an accident but she was conscious and able to walk when they took her away from it. You heard your brother, Sir. Maddie's fine. And she's just inside, waiting for you to see."

With that the car came to a complete stop and the doors pulled open. It was seventeen steps from the moment his feet hit pavement to the moment he stood in front of hospital security, waiting and ready to take him to the only thing that could make him feel better at this point.
And not one camera was to be seen.

As Harry walked through the hospital corridors, he could feel his anger and upset returning. With every quick step, with the smell and the sounds and the overwhelming reminder of where he was, of what had happened, he could feel the fury building and he wondered if he had really ever been this mad before in his life. With Jim walking tall next to him and the hospital security guard leading the way, they passed by the emergency room desk, they passed by a bank of rooms, by the nurses station and then finally, finally, they were outside a room at the end of the hallway.

And suddenly his heart was in his throat. His palms were sweaty and his mind was racing. Pausing right outside the door, he looked to Jim. "Do you need to go in first or..."

"No," Jim shook his head, his heart on his sleeve as he stood aside for Harry. "You go ahead. I'll be right out here if you need me."

And there he was, mere feet from the woman who held his life in her hands. Pulling together what was left of his mind, he tried to prepare himself for what he might see, what she might look like and then he took a step forward. With a soft knock to the door, he pushed it open and stepped inside.

When her eyes flew up to meet his, his vision blurred and his heart thudded back to life.

"Maddie..." He choked up as the door swung closed behind him, his whole body aching at the sight of her with cuts and scrapes and bruises already forming. His eyes widened at the sight of her bloodstained clothes and she caught it—the fear and devastation that washed over his face.

"I'm so sorry." Her voice was small and fragile and the tiniest bit afraid as she watched him process, first hand, what had happened to her. At the sound of her voice, every shred of anger and fury he had been harboring flew from his soul and all that was left was this; was her.

"Sorry?" His voice cracked as he closed the distance between them. "What on earth are you sorry for?"

Looking up to him with wide, teary eyes, she bit at her lip to keep from crying and she waved a shaky hand at herself. "This."

"This?" He reached out and touched her. It was like he was handling the finest of china, his fingers barely gracing over her as his hands moved to her hair, her cheeks, her shoulders, his eyes scanning her from head to toe. Making sure it was really her, making sure she was really there, that she was in one piece. It was so much, too much, and he couldn't find his voice to tell her that this was the single greatest thing he'd seen in his life.

Knowing what he was looking for, she swallowed her emotions and spoke with a cracked voice. "The biggest thing is this cut here," she lifted her arm to point, grimacing at the pain. "Fourteen stitches. Apparently scalp wounds bleed like gunshot wounds..." The small attempt at a smile faded from her face, both of them remembering the time she had had one of those. "Other than that, it's mostly minor scrapes and bumps and bruises though the doctor said I'm going to see a big bruise across my chest from the seat belt..."

"Thank God," Harry's voice was barely a whisper as his hand clutched to his chest, right over his heart, as though he were trying to keep it in his chest. "I mean...Thank God you were wearing it." His hands moved to gently cup her cheeks. "Don't ever go anywhere without it."
"I don't," she shook her head, her hands—scratched and cut—moved to his arms, her fingers wrapping around his wrists, feeling the need to comfort him, to make him feel better.

"Is that it?" He lifted his eyebrows over tear-filled eyes. "There's nothing broken or out of place?"

"No," she smiled, her thumb smoothing over the soft skin of the inside of his wrist. "I'm sure I'll be achy tomorrow but they gave me a prescription for some pain pills and I have a whole shelf of Scotch at home..."

That brought the smallest of laughs from him. "My God, Maddie...when Will called..."

"I tried to call you myself but my phone was ruined in the accident..." She looked up at him through teary eyes. "And I don't think you recognized my assistant's number..."

"I honestly don't know where my phone is," Harry shook his head. "I think Jim has it."

"I was hoping that I'd be home by now, by the time you got here."

"What? Why?" He pulled back only a bit.

Maddie felt the emotion of it all rise in her throat. She had been so worried about him, about how he would hear the news, how he would take it, how it would hit him. "So you didn't have to see this."

"Oh Maddie, Maddie..." Very carefully, very easily, he pulled her into his arms and with his whisper soft touch, he brought her in. He cradled her there. "I couldn't get here fast enough. I...I'm so..." Mindful of the cuts and the aches he knew she must have, he held her to him and neither of them were sure he was going to let go. With a gentle kiss to her forehead, he closed his eyes. "I love you so much."

With her face pressed into the soft fleece of his coat, she wrapped her arms around his waist and she felt her body ease up. "Will you take me home? I just...I really want to go home."

"Yes," he nodded, his hand smoothing up and down her back. "Are you free to go or..."

"The doctor just stepped out to get my discharge instructions," Maddie wiped at her eyes and reluctantly released her hold on him. "He called in a few prescriptions."

"Do we need to pick those up?" Harry watched as she moved around him towards her purse.

"No," she shook her head. "Jillian went to pick them up. She was right behind me when it..." Her voice trailed off, choking up on her emotions. "Poor thing. She saw it all happen, she was right there."

"Hey..."

"Did you see it?" Maddie's eyes locked with his, her worry rising to the surface. "Pictures of the car? The scene?"

"No." Harry's answer was clipped, the anger from before teasing back. "I don't know if I want to."

"I don't know how you're going to avoid it," Maddie shook her head. "There were paps
everywhere...everywhere. Surely there are pictures all over the internet."

"Probably," his voice was strained as he nodded. "But I came straight here. I didn't think I should see...that before I saw you."

"Smart," Maddie nodded, smiling softly at him, trying not to let the emotion take over the room. But his jaw was tight and his shoulders were squared and, for as soft and sweet as he was being with her, she could see the fury building inside of him. "Harry..." She reached out to him and he looked up to her but any sort of coming together would have to wait because the Doctor stepped into the room, discharge notes in hand, ready to dismiss her.

The deep, heavy ache was already settling into Maddie's body when they finally arrived back at her apartment. In the time since the accident, the police and building security had worked together to tighten things up around her home. Press and paps had been pushed so far back that they had ultimately thinned out and there weren't very many remaining. Those that were left were so far away they barely had a chance to take a shot of the car flying by. Maddie and Harry, tired and emotionally spent, wanted absolutely nothing to do with any of it. At least for the remainder of the evening. They had met briefly with Bishop Enterprise attorneys who were planning on issuing a brief statement after she had made it home safely. They had made plans to meet the next day with the team to learn more about the cause of the accident and the injuries to innocent bystanders. But for now--Maddie was done with all of it.

When Maddie stepped into her home, when she flipped on the lights and felt the warm embrace of this place that she loved, the emotions she had been barely controlling so far, began to give way.

"You okay?" Harry stood next to her, her purse and bag over his shoulder, his own bag clutched in his hands.

"Mmm," She bit her lip as she nodded. "It just feels really good to be home."

"Yeah," he agreed.

"Long day and all..." She gave him a small smile and stepped further into the apartment, Harry following along behind her.

"Sure," he could feel it himself, as the adrenaline died out and reality set in. Sitting the bags down in the entryway, he kept his eyes on her as she moved into the living room. "Can I get you anything?"

"I don't know..." Maddie moved around the living room a bit absentmindedly. She felt a little restless, a little unsettled, and she wasn't quite sure how to calm down. She had called everyone she needed to call; her mother, Ian. Jillian was out collecting a new phone and her medications. And she had Harry right here with her, ready to wait on her, to be at her beck and call.

And yet--she felt uneasy, she felt flustered.

Harry watched her walk around, watched her run her fingers along the mantle, watched her fidget with a few frames, with some books on the shelves. "If you're hungry, I can cook something. Or I can order up anything you'd like..."
"Maybe," she thought it over, reaching for the tv remote, wanting something other than silence going on around them.

"Hey Maddie..." Harry stood off towards the back of the living room, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched her. He knew exactly what it looked like when somebody was trying to evade their feelings, when somebody was trying to ignore the emotions.

But before she could turn to address him, the program that was on the tv went to commercial and the local news took that moment to bring the viewing audience an update.

"According to a statement just released, Doctor Madeline Bishop has been released from the hospital after sustaining minor injuries..."

"Minor?!" Harry huffed, the heat rising in his cheeks.

"Doctor Bishop was involved in an auto accident this evening when the car that she was a passenger in was broadsided by another car while being heavily pursued by a mass of paparazzi following the revelation of her reunion with Prince Harry..." Maddie stood in front of the tv, her eyes wide as the camera cut to photos of the accident, of the wreckage that had been left behind. As her stomach turned, she heard Harry suck in his breath behind her. "Of course, this is eerily reminiscent of the tragedy that resulted in the death of Princess Diana and one can't help but wonder..."

With a press of a button, the tv went blank and Maddie discarded the remote with a toss to the chair. As she turned to face him, she could feel her stomach tie in knots, she could hear her pulse pounding in her ears and her greatest fears were rising to the surface because she knew, as she looked at the hurt in his eyes–his greatest fears were already there.

And they could avoid it no longer.

With tears in her eyes and a crack in her voice, Maddie decided to just jump in and address what they had managed to avoid so far. "You know...the entire time it was happening..." She swallowed at the dryness in her throat. "When we were trying to get away from them...I was so nervous, so...afraid of what was happening."

"Maddie..." His lips mouthed her name, but his voice was barely there, too caught up in the emotions that were weighing on him.

"All I could think about was...your mother," she blinked at the tears in her eyes, running her hands back through her hair, careful to avoid the cut and the stitches. "And how she must have felt." Her voice choked up on the last word, her tears running over onto her cheeks and her heart aching in her chest more than any of the bumps or bruises from the accident.

"Please," he whispered, his hand clutching his chest, his eyes wide and dark.

"And when that car hit us..." She continued on as she cried. "All I could think of was, please don't let me die..."

"Jesus, Maddie," Harry pleaded with her, not sure his heart could take this conversation, not yet.

"In the back of the ambulance, these questions were flying through my mind and all of them were about you. How were you going to find out? Who was going to tell you? Where were you going to
be? What were you going to say? What were you going to...do..." Her voice gave way and her eyes
tlocked with his and through her tear-blurred vision, she could see it all wash over him.

Standing taller, he cleared his throat, and as he juggled the multitude of feelings he had
surrounding all of this, he tried to clear his mind. This was it. This moment they had been pushed
to, this edge where he sat staring at his greatest fears realized, where he stood at the brink of losing
her, where it was absolutely because of her involvement with him. They had been here before and
now, as she stood across the room from him, bruised and tired, he knew she was thinking about
what he had done before.

About what exactly he was going to do now.

But before he could move forward, before he could scoop her up into his arms, before he could say
or do anything, the buzzer at the door sounded, cutting into the moment like a knife. Maddie's eyes
left his and she tried to pull herself together. "That must be Jillian..." She wiped at her eyes as she
moved towards the intercom, drawing her mind back from the place they were going and Harry
stood absolutely still in the living room, his heart hammering in his chest.

When Maddie returned, she returned with her assistant who, though smiling, looked just as tired
and flustered as the rest of them.

"Harry, this is my assistant Jillian," Maddie introduced the two of them. "Jillian, this is Harry
Sussex."

"Good to see you," Harry stepped forward, extending his hand. "I think maybe we've met before?"

"Yes," Jillian slipped her fingers into his, meeting his smile, acknowledging the weight of the day,
of this moment. "Though it's been a few years."

"It has," he nodded, squeezing her hand lightly before he let go. "Good to see you again."

"You too," she returned the sentiment and shifted her focus to Maddie, setting her bag down on the
coffee table and beginning to search. "I have your new phone," she pulled out a box and handed it
over. "They were able to move all of your contacts over from the cloud, so you should be good to
go."

"Thank you so much for doing this Jillian," Maddie was grateful as she opened the box, pulling the
phone out and powering it up before setting it aside. "And the old one?"

"They said that even if it powered back up and was functional, nobody would be able to get
anything off of it anyway."

"Good," Maddie exhaled. "Good."

"And..." She pulled out a few paper bags. "Here are your prescriptions," she sat them down on the

"And your instructions," she held up the paperwork, looking between the two of them before handing them over to Harry. "There's an antibiotic she needs to start taking right away and pain
medicine that she start taking whenever she wants."

"Okay," Harry nodded along, taking mental notes.

"She should eat something before she takes either of them," Jillian continued passing on the
doctor's instructions. "And this sheet here has a list of things to watch for and...did they give you the instructions for the wound?"

"They did," Harry answered, glancing at his bag where he had tucked them.

"Excuse me," Maddie laughed, mildly amused. "But you both see me right here, right? I think maybe there's a chance I might be able to handle the prescriptions?"

"I'm sorry," Jillian blushed as she looked from Harry to Maddie. "I'm sorry Ma'am. I didn't mean that you couldn't. I just thought maybe he..." She looked to Harry again. "I thought you were going to be here for a while...taking care of her..."

"I am," he answered instantly, nodding his head as he looked to Maddie, holding her gaze "I am going to be here for a while...taking care of her."

"Ah," Jillian nodded, catching the look between them, the mood. "Okay. Well. I think maybe it's time for me to go." She clapped her hands together and reached for her bag. "I spoke with the team from work. They said they were going to meet with you tomorrow to go over the details from...tonight." Her smile faded from her lips as she remembered. Shaking her head, she tried to move forward. "And to move forward with whatever they see necessary. I'll be at that meeting, if that's okay with you?"

"Of course it is," Maddie nodded, snapping out of her own mind. "And I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap about the prescriptions. I'm just a little..." She exhaled, waving her hand off in the air.

"I know," Jillian took a step forward, her hand gentle as she patted Maddie's shoulder. "And it's quite alright. I'm going to let you rest now. If you need anything, anything at all, please don't hesitate to call me."

"I won't," Maddie smiled, moving to hug her. "Thank you for everything tonight. You really went above and beyond." She stepped back and met her eyes. "You've been a great friend to me. Thank you."

"Of course," Jillian smiled through her emotions. "Again...anything you need..." She shook her head. "Did you want me to give Harry my number in case..."

"No, no," Maddie laughed. "Harry and I will be fine. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she nodded, pulling her bag up over her shoulder and turning her smile to Harry. "It was good to see you again."

"You too," he nodded.

"You'll take care of her?" She lifted her eyebrows as the three of them walked to the door.

"Absolutely," Harry answered, turning his smile to Maddie. "Just as long as she lets me." And he didn't even care if Jillian caught the serious undertones to his words.

As Jillian said her good-byes and Maddie shut the door behind her, Harry could see the look of discomfort and pain in her eyes, in the way her face would twist up as she moved. When she locked the door and turned to face him, his expression had shifted to business.
"Food," he crossed his arms over his chest. "You need to eat some food so you can take your meds..."

"Harry..." She hugged her middle.

"You heard Jillian," he shook his head. "You need to start the antibiotic and I can tell you want to start the pain pills. But first, you need to eat. So...tell me what you want and I'll get it for you."

"But, before..." She glanced towards the living room.

"I know," his voice was soft, his head heavy as he nodded. "I swear to you we can get back to that, we can spend as much time as it takes for you to realize that...that as scared as I was..." His hand moved to his heart and his eyes grew wide and pleading. "And I was. Terrified. I'm not going anywhere Maddie. I...I simply can't."

Maddie tried to keep the onslaught of emotions inside, tried to keep them from boiling over. With tears in her eyes, she nodded. "Okay..."

"Okay," he eased up. "And we'll get back to that. But first..."

"Food," Maddie breathed.

"Food," Harry nodded.

As Maddie relaxed, cuddled up on the couch, Harry finished up in the kitchen. She had requested a grilled cheese sandwich with some tomato soup, easy and comfortable, and Harry had eagerly complied. Loading up a tray with her food and some tea, he added her pill bottles and picked it up, bringing it to her on the couch.

"Here we go..." He called out, smiling as he saw her there bundled up with the blankets and looking the closest to relaxed that he had seen her since he arrived.

"Thank you," Maddie moved to sit up, clearly in pain as she did so.

"Of course," he nodded, helping her adjust the tray in her lap before he stepped back. "Would you like me to turn on some music? Or the tv?"

"Mmm," Maddie shook her head, reaching for her spoon. "I don't care to see any more news updates or theories."

"I could turn on a movie?" He suggested, understanding exactly what she meant.

"No," she shook her head again, loading up her spoon and leaning in to take a sip. "I think I prefer the quiet..."

"Fair enough," he shrugged.

"And you," she reached up for his hand. "Will you join me?"

"Yes," the relief in his voice was clear. "I'll just go grab some soup and I'll be right back."
"Okay," Maddie squeezed his hand and let him go, feeling more and more content with each sip, with each bite.

As she reached for her sandwich, dipping it into the warm, rich soup, there was a knock on the door. That's weird, she thought to herself just as Harry stepped back into the room, confusion in his eyes as he looked to her.

"Were you expecting anyone else?"

"No," she shook her head, moving to stand. "And there are only a few people on the list who can come straight up. Here, let me..."

"It's okay," he held his hand up to her, moving to set his soup down before heading to the door. "I can get it." Wiping his hands on the towel slung over his shoulder, he hurried to the door and opened it.

There looking back at him with a glare that looked a lot like Maddie's, was her oldest cousin, his posture straightening and stiffening as he looked him over. "Harry." The way he said his name told Harry all he needed to know about how he must still feel about him.

"Kyle," Harry blinked, trying to quickly wrangle the mix of emotions that surged forward at seeing him.

"Are you going to let me in?"

"Of course," Harry nodded, stepping aside. "Sorry. It's been a long day and I was surprised to see you here."

"I could say the same thing about you," Kyle stepped past him into the house, turning to look right at him as he shrugged his shoulders. "Though if the past is any indicator at all, you should be disappearing any time now."

Ah, Harry felt his defenses fly up, felt his body ready itself for a fight that he hadn't seen coming. So this is how it's going to be.

"Harry? Who is it?" Maddie's voice called out seconds before she stepped into the entryway with the two of them.

Her eyes widened and her heart skipped and at the same time as she was happy to see her cousin, to see family, she suddenly felt very nervous about what might unfold with these two men who stood tall and ready and looking to her.
Chapter 28

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"Ummmm..." A small, sweet voice from the hallway cut into the tension. "Excuse me..." It was Amy, with a nervous smile and tentative eyes as she stepped around her husband and into the entryway. "Hi." She glance around quickly, easily reading the feel of the room and, in an effort to make this as easy on Maddie as she possibly could, she was the first to step forward. "Harry..." Her smile pulled higher as she nodded to him. "It's good to see you again."

"Amy," Harry breathed her name, relief rushing out with the word. "You too. Please....come inside. Can I take your bag?" He held his hand out, grateful when she turned it over to him.

"Thank you very much," she sighed as she handed it over, looking pointedly to her husband who still stood in the doorway; tall and tense. "Kyle? Will you be joining us inside or..."

"Yeah, yes," he snapped out of his trance and moved inside, shutting and locking the door behind him.

"What are you guys doing here..." Maddie moved into the group, her tired, pained eyes wide as she shook her head, looking to them with disbelief and stun.

"We came to see you," Kyle informed her, moving to kiss her cheek, careful as he leaned in. "We saw the news and we were worried."
"But I'm fine," Maddie laughed lightly, meeting Amy's eyes with curiosity as she hugged her hello.

"We wanted to see for ourselves," Kyle answered, adjusting his bag as he looked her over.

"He insisted," Amy spoke softly to Maddie as she held onto her just a beat longer.

"And...you don't look so fine," Kyle shook his head.

"Well thank you very much," Maddie snickered. "I actually think I look pretty damn good, all things considered."

"You look beautiful," Amy smiled, her hand soft on Maddie's shoulder as the two pulled apart.

"I couldn't agree more," Harry agreed easily, his eyes and his smile fixed on her.

"Yes well," Kyle took a deep breath, standing taller and squaring his shoulders as he looked to Harry. "We're here now...to take care of her. So if you need to be going..."

"Jesus," Amy exhaled, a slight almost undetectable role to her eyes.

"Kyle," Maddie looked up at him in surprise.

"I don't," Harry answered before Kyle could say anything else. "There's nowhere else I need to be."

"You're sure?" Kyle lifted his eyebrows to Harry, clearly poking at him, egging him on.

"Absolutely." With his arms crossed over his chest and his jaw set in a hard angle that spoke very clearly of his intentions.

"Fantastic," Amy's voice had a slightly annoyed tone to it as she clapped her hands together, moving between the two men as her arm moved around Maddie, steering her away before she could begin to step in. "Come on. Surely you shouldn't be up monitoring whatever this is." Her glare went right for her husband. "Let's get you back to resting. Kyle, just sit our bags down right there."

"I could take them to a guest room if you would like?" Harry offered.

"No, no," Amy turned around, smiling at the two of them with seriousness in her eyes. "I haven't decided if we're going to stay here tonight or not..."

"What?!" Kyle looked to his wife, shocked.

"We came to check on Maddie," she reminded him. "And she seems to be doing fine," she sighed. "She seems to be taken care of, just like I told you she would be."

"Amy," Kyle started forward.

"Put down the bags Kyle," she cut him off. "And get in here so we can spend some time with your cousin. We can decide the rest of it later."

With a deep breath, Kyle pulled his shoulders back and checked his pride and nodded, doing exactly what his wife told him to do. He put down the bags and he followed along into the living
room. He watched as Harry did the same. As happy as he was to see Maddie, as great as it felt to see with his own eyes that she was fine; walking and talking and even laughing as she next to Harry on the couch...as happy as it made him to see her smile, the fact that Harry was next to her while she did it made his blood boil.

He had known he was there, had known he was on his way when the accident and he had assumed—correctly—that he would be there when they arrived. And he had thought he had adequately prepared himself for what it would feel like to see him again, after harboring such ill feelings towards him for so many years.

But seeing him was different, seeing him was difficult. There in Maddie's home, answering her door. The shock had jolted him and it was taking him longer to recover than it should have.

And he knew that. He knew he needed to calm down, to take a breath and let things go. But for some reason he simply couldn't, for some reason he felt overly protective of Maddie, overly protective of her past, of the life she had built after Harry left.

Those feelings bled into the evening, despite his wife's steady hand and remindful gaze. Despite the scotch that had been poured and the food that had been served. Somewhere deep in the pit of his stomach, he was still angry. And even he wasn't entirely sure where it was coming from or what it was about.

But there it was.

And he wasn't the only one who could feel it.

Harry caught it; in the tone of his voice, the sharpness of his gaze. He was very well aware of the complete disdain that was directed at him from where Kyle sat on the couch across from him and Maddie.

Amy could sense it, she could feel it radiating off of her husband sitting next to her. She had known long before they boarded the flight he insisted on taking that once they got here, once they saw Harry—who she knew would be there—that this would happen. That Kyle's misguided, pent up, anger would boil to the surface.

She was just glad that Maddie was tired enough that she didn't seem to notice too much. Or if she did, her pain meds were helping her not to worry too much about it. With the small, snide comments and the lingering glares aside, the two boys managed to be in the same room, managed to stay relatively civil while they had a few drinks and entertained Maddie.

But once she decided she wanted to retire to a hot bath, once she was soaking in the bubbled water Harry had drawn, once Harry came back to the living room to clean up, to rinse off dishes and tidy up, the gloves were off.

Whatever Kyle had been managing to keep at bay, was no longer restrained. And with every move Harry made around the kitchen where they all were cleaning, Kyle would watch him and roll his eyes or let out a small huff. Until finally, Harry thought maybe it would be best for them to just get it out in the open, thought maybe they could put it aside sooner, make this easier for Maddie.

So, when Kyle let out his third huff, when he looked right at Harry and shook his head, Harry took a deep breath, turned around, leaned back against the counter and faced it head on. "Listen Kyle if there's something you would like to say..."
"Something I would like to SAY?" Kyle was instantly standing at attention; back straight, eyebrows arched as he put down the bottle he had been pouring from—as though he had been waiting for this exact opportunity.

"I know you're not exactly thrilled that I'm back," Harry was calm, quiet; knowing this was among the penance he knew he should pay for how things had gone in the past.

"I'm really not," Kyle agreed easily.

"Kyle," Amy's voice was pointed.

"What?" He laughed, turning to her with wide eyes. "He knows how I feel. There's really no use in trying to hide it."

"Yes, well I'm not sure this is the time or place for..." Amy waved her hand, her other falling onto her husband's arm wanting to calm him before she couldn't any longer.

"HE brought it up," Kyle defended, pointing to Harry.

"He's right," Harry nodded apologetically to Amy, holding his hands up in surrender before moving to put a few more glasses in the soapy water of the sink. "I'm sorry. Perhaps I shouldn't have."

"Perhaps," Kyle's tone was full of sarcasm as he took a long drink from his glass. And though he was trying to calm himself, trying to back down from all that had built up inside of him, from the adrenaline that had been pumping through him since he heard of the accident, he was finding it nearly impossible and the beer wasn't helping. Finishing off a long, slow drink, he sat his glass down on the counter next to him and then with a mix of feelings boiling in his chest and without much thought, he looked right at Harry and brought it right back to center. "Perhaps you shouldn't have done a lot of things."

"Kyle Forrester," Amy's voice was shorter but Kyle was paying her very little attention.

"Perhaps you shouldn't have made promises you couldn't keep," Kyle leaned in, his eyes dark and hard and fixed on Harry who took a breath and hardened at Kyle's words. "Perhaps you shouldn't have been such a gutless asshole. Perhaps you shouldn't have made your way back into her life and perhaps you shouldn't be walking around BISHOP'S home with BISHOP'S wife pretending to be anywhere near the man that he was."

The room around them stood still and the strain in the room was palpable.

"Kyle..." Amy's voice broke into the silence as she stopped what she was doing and moved in closer.

"What?!" His eyes snapped over to her, the hurt in them making her heart ache.

"Hey, come on..." Amy tugged at his arm. "Let's not..."

"This is bullshit," Kyle nodded to Amy. "This is bullshit and you know it." And his eyes returned to Harry. "You know it too."

"Yeah..." Harry swallowed the lump in his throat, his head nodding as he swallowed his pride,
tucking back his inner instinct to fight back. He wasn't going to do this; not like this, not there. Clearing his throat, he pushed away from the counter and took a step away from them, thinking maybe it best if he went to check on Maddie who had yet to return. "I'm sorry..." His eyes shifted from Amy to Kyle and back again. "For a lot of things, I'm sorry."

But Kyle wasn't having it, he wasn't done and he was stepping forward instantly; his anger topping the surface. "You've really perfected that 'walk away' thing haven't you Wales?"

Harry stopped on his way out of the kitchen. He took a deep breath and turned around. "Listen Kyle, I know I fucked up. I'm not stupid. I've made some big, big mistakes. But fighting with you in Maddie's home, after a day like today, is not going to be one of them. I thought we could have a conversation about it and I was wrong so I'm just going to...not."

Kyle met Amy's warning-filled eyes and though he knew, he knew he should let it go, let Harry walk out of the room and end this whole conversation, there was something inside of him that just wouldn't let it. Maybe it was his own sadness, his own guilt, his own hurt. Whatever it was, it's what propelled him to look directly at Harry as he mumbled. "You've got a lot of fucking nerve, I'll tell you that."

"Kyle!" Amy gasped, turning wide eyes to him. "What the hell are you doing? Can't you just let this go?!"

"It's okay," Harry held up his hand to Amy, shaking his head softly.

"No it's not okay," Amy's eyes stayed focused on her husband.

"No it's not okay!" Kyle yelled; exasperated with her, with the situation, with all of it. "It's not okay. In fact there's nothing okay about any of this."

"Kyle!" Amy was embarrassed and tired.

"Come on Amy..." He exhaled. "You know I'm right! She was depressed for months because of him. She lost so much because of him, was nearly destroyed because of him! And now they're after her again; the press, the paparazzi—all because of HIM! And now this accident!" Kyle yelled as unexpected tears sprang in his eyes, his finger pointing accusingly to Harry.

"That wasn't his..." Amy tried to reel him in, but Kyle was too far gone.

"And here he is..." He waved his hand at Harry who stood in the doorway, watching as Kyle laid truth to his failures. "In the home that Bishop built..."

Harry's eyes snapped up, wide and full of emotion at the second mention of his best friend.

If Kyle noticed or not, he kept going. "Parading around here like he belongs. I wonder what he would say about this show you're putting on. Enjoying his Scotch! Eating in his kitchen! Sleeping in his bed! With his wife!"

"Okay that's enough," Harry stepped forward. He had been ready to take the worst of it, but pulling Bishop into the mix somehow made it different. "You are way out of line right now."

"I'M way out of line?!" Kyle's fury turned to Harry, not seeing the tears in Amy's eyes, not feeling her hands on his arm, trying to keep him from moving over to Harry. "Who the hell are you to tell
anyone anything about being out of line?!

"Stop it," Amy's voice was loud and clear but they were so far passed hearing her.

"This isn't the time and place for this," Harry held his ground.

"No you're right," Kyle shook his head, shook his wife's hands off of him. "You're right. It's way, way too late." And then without any warning, without any hint, Kyle stepped forward and swung.

A crack sounded out as hit Harry. A groan, a gasp, and before either of them had time to register it, Amy was between them, pushing and pulling and trying her best to keep them apart.

But Kyle was focused; tears in his eyes as he yelled. "I should have boarded a plane to London and kicked your ass years ago!"

"Stop it!" Amy cried in front of him.

"You are nowhere near the man he was!" Kyle struggled in his wife's grasp, unable to move as he yelled at Harry who stood hunched over slightly, his hand to his eye. "Nowhere NEAR the man he was!"

"You think I don't know that!?" Harry's voice rose in the room, scary even himself. Harry's voice choked on his own emotion as he looked right at Kyle. "I know he was a better man, that he'll always be the better man...that I'll never..." He shook his head. "You think I don't know that Kyle?! You think that every time I look at her I'm not thinking about how fucking unfair it is that he's gone and I'm here and how....lucky I am that she's even talking to me..."

"Good!" Kyle shot back.

"Enough!" Amy pushed at his chest, exasperated. "I can't believe you right now! I can't believe you're acting like this! That you fucking hit him!"

"He deserved it!" Kyle yelled back.

"He's right," Harry cut in, drawing their attention back to him; his eyes focused on her.

"Harry..." She turned to look at him, eyes wide and full of tears, thankful Maddie wasn't here to see this unfold.

"Harry..." Harry held his hands up in front of him and backed towards the doorway. "He is. But I'm done. I'm not going to fight with you here in Maddie's kitchen. Not with her down the hallway...not after today." He shook his head and pressed a hand to his chest, his eyes looking to Amy. "I'm going to go check on Maddie. She's been back there for a while and I don't want her to have fallen asleep in the tub."

"Harry..." Amy's voice cracked as she looked to him, as her hold on her husband loosened.

"It's okay," he tried for a smile, his face already reddening, already swelling up. "You should stay though..." He nodded towards the hallway he was heading for. "I know it's not...my place to say so but...both rooms are open and I'm sure she would insist." Without giving her a chance to respond, Harry turned and stepped away from them, leaving them in the kitchen to their own accord.
He could hear arguing as he moved further and further away from them, he could hear Amy calling Kyle out on his actions and he could hear Kyle backing them up. Rubbing at his face, Harry groaned to himself. It already hurt and he guessed it was going to leave a mark.

But he had meant what he said to Kyle. There was nobody there in that room who thought he deserved to be hit for all that had happened more than he did. Nobody in the world, he guessed.

Shaking it off, he was quiet as he opened the door to her room, not wanting to bring any of the negativity in with him. But when he stepped into the room, illuminated only by a small bedside lamp, he stopped in his tracks and his heart ached in his chest.

There she was. Cozy and warm and tucked up under the covers. She had gotten out of the bathtub, had put on pajamas and had–clearly–fallen fast asleep. And thankfully she hadn't heard one single bit of what had just gone down in her kitchen.

Stepping further inside, Harry closed the door behind him.

And it was this, this woman in front of him. Sleeping peacefully even though she had been through hell that day, even though she was banged up and recovering. She was quiet and curled up in her bed with the softest of smiles on her face.

And he was so in love with her, so completely enamored with her, that it made him want to cry.

But instead, he was quiet as he dressed for bed. Instead, he was gentle as he crawled in next to her.

And he was thankful, blissfully thankful as he laid down on the pillow next to hers and he watched her sleep.

There, next to him, smiling and whole. She was there. And nothing, nothing could make him leave her.
When Harry woke the next morning, Maddie was still sound asleep. Curled up onto the pillow next to him, he could see her bruises darkening and he knew today was going to be just as ache-filled as yesterday. Maybe even more so. Careful not to wake her, he slipped from her bed and pulled on a t-shirt and left the room.

Knowing she had medication to take, knowing she would most likely want a pain pill, he decided to get a move on breakfast, wanting there to be something ready for her stomach when she woke. With his hand rubbing at his stiff neck, he made his way to the kitchen, tired and quiet and so many emotions still up in the air.

And when he stepped into the kitchen and saw Kyle already awake and brewing coffee, memories from their encounter came flooding back into the room. Both men stood taller, both men squared their shoulders. Kyle's eyes followed Harry's movements as he stepped further into the kitchen. Though Kyle felt that maybe he should say something, it was Harry who spoke first.

Pointing to the eye that Kyle had hit the night before, Harry met his gaze with an easy calmness. "I let you get in one." He held up one finger. "Because I know that I had it coming, because I know that at some point I deserved it, probably more."

"Probably?" Kyle was much less angry, much less volatile but his sentiment was still the same.

"But that's it." Harry ignored the jab, shaking his head. "I won't let you hit me again like that Kyle. I just won't. So it would be great if you could do your part to make sure that we don't make this worse for Maddie."

Kyle had the decency to look a little embarrassed, slightly humbled. "Listen..."

"I know you hate me," Harry cut him off, taking a deep breath as he continued what he wanted to say. "And as much as I wish that weren't true, I know there's nothing I can do to fix that. So I'm just going to have to live with it. But it doesn't change how I feel about Maddie. And know this," Harry stood taller, spoke clearer. "I love her. Love her."

"Yeah," Kyle nodded, looking down to the ground as Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"I made a grave mistake years ago when I pushed her away and I have paid every single second of my life since then. And now that she's back in my life? Now that she's let me back in? There's no way I make that mistake again. If she wants to be with me, then I'm all in. And nothing's going to scare me away. Not an accident that's eerily close to the one that took my mother," Harry shook his head and swallowed. "And not her older cousin who thinks he's looking out for her best interests."

"I..."

"Nothing." Harry shook his head. "And nobody. Except for Maddie. So you can throw all you want at me, you can roll your eyes and huff and sigh and call me whatever names you can come up with. But I'm not going to be intimidated out of her life." Harry shrugged. "And I'm not going to let you hit me again."
Kyle watched him for a beat, his eyes trained on him as he moved to begin breakfast, and finally he spoke. "Are you finished?"

"I think so," Harry nodded, the corners of his lips curling up slightly.

"Good," Kyle took a deep breath and began. "I'm not going to hit you again."

"Good to hear it," Harry replied.

"And..." Kyle shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, and met Harry's eyes. "And I'm not going to trust you again. Not easily."

"Okay..."

"Okay," Kyle nodded. "But. She...she does. I don't know why she does or really how she does. But she does. And last night...last night I was letting off anger that has been building up for a very long time. I said some things..." He looked down at his hands, at his fingers as they twisted at his wedding band. "Some things I meant," he looked up to Harry then. "But some things that have probably built up to more than they started out as, some things that were probably magnified by the news of the accident, by the alcohol..."

"You know you don't have to apologize..."

"I'm not," Kyle cut him off with half a grin. "I meant what I said. And...I meant that swing I took." He nodded to Harry's eye, slightly swollen, slightly red. "But I shouldn't have said it here, last night. Not like I did." Harry waited, curious about where this was headed. "And the stuff about Bishop..."

As his breath sucked into his lungs, Harry felt his defenses fly up, felt his body gear up. But before Kyle could continue, a strained, sleepy voice behind them drew their attention.

"What stuff about Bishop?" Maddie, still in pajamas, still looking closer to sleep than awake, stepped into the room with a stifled yawn, clearly feeling the pain from yesterday.

Both men turned at the sound of her voice, both men moving to action, wanting to make her comfortable again.

"Oh it's..." Harry began, ready to wave it off, to brush it aside. But when Maddie looked up to him, her eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

"Oh my God..." She reached up then, her fingers stretching towards his eye. "What happened to your face?"

"To my face?" Confusion clouded his eyes for a split second before her finger reached him and he flinched. "Ah...my face."

"Yeah! Your face! Harry what happened to you?"

"It's nothing," He reached for her wrist, pulling her hand away from him.

"It's not nothing," she shook her head. "It's..."
"Me," Kyle offered himself up, ready to stand and take what they both knew was coming. "It was me. I happened to his face."

"You?" Maddie turned to her cousin, her expression a mixture of shock and anger. "What do you mean it was YOU?"

"You know, it's not really a big deal..." Harry offered, wanting to back her down. It was first thing in the morning and she hadn't even had breakfast much less her pain pills.

"Not a big deal?" She looked back to Harry, shaking her head at the both of them. "You hit him."

"I did," Kyle nodded, sheepish and embarrassed. "I had a few drinks, had a few things to say and it just...it escalated pretty quickly."

"Jesus Christ Kyle!" Maddie stood up to him, moving in on him. "What in the hell is wrong with you?! You can't just come to my home and hit my boyfriend because you're pissed about something that happened years ago!"

"Maddie..." Harry stepped forward, wanting to calm this down, to ease her back.

"Have you apologized?" Her arms crossed over her chest, her eyes boring right into her cousin's.

"No I haven't..."

"Well what are you waiting for?"

"You know what..." Harry stepped up, moving to Maddie's side, a soft hand on her shoulder and a smile on his face. "It's really not necessary."

"You're joking," she turned to him.

"I'm not," Harry shook his head, glancing up at Kyle as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Harry. What happened here happened years ago."

"I know," he nodded. "But we all know that I deserved one hit. It really should have been you who delivered it or maybe even Bishop but..." Harry sighed. "It might as well have been Kyle."

"But..."

"It's okay," Harry shook his head, his hands moving comfortably over her shoulders, her arms. "It is. And...it won't happen again."

"Right," Kyle nodded, a little thrown by Harry's reaction. "Listen Maddie. I shouldn't have done that here. I shouldn't have come to your home and got into it..."

"No," she shook her head. "You shouldn't have."

"But we've..." He looked to Harry, unable to help the way his gaze hardened. "We've settled things between us as much as we can and I can promise you that it won't happen again."

Standing still for a moment, Maddie's eyes moved between them; watching, judging. And then,
because it had been a crazy few days, because she had more important things going on—like the
stabbing ache in her head, the dull ache in her chest, and an empty stomach to top it all off—she let it
go at that.

And, as the two men looked at each other, they both stepped back—seemingly stepping down and
away from whatever battle it was they thought still needed fought. She knew it wasn’t over
between them, she knew there would probably always be a bit of bad blood but they seemed to be
calling a truce—at least for now. And, for her, for the moment, that was good enough.

Maddie wasn’t feeling well. The cuts, the bruises, the bumps and the scratches and all of it put
together had taken a toll on her and all she really wanted to do was rest. So they postponed the
meeting with the attorneys and the PR people and took another day at home. Maddie had lunch
and took her pills and had been sleeping for nearly an hour when the buzzer rang out. Lifting her
head from her pillow on Harry’s lap, she looked up with confusion as Kyle went to find out who it
was. When he came back into the room, he had an amused grin on his face and his eyes shot a
quick glance to Harry.

"Who is it?" Maddie asked, sitting up on the couch as she stretched herself awake.

"Charlie Hunnam," Kyle's grin slipped higher as he said the name and Harry, who felt his
instinctual territorial nature flare up, knew exactly why.

"Charlie?" Maddie's forehead creased. "But the premiere isn't for a few weeks...what's he doing in
New York?"

"Well, right now it appears as though he's coming to check on you," Kyle shrugged his shoulders
and clapped his hands together. "I told them to let him up, I hope that's okay."

"Of course," Maddie nodded, looking to Harry as she moved to get up, to answer the door.

"Hey, hey, I can let him in," Kyle offered.

"Or I can?" Amy put out there, a smirk on her face as she ran her hands back through her hair.

"Lovely," Kyle shifted his gaze to his wife as Harry chuckled. "I can see you primping by the
way."

"Don't care," Amy shrugged, rising to her feet and heading for the door. "Jenna's going to be so
jealous."

Maddie reached for Harry's hand, tugging at it so that he looked up to her. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be," he shook his head at her, smiling wide. "No need to be."

"Hey..." She pulled his hand closer to her, holding his gaze as she smiled sweetly. "You've had a
crazy weekend..."

"Not crazier than you," he bent to kiss her fingers, straightening up as he heard voices—Amy's and
Charlie's—on their way into the living room. As Maddie sat up and situated herself, he couldn’t help
but watch her face, watch for her response. And when Charlie stepped into the room, her smile
pulled higher. She was happy to see him.

"Charlie..." She said his voice with a softness that was distinctly Maddie and she rose from the couch to greet him.

"No, no, don't get up" his voice was low and accented and Harry felt his shoulders squaring on reflex. Taking a breath, he reminded himself where he stood and he rose to his feet as well. "I'm sorry I just stopped by unannounced," he hugged Maddie, kissed her cheeks. "I saw the news and tried to call but...I had to see for myself."

"I'm fine," Maddie assured him with a squeeze to his arms, a smile that held something just the two of them shared. And though Harry was instinctually and incredibly jealous, he held it in. He kept it together–mostly for Maddie's sake but a little bit because Kyle was watching him like a hawk, wanting to see his reaction. "I have some bumps and bruises and a few cuts..." She shook her head. "But I'm fine."

"Yes," Charlie nodded, looking her over with a smile that was meant in a friendly way, a sweet and loving way. "It's good to see you Maddie."

"It's good to see you too," she assured him with a nod before turning to face the crowd. "Charlie...this is my cousin Kyle and his wife Amy..." She waited while hands were shook, while pleasantries were exchanged and then she turned bright eyes to Harry. "And this is Harry Sussex..." She tossed him a wink, reminding him of exactly what he needed to be reminded of in that moment. "My boyfriend."

"Ah yes," Charlie nodded, his lips curling up in an amused way as he reached to shake Harry's hand. "I think I saw something on the news to that effect."

"I would imagine you did," Harry extended his hand and a welcoming smile. "It's nice to meet you."

"You too," Charlie shook his hand. "And thank you."

"Thank me?" Harry's eyebrows drew together as they all took seats around the living room. "For?"

"Letting me take Maddie to the premier of my film," Charlie turned his bright, smiling eyes to Maddie. "That is if you're still up for it?"

"Oh absolutely," Maddie nodded with a grin. "I've been looking forward to it. Though..." Her lips turned down in a frown, her hand skimming over her shoulder where the seatbelt bruise began. "I hope these bruises heal before the premiere. I'll look ridiculous in my dress."

"No, no," Charlie shook his head. "I'm sure you'll look as beautiful as always." The second he said it, Maddie flushed pink and Harry could swear he heard Kyle snicker. But he remained calm and cool, even when Charlie looked right at him, sheepish and apologetic. "Sorry."

"No," Harry shook his head, reminding himself not to reach for Maddie's hand, not to move in closer. Reminding himself there was no need to try to assert his dominance here. This was Maddie's friend–at least that's what he told himself as he smiled to her. "I couldn't agree more."
"Well..." Harry let out a long breath as he followed Maddie into her bedroom later that night, the two of them finally finding solace at the end of yet another long day. "Turns out Lexie was right."

"Lexie?" Maddie's eyes were confused as they looked across the bed at him. "About what?"

"Charlie," Harry couldn't help the smirk that pulled at his lips at Maddie's reaction to hearing Lexie's name. "It turns out he is as sexy in person as he is on tv."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back as she laughed and fuck if Harry wasn't in love with that sound. Chuckling as he stepped out of his clothes, he shook his head. "I'll have to call her and let her know..."

"You'll do no such thing," Maddie eyed him with warning and warmth and for the first time since he had landed, since he had heard the news–they felt close to normal.

"If you say so," Harry's smile slipped higher, relaxing as Maddie climbed into bed. "Can I get you anything?"

"Mmm," she nodded her head, patting the bed next to her. "You." The look in her eyes hit him in his gut. "I would really like for you to be right here."

And there he was. Just like that, just that easy. As he settled in next to her, she reached for his hand, pulling it over to her. Holding onto it with one of her hands, she traced over his veins and his muscles with her finger, just enjoying the feel of him there with her.

"You know..." She sighed, turning her eyes up to him. "So much has happened in the last two days and when we're not juggling all of it, I'm sleeping." Her fingers stopped tracing and held onto him instead. "We haven't even had a minute to talk."

"No?" Harry's eyebrows lifted tiredly. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I don't know," her shrug was weak, her smile soft. "The accident? Kyle punching you..." She reached up to run a gentle finger under his eye. "Charlie showing up?" She let out a small laugh. "You've had to handle a lot these last few days, Harry..."

Swallowing the lump in his throat that was full of nervousness, that was tinted with fear, he nodded his head and met her gaze. "And now you're worried I'm going to take off? That you'll never see me again?"

"I..." She blinked at the tears that rose to her eyes, wanting to shake the feeling in her stomach.

"It's okay," Harry whispered, purposefully keeping his eyes locked with hers. "I get it. This is just...the natural consequences of what's happened between us."

"Harry, I don't..." She shook her head.

"It's okay," he repeated louder this time; easier. "It takes time to let go of that much doubt, Maddie."

"I don't doubt you Harry," she tugged at his hand, wanting to tug him out of this mood, this place. "I just...I know that you must be feeling just..."

"I know you do," she nodded.

"But..." He inhaled and turned to face her. "The difference is that last time...last time those feelings made me want to run as far away from you as possible, like I was holding onto the bomb that was going to explode and take you out."

"And now?" She whispered, holding her breath.

"Now?" He smiled then, surprising her as his arms moved around her, drawing her closer to him. "Now I just want to wrap myself around you and never ever let you go."

With emotions tangled in her throat, the tears in Maddie's eyes rose and she sank into his arms. "I think I like that."

"Me too," he sighed, kissing the top of her head as he held onto her, as his hands moved over her.

"Even with Kyle trying to bully you into leaving?"

"Ha!" Harry laughed. "I wish him the best of luck, love. I'm not about to be bullied by Kyle."

"What about the paparazzi waiting outside?" She turned her eyes up to look at him, to watch as his jaw hardened.

"Fuck the paparazzi outside Maddie."

"Yeah?" She let out a small laugh and then a sigh. "Honestly though....what are we going to do about them? We're meeting with my team of people tomorrow and...why are you laughing?" Her eyes narrowed as he chuckled, his chest rumbling next to her.

"Because...you have a team of people." He sighed, his head tipping back against the headboard, his eyes focused on the ceiling. His grin spreading wider and wider. "It's usually me with the team of people but...not this time." He turned to kiss her.

"Yes well, that team of people is pretty hard core. And my father-in-law is lighting a fire under them," she smiled as she thought of Ian, feeling terrible that he was so worried. "I think they're going to want to come down hard on this."

"I think you're right," Harry nodded, clearing his throat and sitting up a bit, his eyes growing serious. "I actually have an idea. I talked to Thomas about it briefly but I wanted to run it by you."

"Oh?" Maddie pulled back just a bit, just enough so she could watch him. "Tell me more."

It was still dark outside when Harry woke. With Maddie curled up next to him and the world asleep around him, he wasn't sure what stirred him from his slumber. But once he was awake, he found he couldn't just drift back to sleep right away. So he rose from bed and, after a stop at the bathroom, he made his way to the kitchen for something to drink.
Quiet and careful, he walked through the dark hallway, across the living room lit only by the light of the moon shining in through the large windows. It was so calm, so peaceful there. Stepping onto the cold tile of the kitchen, he rubbed a hand over his face as he made his way to the cupboard where she kept the glasses. But when his fingers left his face and his eyes opened, the shadow standing in the room nearly made him jump out of his skin.

"Jesus Christ!" He stepped back, his hand flying to his chest. "Kyle?!!"

"Yes!" His voice was hushed but quick.

"What the hell are you doing?" Harry took a deep breath, trying to calm his pounding heart.

"The same thing as you I imagine," he grumbled.

"Thirsty?" Recovering, Harry went for a glass.

"Couldn't sleep," he shook his head and took a sip from the glass in his hand. "You want some Scotch?"

"Scotch?" Harry's voice and his eyebrows lifted. He had come for water, but since Kyle was there and he was offering. "Sure." He shrugged his shoulders and set his glass down on the counter standing across from where Kyle sat.

"Here you go," Kyle poured a glass and pushed it his way.

"Thanks," Harry picked it up, twirling it around in his fingers with a huff of a laugh. "It's really Scotch in there?"

"Yes." Kyle answered.

"Just Scotch?" Harry couldn't help it as he brought the glass to his smirking lips.

"As if I'd try to take you out with a glass of Scotch with my fingerprints all over it."

"Fair point," Harry chuckled into his glass, taking a long sip. For a long while the only sounds in the room were the clink of the glasses, the swish of the liquid. And then, just before it turned completely awkward, Kyle spoke up.

Calm and steady and shielded by the darkness, he owned up to something that had been bothering him all day—and much longer than that. "I shouldn't have said what I said about Bishop."

Harry's hand stopped on its way to his mouth, his glass pausing mid-air as he looked right at Kyle. "Sorry?"

"Part of that was..." Kyle took a deep breath. "When he first came around, when he first started dating Maddie, I gave him a really hard time."

"You did?" Harry's lips curled up and he wished more than anything in the world that his best friend were there, that he could turn to him and bond over Kyle giving them shit.

"Of course," Kyle nodded. "He had been your best friend and he was so much like you and it wasn't
fair. I wasn't fair to him then and it took a while for me to get over myself and give him a chance..." He shook his head and took a drink. "So last night, when I said those things...some of that was me dealing with my own shit. It wasn't so much about you."

"It's okay," Harry reached for the bottle, topping off both of their drinks. "I mean..." He took a deep breath, his shoulders rising and falling as he did. "You weren't wrong. Bishop was always the better man of the two of us. When we were kids, when we were twenty and crazy and...certainly when it came to Maddie."

Kyle shifted in his chair, unsure of what to say, of where this was going. "You know..." He cleared his throat. "He always spoke highly of you. Even after they got together, even after your friendship was over. God he even defended you to us..."

"He did?" Harry could feel his emotions rushing around inside of him.

"He did," Kyle answered, his voice heavy with his own feelings about it all. "Through all of it he never backed down from that. He maintained that you...that you loved her, that you truly believed that what you were doing was protecting her, keeping her safe."

"I did believe that," Harry whispered, his conviction so much less than it had been so long ago.

"And now?" Kyle wasn't egging him on with the question, wasn't trying to provoke him.

Harry shook his head. "Now?" His voice cracked, his hands pressing down on the counter as he looked to the floor. "Would she be safer without me in her life?" He hated his instinctual answer to that question. "Maybe." He hated admitting it out loud. "But..."

"But?"

"But I'm not going anywhere Kyle. As selfish as that makes me, as horrible as that might be, I can't be without her anymore. I know I don't deserve her or any kind of second chance she's giving me. But she's giving it to me and I'm taking it."

"Yeah..." Kyle sighed. Taking another drink, he let that sit for a moment, let it linger, and then he swallowed and continued. "When she lost you, she was just...destroyed," he shook his head. "She cried and cried and she barely moved. I had never seen her like that before, I was so worried about her, worried she wouldn't get up, that she wouldn't recover." He hated the images that popped into his head but he knew that Harry hated the ones in his even more. "I couldn't imagine anything hurting her as much as you did when you left..." His voice cracked. "And then she lost him."

The silence between the two of them was deafening, the hurt inside each of them very real.

"I don't know why she's decided to be with you again," Kyle spoke over the ache he felt. "I don't know how she's gotten to a point where she can trust you. But...she has." He took in a breath and let it out. Finishing his glass of Scotch, he rose to his feet. "And as much issue as I have with that...I don't want her to have to lose you again."

Harry blinked, surprised by that. "I...I don't know what to say."

"Nothing," Kyle shook his head. "You say nothing. You just...don't make Bishop wrong about you. Don't make him wrong about everything he said about how much you really loved her." Kyle rounded the counter then, heading for the hallway, for his bed. "We're leaving in the morning,
Amy and I. We're going back to Colorado, giving you two some space, some time."

"You know you don't have to do that..." Harry offered.

"Oh I know," Kyle chuckled, already moving away from him. "Goodnight Harry."

With confusion in his eyes and emotion in his heart, Harry shook his head. "Goodnight."

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Standing in the lobby of Maddie's building, Harry turned to Maddie with a nervous smile. He looked tall and elegant in his suit and tie and she looked proper and professional in her dress and heels. Both of them were done up; hair, makeup, a freshly trimmed beard.

"You're sure you want to do this?" Harry's voice was soft as he spoke to her, his hand reaching for hers.

"I'm sure," she nodded with a smile, her fingers tangling up with his.

It had been three days since the accident. His black eye was barely noticeable and her bruises were beginning to fade. Kyle and Amy had gone home days before and Harry hadn't left her side for more than a few minutes. They had finally met with the team from Bishop Enterprises, they had finally conferenced with Thomas who was still in London and a decision had been made. They were going to go with Harry's idea.

When the car pulled up in front of Maddie's building, Jim stepped forward and Harry's hand tightened on hers.

"You know there's no going back after this," Harry warned one last time. "No option for denying it."

"Oh I know," Maddie laughed at him.

"And it doesn't in any way guarantee that they'll stop..."

"You know," she turned to him then. "This was your idea. If you don't want to do it then all you have to do is..."

With a kiss, he silenced her. With a smile he warmed her heart.

"I want to do this." Standing tall, he pulled her hand into both of his. "Come on. Let's go."

And just like that, they were in motion. Out of the building and into the car. There were photos taken as they emerged, footage shot as they drove away.

It wasn't a long trip to the Bishop Headquarters in the city and Maddie held Harry's hand the entire time. When they pulled to a stop outside, she could see the press waiting for them, could see her team just inside. Across the backseat of the car, Harry's eyes sought hers, sought peace and certainty. And then, with a pat to his chest, he made sure his statement was tucked into his pocket and he reached for the handle.

Stepping from the car first, Harry took the brunt of the flashes that were waiting for them. But
when Maddie emerged, when she stood tall next to him and took his outstretched hand, a whole new round of photos were snapped. But they didn't flinch and they didn't blink.

Instead they walked, hand in hand, into the building, into the press conference that had been arranged just for them, just for this. Nearing the stage, Harry paused to smile at her, paused to let go of her hand before he took the last few steps alone. As Maddie took a seat next to her assistant and Harry took the mic, the room quieted and waited.

"Good Evening," Harry addressed them, unfolding the statement he had written over the phone with Thomas, the words that had been read and approved by his father, the truth Harry hoped would get everyone to back up just a little. "Thank you all for coming. I have a few brief words for you and then you will hear from an attorney for Doctor Bishop." With a quick glance to the crowd, he looked down at his notes. "As you know, it has been my policy not to speak of my private, personal affairs, not to address rumors and speculation regarding my love life in the media. But, in the light of recent events, of the near tragedy that landed several innocent people in the hospital, I have been compelled to make a statement, a plea if you will." Clearing his throat, his hand smoothed down his tie and he looked to Maddie for the briefest of seconds before turning back to the crowd that had assembled.

And there, in front of the members of the press, in front of the world that was watching, the people who would see it or read about it later, he did what he had never done before, he laid down the truth of their relationship. He talked about their first engagement, how it had ended. Why it had ended. He made it clear that it was his decision, his responsibility. He made it clear that it had not been about disloyalty or unfaithfulness. He made it clear that it had had everything to do with his own fears and insecurities.

With emotion in his voice, he talked about Bishop. About how Maddie had found solace and friendship, then companionship and love, with his best friend. He meant it when he said that he was thankful they had found each other. He meant it when he said that he was happy they had loved each other.

He spoke about the end of his own marriage, the parts that were his and the parts that were Cassandra's–all parts that had nothing to do with Maddie.

And then, with a smile on his face, he spoke of his reunion with the great love of his life. He spoke of her with caution and care and he spoke of her with honesty.

And then he asked something of them. Space and time. Respect and dignity. He asked them to not let another near tragedy happen again, asked them to help him make sure that this love of his life and the innocent people who surrounded her weren't put into harm's way because of the life he lead.

And then, with a sincere thank you and a smile to Maddie, he stepped down from the stage and took his place at her side. As her attorneys took the stage to lay out what was happening next as a result of the accident, Harry took Maddie's hand.

He knew this wouldn't solve everything, he knew it wouldn't keep them all away. But he had been honest and he had been genuine and he was hopeful that people would see that, hopeful they would back off of Maddie, that they wouldn't come at her with such malice.

And for those who wouldn't respond to his heartfelt plea, he hoped that the thinly veiled warnings that were being issued by her attorneys would do the trick.
With her hand in his and their story laid out in front of them, all they had left was to be together, to try to make this work in the crazy world that surrounded them, the world that was going crazier every moment as news of this confirmation hit, as details of their story were picked apart, as photos of the two of them were scrutinized.

Yes. The world now knew and even with the touching truth that was told, even with the warm photos that were released, there were those among them who would still look for the twists and turns in it all, those among them who would still seek the negative, the worst.

But, for now, Harry was standing tall next to Maddie and Maddie, she was smiling. Wide and easy, with her hand tucked into his.

Ready to face whatever was coming for them.
Harry's speech, as impassioned and honest as it was, did nothing to stave off the massive interest the public had in his relationships, in his reunion with Maddie. Yes, rumors were quieted. Yes, most of the ill-will wished on Maddie drifted from the headlines. But the curiosity, the desire to know more, to catch pictures of them together, to watch as the couple returned to this relationship that had once been heralded as a fairy tale—that only increased. The gossip, the talk, the intrigue merely switched. Before it was a tale that involved any number of sinister notions; infidelity, disloyalty, friends turning on each other. But now it was about true love about finding your soul mate again, about second chances and this pedestaled version of friendship and love.

Both were impossible notions, both were extreme versions of a mixed up reality. And both kept Maddie and Harry at the center of intrigue. Though the paparazzi had backed off, though the mad pursuits had stalled in the wake of the legal action being taken, but the interest was still there. And the hype, the play up by the public and the media, that was still very much a part of their lives.

Just two weeks after the accident, Maddie was snapped walking through the London airport. With her hair tucked up under a hat and her sunglasses hiding her eyes, she slipped into a waiting car and was taken straight to Kensington Palace. But not before a few fellow travelers snapped a few quick photos and made her arrival in London national news.

"You've been spotted," Harry smiled down at her, pulling her hat from her head as the door shut behind her.

"Is that so?" She tipped her lips up to his, tugging at his t-shirt, wanting him to kiss her.

"Mmm," he nodded, leaning in to do just that. "They know you're here."

"Well..." She sighed heavily, shrugging her shoulders as she wrapped her arms up around his neck. "I suppose they were going to figure it out sooner or later."

"You mean tomorrow? When you're sitting on the sidelines at my polo match?" His eyebrows lifted as he gathered her in his arms.

"I mean that exactly," she grinned, intent on ending this discussion, focused on reuniting with him. Right there in the entryway.

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"And in Royal News. Perhaps a sign as to the seriousness of their relationship, Doctor Madeline Bishop was seen sitting with the Duchess of Cambridge at the Beaufort Polo Club this morning. While Princes William and Harry played in a charity match, the former fiancé of the later was seen laughing with the former's wife and the young Prince Arthur leading spectators to believe that this reunion might not be so short lived."

The coverage of Maddie's appearance in Tetbury made it much bigger than it was meant to be, much more serious than anyone ever intended. But at the end of the day, it wasn't untrue. Maddie rode with Harry to the polo match and quickly found home with Kate and the rest of the family.
"Good Morning!" Kate's smile was wide as she waved Maddie over.

"Good Morning!" Maddie called back with a matching smile. "How are you?" She leaned in to hug the Duchess, kissing her cheek as long range cameras snapped away.

"Wonderful," Kate nodded, gesturing for Maddie to join her as they sat down on a spread out blanket, watching as Arthur played about with his own miniature polo mallet. "I'm so glad you were able to come this weekend. It's really good to see you."

"It's good to see you too," Maddie relaxed back on the blanket. "And I'm excited for the match. It's been awhile since I've been."

Nodding, Kate pulled her sunglasses onto her face. "And how are you feeling? Are you recovering from the accident?"

"Recovered actually," Maddie smiled. "The bruises are still a bit of a shadow but otherwise, I'm perfectly fine."

"Thank God," Kate shook her head, glancing towards her husband and his brother, mounting their horses, most likely brandishing their own round of trash talking. "They were very worried about you."

"I know," Maddie nodded, sucking in a breath as she remembered.

"Will was beside himself when he saw the news, sick to his stomach trying to get ahold of Harry."

"Yeah," Maddie's eyes focused on the boys in question. "I can't imagine what it was like for them..."

"Yeah," Kate agreed, shaking her head as her mind shifted. "But you're okay. And really that's all that matters."

"Hmmm," Maddie turned a smile to her friend.

"Well, that and...you're here today," Kate's grin slipped higher. "Care for a drink?"

Maddie glanced at the cameras across the way, to the fellow spectators trying to look inconspicuous as they pointed and watched. And then she met Kate's eyes through the shade of their sunglasses. "I think you've read my mind."

As Maddie sat there on that blanket with Kate, watching as Will and Harry rode hard, as Arthur played around them, she felt better than she had in awhile. It was nice, to be outside in the warm sun, in the fresh air. It was nice to be laughing with a friend, getting slightly tipsy in the afternoon. And though she knew that there were cameras documenting this moment, that her face would most likely be thrown up on some gossip blogs, she didn't care so much anymore.

She was happy. She was breathing easier, laughing louder, and she was with Harry.

The very same man who was grinning wildly as he walked over to them. The match was over and the men were dirty and sweaty and even though Will had been the victor, Harry looked as if he had won a prize.
"Ladies," nodded his head to the two of them, reaching out his hand to help Maddie up from the blanket. "How are you?"

"Great," she smiled up at him, her cheeks rosy from the alcohol and the sun. "You rode really well today," she didn't even try to hide the way her eyes drifted down over him.

"You enjoyed the show?" He was smug and proud and loving the way she was looking at him.

"Very, very much," she bit at her lower lip as she nodded, her hand reaching out for him as though she didn't know there were people watching.

"I am very happy to hear that," Harry shook his head, leaning to kiss her— even though he knew there were people watching. "Any chance I can convince you to join me in the shower before we head out tonight?"

Maddie chuckled as Harry hugged her to him, sighing as she nodded her head. "A really, really good chance."

If the photos of Maddie at the airport had caused the gossip to stir, the shots from the polo match lit them on fire. By the time Maddie and Harry were stepping out that night, the cameras were out in full force. Maybe if they had stayed home, if they had stayed in, it wouldn't have turned into such a spectacle. But they wanted to go out, they wanted to meet their friends and have a few drinks and enjoy being together.

And neither of them were in any sort of place where they could be bullied by the press into staying home and staying low.

So they showered and dressed and readied to go. And when their car pulled up outside Leo's bar, they were waiting for them. Harry stepped out and reached back for Maddie's hand and together they walked through the flashes, through the gaping stares. Hand in hand, they moved past the crowds and into the bar.

When they stepped into the safety of the building, Harry glanced down to her, question in his eyes and she smiled and nodded up at him, the answer in hers.

Yes, she was fine. Yes, she would be okay.

They were well into the night when it happened. Seated around a corner table, Maddie was tucked into Harry's side, his arm wrapped around her as they talked and laughed with Kiki and Sean. Leo had been delivering drinks all night and, as soon as he finished up with a business associate, had every intention of joining them. It was light and it was easy and it was such a strong contrast to the last time they were together.

Finally. Maddie sighed as she leaned in closer to him, turning to nudge his shoulder with her nose. Feeling her there, sensing her there, Harry turned a warm smile down to her and for a second they were both so caught up in each other that neither of them noticed the way Kiki's eyes had widened, the way Sean had sat up straight in his chair.

"Hey..." Sean cleared his throat, looking to Harry. "Heads up Sussex."
"Hmmm?" Harry asked, not wanting to pull his eyes from Maddie. "What is it?"

"The Duchess," Kiki muttered under her voice.

"What?" Maddie looked to her, confused by her tone. "Kate's here?"

"No," Kiki answered, her eyes focusing on Harry as she spoke into her glass. "Cassandra."

"What? Where?" Maddie asked as Harry finally turned to look but it was too late. She was already there, already standing next to him at the table.

The mood at the table shifted instantly, everyone adjusting in their seats, taking deep breaths, trying to prepare themselves to handle Cassandra and whatever it was she brought with her.

"Well, well, well." With her hands on her hips and a look of disdain on her face, she looked down at Harry, her lips curling up as she looked to Maddie. "If it isn't my husband. And his mistress."

"She is not my mistress," Harry looked right up at her, completely unamused.

"And he is not your husband," Kiki clarified, unable to keep herself out of it. "I was there when the papers were signed, for the celebration that followed..."

"What do you want Cassandra?" Harry cut off Kiki's words, wanting to bring this conversation to as quick of an end as he could manage.

Pulling her glare away from Kiki, her arms folded over her chest and her eyes zeroed in on him. "I saw you on the news."

"Oh?"

"Your romantic declaration out of New York."

"Ah," Harry nodded, glancing down at the drink in his hands before he looked back up to her. "And?"

"And..." Her eyebrows lifted. "How could you Harry?"

"How could I?" He laughed. "How could I what?"

"Say what you said about me."

"You mean the truth?" He laughed again, taking a quick sip before he shook his head. "I'm not hiding from the truth anymore."

"Oh how big of you," the sarcasm was thick in her voice, her irritation strong in her posture and mannerisms. "It's too bad you didn't make that decision before you decided to marry me."

"I couldn't agree with you more," he held his ground, sitting taller. "But things being as they are..."

"Yes," she cut him off, her shoulders squaring as her eyes shifted to Maddie. "Things being...as they are."
"Cassandra, what is it you want?" Harry shifted in his seat, wanting to put himself between the two women, wanting to divert Cassandra's hateful gaze.

"It's funny," completely non-pulsed, Cassandra's focus stayed intent on Maddie. "The last time I saw you, you were latched onto Harry's best friend."

"Hey..." Kiki held up her hand as the tension at the table grew heavier. But Maddie stayed silent.

"How nice," Cassandra wasn't fazed at all. "The 'one-that-got-away' has returned home to the noble Prince." She leaned in and her voice dropped low. "After a wild rendezvous with the free-spirited Bishop of course."

"Cassandra," Harry warned.

"What?" Cassandra blinked her wide eyes at Maddie. "Not going to defend yourself?"

"Nah," Maddie shrugged. "There's no need. However..." Leaning forward, her gaze locked with Cassandra's. She had intended on keeping her mouth shut, but Harry's first wife had pushed the exact buttons needed to push Maddie into action. "Bring Bishop up like that again and I'll smack that smirk right off your pretty face." With no hint of humor in her eyes, it was clear to everyone around them that Maddie wasn't kidding. Across the table, Sean snickered and Kiki elbowed him.

"Aw come on," Cassandra's smile slipped higher. "I think it's great that you had somebody to keep you warm while Harry...figured his own shit out. How nice for you."

"And see, my understanding is that's exactly why your marriage ended." Maddie's head tipped to the side. Though her voice was sweet, her words were pointed and Cassandra's flinch was evidence of that. "Somebody keeping you warm."

With his hand on Maddie's arm, Harry cleared his throat and leaned forward. "What did you want Cassandra?"

Her eyes shifted to Harry, her tone shifting almost businesslike. "You didn't have to air our business out for the entire world. And if you were going to do it, a little heads up would have been nice."

Taking a breath, Harry nodded. "You're right. I could have given you a fair warning," he shrugged. "But in all honesty, there was so much going on that I wasn't even thinking about you at the time."

"Well sure," she chuckled, a low, bitter sound. "I mean, you didn't when we were married, why would you start now?"

"You know what, I think it's time for you to step away," Kiki spoke up then, ready for this show to be over. "Coming over here acting like you weren't at fault for the end of your marriage."

"This concerns you how?" Cassandra turned icy eyes to Kiki who seemed to gain ten inches as she sat taller in her chair.

"How?!" Her voice lifted with her eyebrows. "You think I don't know the things that were said? The shit that went down?"
"Kiki," Harry reached out towards her, desperately wanting to keep the peace, wanting to not offer the public another story starring his love life. "Cassandra, thanks for stopping by but I think this conversation is probably over."

"It always is," she offered him one smug, sarcastic shrug before she moved to step away. But before she did, she paused and looked right at Maddie. "I'm wondering, now that you're staying at Kensington again, what's it like to sleep in a home meant for somebody else? In a bed that belonged to another woman?"

"I don't know," Maddie shook her head, leaning in, matching her sarcasm and snark. "You tell me. It seems like maybe you're the expert in that area." Maddie's meaning was lost on nobody and it infuriated Cassandra to no end.

"You bitch." She took one step towards the table, towards Maddie, and everyone moved.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Harry stepped between them, his hand reaching out for Maddie as he looked pointedly at Cassandra. "Time for you to go." When she moved, he moved too. "Right now. Don't make me involve Jim in this. This doesn't need to go down like that."

Thankfully, Cassandra saw that he was right and didn't want any more negative press than she already had. And right now, in the current media climate, she would only be digging herself a hole. Without another word, she took a step away from them. With one last look to Maddie, she moved away from the table, leaving them all a bit riled up, a bit on edge.

"What in the hell was that?" Kiki reached for her drink, watching as Cassandra moved further and further away from them.

"I don't know," Harry shook his head, settling back in his seat, his eyes on Maddie as they calmed down. "I'm sure she's just upset that any sort of attention that was on her...isn't any longer."

"I'm sure," Kiki shrugged, rising to her feet. "I'm going for more drinks." She tugged at Sean's shirt, wanting him to join her.

"Thank you..." Harry nodded before turning to Maddie. "You okay?"

"Me?" Maddie's smile was wide and easy as she nodded her head. "Of course I'm okay. Come on..." She reached for his hand. "Come dance with me?"

Taking her hand, Harry nodded and grinned. And he followed.

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It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon and though Maddie wasn't looking forward to her inevitable trip home, though she wasn't looking forward to being apart from Harry for another few weeks, this particular solo trip had her excitement building.

She had left Harry barefoot in his office at Kensington. With a kiss and a promise to return for one last night together, she set to the country to have dinner with Ian and Michael. The closer and closer she got to the Bishop Estate, the wider her smile became. She was so happy to be seeing them, so eager. And, as she pulled up the drive, it was clear that she wasn't the only one.

"Madeline!" Ian Bishop was waiting on the front porch for her when she arrived. He was just as
quick as she was and before she made it two steps from the car, he had her in his arms, hugging her
close.

She sighed as she hugged him back, blinked at the built up tears, and she felt very much at home.
This was the first time they had seen each other in a while, the first time since the accident. And
both of them thankful for this reunion.

"It's so good to see you," Maddie kissed his cheek.

"My darling," he pulled back, looking her over with concerned, fatherly eyes. "You're really okay?"

"I am," she nodded, her hand reaching to cup his cheek. "Cuts have mended, bruises have
faded...I'm perfectly fine."

"You're sure?" He patted her hand, that unmistakable Bishop smirk in place. "Because I saw photos
of you running through the park with Harry this morning..."

"HA!" Maddie's head tipped back, her wide laughter surrounding them both. "Yes. Yes...even
though I was running this morning with Harry. I'm fine." She hugged him again. "More than fine."
And, as she thought of Harry waiting at home for her, as she thought of this moment with Ian, of
dinner with him and Michael, of this new wonderful direction her life was headed...she meant it.
"More than fine."
Chapter 31

Though Harry would be hard pressed to admit it aloud to anyone other than Maddie, he was beginning to grow quite fond of his trips to New York. The flight was quick and easy, the view of the city as the plane descended was gorgeous. And of course—the closer he got to Maddie, the easier he breathed, the happier he was. The same was as true for this trip as it had been for any other.

As the car drove him from the airport to her office, he looked over his notes. This trip wasn't just for fun. There was a meeting scheduled that afternoon to discuss Bishop Enterprises involvement in a sponsorship of the Inaugural Invictus Games in London that fall. But the meeting was with Maddie and, at the end of it, they were leaving in the same car.

Biting at his bottom lip, he lifted his eyes from the notebook in his lap, glancing at Thomas who sat across from him, and then looking out the window at the buildings passing by and he eased back in his seat. This he could get used to, ending his day meeting with Maddie. Followed by dinner. Followed by...his cheeks tinted pink as he pulled himself back to the moment. Business first.

The throngs of paparazzi had long since given up stalking the entrance to the office buildings that housed Bishop Enterprises so Harry's arrival was met with zero recognition and zero issue. Just the way he liked it. He and Thomas were in the elevator and up to Maddie's floor, arriving just a bit before schedule.

Which is probably why the front reception desk had been abandoned. Feeling anxious and unable to exercise patience, Harry moved right past it towards Maddie's office—not even thinking twice about what he was doing. With Thomas two steps behind him, quietly protesting his actions, he snuck up to Maddie's door, passing by what appeared to be a guard, he grew quiet and watched what was happening inside.

"What time is it?" Maddie was standing next to Jillian with their backs to the door, looking down at something on the desk in front of them.

"About thirty seconds after the last time you asked me," Jillian snickered, nudging Maddie lightly. "He'll be here soon."

"How soon?" Maddie's toes tapped impatiently and Harry could actually feel his head swell a bit at having overheard the excitement in her voice.

"He's not expected for another twenty minutes," Jillian glanced down at her watch. "And, if we really focus, that should give us enough time to decide." Both heads turned attention back to the desk, quieting as they looked something over.

"I don't know..." Maddie shook her head with a soft laugh. "I mean...I think we can narrow it down to these two..." She pointed and Jillian nodded in agreement. "But I think I might have to look at them with the dress again to decide."

As both women looked up to the large garment bag hanging in the corner of Maddie's office, Harry's eyes moved to follow.
"God, how cool is it that people want to lend you all of this gorgeous jewelry..." Jillian looked back down at the desk.

"Well sure," Maddie shrugged. "It's a red carpet premiere. Free advertising."

"I know," Jillian sighed. "It's all just so beautiful. I don't know how you're ever going to decide..."

Clearing his throat, Harry decided he had watched them in silence long enough. As both women turned to look at him, he stepped inside. "Maybe I can help?"

"Harry!" Maddie's face lit up instantly, her hands clapping together as she abandoned the jewelry on her desk and went right to him.

"Sorry to barge in early," his smile was cheeky as Maddie hugged her arms around him.

"Don't ever be sorry for that," she shook her head, kissing his cheek and meeting his eyes. "It's great to see you."

"You too," his hands rubbed at her back as she stepped out of his arms and away from him—a move that took considerable effort on her part, a move that made him wish he hadn't agreed to a meeting first. Clearing his throat, he snapped back to the moment. "You remember Thomas..."

"Of course," Maddie moved to greet him, smiling warmly as she kissed his cheeks. "Please come in. This is my assistant Jillian."

"Good to meet you," Jillian stepped forward, moving right back to business. "I'd be happy to escort you to the conference room and fetch you something to drink?"

While Thomas agreed, following Jillian from the room, Harry hung back for just a moment longer, waiting for the two of them to step out before he moved back to Maddie who was already reaching for him.

"I'm so happy you're here..." She sighed as her lips brushed against his. "I've missed you."

With a groan, Harry kissed her back. "I've missed you too." His lips met hers once more before his brain kicked in and reminded him of the tasks they still had in front of them. Though he pulled his mouth from hers, his hands lingered a little longer. "What is going on over here?" He nodded towards the desk.

Glancing towards the spread of jewelry laid out, Maddie shook her head. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" He laughed, his eyebrows drawing together. "There's a big brute of a man at the door and about a million dollars worth of jewelry on your desk."

"Ah that..."

"Ah that," Harry snickered.

"Harry Winston sent over some jewelry for me to choose from," she explained, stepping away from him towards the desk. "To wear to the premiere. Jillian was trying to help me decide."
"And?" Harry moved to stand next to her, looking down at the pieces laid out. "You were debating between which two?"

Maddie watched him for a moment, gauging his actual interest in the matter versus his dutiful curiosity. "These two," she pointed to one, then the other.

"Wow..." Harry reached for one of the pieces. "They're both beautiful."

"They are," Maddie agreed with a nod. "So you can see my dilemma."

"I can," he laid the piece down and looked to the garment bag hanging in the corner. "Is that the dress?"

"It is," Maddie bit her lip as she looked at it.

"Do I get to see it?" He lifted his eyebrows to her.

Crossing her arms over her chest, her eyes narrowed as she studied him. "Do you want to see it? I mean, the last time we talked about this premiere, you weren't terribly excited about...all of this."

"Well," Harry took a deep breath and shrugged his shoulders. "It might be easier if I see it for the first time now, in your office, with you... instead of when you're wearing it, out. With him."

"Awww..." Maddie's head tipped to the side, flirty and playful. "Tell me you're not still jealous."

"I am not still jealous." He didn't even blink as he repeated her words.

"Ha." Her laughter rang out into the room. "Maybe try it one more time with meaning?"

He laughed along with her, thankful for her sense of humor, even in the face of his mild insecurities. "What do you want from me here?"

"Honesty? Support?"

"I'm not sure I can do both," he shook his head, letting out a deep breath. "Will you let me see the dress?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded as she laughed, appreciating the ease of their conversation. "I can show you the dress. Tonight in fact. You know, when you get to go home with me."

"Now see, I love the way that sounds." Harry's eyes were dancing as he watched her go to the door and gesture for the man outside to join them.

"I thought you might," she smiled at him, leading the gentleman over to her desk. "Mr. Fetzer, this is Harry Sussex. Harry, this is Mr. Fetzer, he's from Harry Winston."

As greetings and pleasantries were exchanged, Maddie pulled up the information cards on the two pieces she was considering. "I'm still deciding between these two," she pointed to them and Mr. Fetzer took out his notebook, making notes and taking down details. "I'm going to keep these cards if that's okay?"

"Of course," he nodded.
"I want to put them next to the dress...think about hair styles..." She explained with a slight roll of her eyes.

"Yes Ma'am, that's exactly what they're for."

"Thank you," she tucked them onto her desk, under her laptop. "I can have a decision for you by Monday?"

"Perfect," he smiled, closing his notebook and looking down to the jewelry. "May I?"

"Of course," Maddie nodded. "I'm going to head off to a meeting. Feel free to take your time packing up. I really appreciate you coming over."

"And we appreciate you considering us," he smiled, nodding to both Maddie and Harry and turned to wrap and pack up the jewelry.

"Well then..." Maddie looked to Harry. "I think we have a meeting?"

"We do," Harry nodded, standing taller, smoothing down his tie. "Lead the way?"

Gathering her notebook and a pen, Maddie smiled and moved towards the door. "Right this way."

Can I be completely honest with you?" Harry's voice was low as he and Maddie stepped into her apartment later that night. After a successful meeting, they saw Thomas off and the play part of the weekend commenced.

"Absolutely," Maddie moved inside, hanging the dress bag on a hook just inside the door, sitting her bags down as she turned to look up at him. "What's up?"

"You...in that meeting today..." His eyes grew suggestive as he shook his head at her, his teeth biting at his lower lip. "You were stunning."

"Oh?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, her lips curling up in a smug, satisfied way. "You like my skirt?"

"Not just the skirt," he shook his head.

"The heels?" Her head cocked to the side.

"Actually," he reached for her. "I was talking about your mind."

"My mind?" She blinked, caught off guard for just a moment.

"Mmm," he nodded, leaning in to kiss her neck, amused at the surprise on her face. "Your mind," he kissed her again. "You're so smart. So quick and witty and creative and...God..." His breath was hot under her ear. "Your mind. In that skirt. And those heels."

"You like?"
"No, no," he shook his head, his lips travelling up her jaw, seeking her mouth. "I love..." Just as her eyes opened wide at his words, his mouth closed over hers and he was kissing her.

In a hot, needy, knee-weakening way, he was kissing her. And all she could do was sigh and sink into him.

"Harry..." She gasped as he pulled at her, as he wrapped her up in him, taking down all of her senses, all of her wits.

"Hmmm?" He kissed her again, his hands hot as they moved over her.

"Bedroom?" Her voice caught on the words and when he saw the look in her eyes, he groaned and nodded and held on tighter.

Bending, his hands wrapped warm around her legs, sliding up over her knees, teasing up under her skirt. With that wide, cheeky grin of his, he asked, "Will you leave on these shoes?"

With a smug smirk of her own, she reached down and twisted her fingers around his tie. "Only if you'll leave this on."

"Deal."

Maddie sighed as she laid back on her pillows. With her bare legs tangled up with his and their bodies twisted up in sheets, she was beyond satisfied and incredibly happy to have him there with her. Her head turned to look at him, her eyes scanning over his face, his smile, his bare chest and shoulders. Moving down over his stomach, his hips...she blushed as she felt her body stir. Closing her eyes for a moment, she took a deep breath and gave them a chance to recover.

When her eyes opened, Harry was watching her, intrigued and bemused.

"Hello there," she smiled, moving in a little closer.

"Hello," he chuckled. "Something on your mind?"

"Ha..." She sighed. "Hard to think of much of anything after the things you just did to my body."

Harry's grin pulled high and wide. "Thank you for that."

"Anytime," she nodded, her fingers stretching out to touch him, wanting contact with his warmth. "I really enjoy having you here. In New York. In my bed."

"God," he groaned, turning to face her completely. "I enjoy being here."

"Good," she giggled, tucking in closer. "Do you remember the first time we were together here?"

"I remember every time we were together," he replied without batting an eye.

"Oh please. You do not!" She snickered, her palm slapping lightly against his shoulder.

"I do!" He rubbed at the spot as he laughed, his hands moving around her, bringing her nearer.
"Why do you ask?"

"You were so nervous," she smiled up at him, her eyes drifting off as her mind pulled up the memory. "You didn't want to..."

"Want?" Harry cut her off with a pointed look, his hands moving down over her ass, patting it lightly. "My nervousness had nothing to do with want. And you know it."

"Either way..." She wiggled closer. "You certainly had issue with sex in my bed."

"Yes well..." He shrugged, leaning up to kiss her again. "I think we can safely say I've gotten past that."

Maddie's laughter was loud and wide and it filled up the room. "Yes. Yes. We can safely say that." Looking down at him, she smoothed her hands up over his shoulders. "He would be so proud."

"He would. He would..." Harry's voice softened, his hands slowed as they moved over her. "Speaking of Bishop..."

"Bishop?" Her smile slipped sweet. "You want to speak of Bishop?"

"Yes..." He took a deep breath and held her gaze. "I do. You know...there's an important date coming up..."

"You mean Bishop's birthday next weekend?" The smile on her face stayed put as thoughts of her late husband trickled into the moment.

"I mean Bishop's birthday next weekend." He nodded his head, struck by the fact that they were lying in her bed naked, talking about Bishop, and not one bit of it felt odd. "Do you...I don't know. Do you...do something? I know it's an off weekend for us but do you want me here for the day or..."

"You're so sweet," her hand was soft on his cheek as she leaned in to kiss him; light and easy. "It's incredibly sweet of you to remember..."

"Of course I remember," his hands moved over her again; softer this time, lighter.

"I actually do do something." She met his eyes, hoping for sympathy and understanding. "But it's something I do alone."

"Fair enough," he held his hands up in surrender.

"I'm sorry."

"No need to be. I just wanted to offer." His eyes were genuine, his smile sincere and it touched Maddie's heart.

"Thank you for that."

"Do you want to tell me what you do?"

"I don't know..." She swallowed back a bit of emotion stuck in her throat, thinking of her plans, of
him. "Maybe someday."

"Maybe someday," he smiled sweetly, his thumbs stroking soft on her cheeks. "I'll be thinking of you."

Unsure exactly what to say and so incredibly thankful for him, Maddie snuggled in closer, tucking into his arms and kissing his jaw. "Thank you."

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When Harry finally woke the next morning, snuggled into Maddie's bed, he found himself alone. Rubbing his hand up over his face and into his mussed up hair, he sat up and looked around. The scent of bacon and syrup in the air told him where he could find her. Stretching his arms up over his head, he stepped from bed; pulling on a t-shirt, stepping into boxers before he made his way towards the kitchen.

Finding her there in a long, soft t-shirt and her hair twisted up into a mess of a bun as she moved around her kitchen preparing breakfast, humming along to the music that played overhead. His grin pulled higher and his heart warmed and he knew that he was just about as smitten as he could possibly be. He watched her for only a few seconds before he stepped inside, wanting to be nearer. "Good Morning."

She turned towards his voice with a big, bright smile on her face. "Good Morning..." She turned to flip a pancake over before she turned back to him. "Feeling rested Sleeping Beauty?"

"I am," he chuckled as he moved in on her, his hands reaching out to her hips as she turned back to the stove. "I think I sleep better on this side of the pond..." He kissed her shoulder as his arms moved around her from behind.

"I think you sleep better when you're in a bed with me..." She plucked the pancake from the pan onto a plate and turned her face to his for a kiss.

"I think you're right..." His lips smiled against hers as he moved in for another. "Good morning..."

"Mmmmm..." She let out a soft moan. "You said that already..." She kissed him once more before she had to check on the bacon that was frying in front of her. "I hope you're hungry. I just got started and I think it got a little out of hand."

"I'm starving," he ran his hands over her hips and kissed her neck once more before he stepped away from her, looking around at the spread. "Anything I can do to help?"

"No," she shook her head. "I'm actually just about finished. You should get yourself something to drink though...there's coffee, juice...tea if you want it."

"Okay," Harry nodded and spun around, reaching for a glass for juice. "Can I pour you something?"

"Coffee please," she called out, pulling the bacon from the stove and laying it out on a plate before carrying it, and the freshly cooked pancakes over to the breakfast bar where she had everything assembled.

Harry quickly poured himself some juice and a cup of coffee for Maddie before he slid into the
stool next to her. "This is pretty impressive," his eyes were wide as he looked it over.

"I was hungry," she shrugged, her eyes flashing to his with a smirk. "I need to refuel from last night."

"Is that so?" He lifted his eyebrows as he filled up his plate.

"Mmmm..." She nodded, reaching for the bacon as she stirred the sugar in her coffee. "My boyfriend kept me up all night..."

"Well it's been a long two weeks, love." He smiled over at her; sweet and easy as he settled back into his seat.

"It has," she agreed, picking up her fork and taking a few bites. "And it's going to be an even longer three weeks." She shook her head as she thought of the time that would pass before they got to see each other again. The next weekend was Bishop's birthday, the one after that was the premiere.

"Yes," Harry sighed, the smile pulling from his face slightly. "It will be."

"Sorry," she frowned, leaning to kiss his shoulder. "I shouldn't have brought it up."

"No, no," Harry shook his head, reaching for his drink. "It's fine. Actually, there's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"About the premiere?" Maddie shot him a confused, sideways glance

"About the press." He clarified.

"The press?"

"Mmm," Harry nodded, taking a bite and swallowing. "Out with me last weekend, out with him next weekend...They're going to jump all over it."

"Harry Sussex," Maddie turned to him, laughter dancing in her eyes. "Are you really still holding onto this Charlie thing?"

"No!" He was quick to denial, his head shaking. "No, no, no. I just...thought maybe you should have a heads up about how this is going to play out."

"Play out?" Maddie watched him thoughtfully, her teeth biting at her cheek to keep from laughing at the whole thing. "Harry...are you worried that people are going to think I've left you for Charlie?"

"I don't give a shit about other people Maddie. I care about you." He shrugged his shoulders. "And I care about Charlie."

"You care about Charlie?" She snickered.

"In this one particular instance, yes."

"He knows we're together Harry. He met you."
"Sure, sure. But just for a little perspective..." He cleared his throat and leaned in, holding her eyes with his as he made his point. "I see the look on your face when I mention Lexie's name, and she's never seen me naked."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed.

"Ha!" Harry echoed her. "Tell me I'm wrong."

"No," Maddie sighed. "You're not wrong. But I still think you're being ridiculous."

"Well..." He leaned in to kiss her. "I reserve the right to be ridiculous occasionally."

"It's just...there are much better reasons to be jealous."

"Excuse me?" His eyebrows shot up.

"I mean...other than Charlie. If you're going to be jealous, that is."

"Christ Maddie. Please don't tell me there are more men waiting to take you out on the town."

"Well, I mean...you never really know."

"You're killing me," he shook his head at her, looking down at his breakfast.

"AND..." She continued. "We both know there are better reasons for me to be jealous than Lexie."

"No," Harry disagreed with a smile. "That's where you're wrong. There are no reasons for you to be jealous. None. Zero."

"Harry..." She rolled her eyes.

"I mean it Maddie." He leaned to kiss her. "There's nobody but you. Nobody."

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After breakfast, Maddie managed to step into the shower. As she washed and rinsed, her mind drifted over her weekend with Harry, over the plans they had. It all seemed to go by so quickly. There was never enough time together, never enough. Though they were down to every two weeks together, she wished it could somehow be more often than that. She wished they could have more breakfasts together, more late night drinks, more lunches, more runs through the park.

But there was really only one way that could conceivably happen. She had to move to London.

As her emotions stirred up in her chest, into her throat, Maddie took a deep breath. She wasn't quite ready for that.

So for now, she would see him every other weekend and--for now--that was how this was going to be work. BUT. With the premiere in two weeks, it would be three entire weeks before she saw him again. Twenty-one days.

Determined to make the most of their remaining time together, she stepped from the shower and dried off. When she stepped out into the room, Harry was there waiting for her. With an easy smile
and bright eyes, he was ready to do the very same.

Saying good-bye was never easy. No matter how many times they said it, no matter how ways—it was never easy. After a relaxed, laid back weekend, after forty-eight hours that seemed to take only two, they were saying good-bye yet again.

Maddie hated to see him go and she hated the way her heart ached in her chest as he kissed her that last time, as he stepped away from her and boarded the plane. She hated knowing that she was sleeping alone without him that night and most of all...she hated worrying about him the entire time he was in the air, until the second he called to let her know he had arrived home in London; safe and sound.

Returning to work on Monday morning, Maddie had a busy morning ahead of her. With follow ups from Friday's meetings, new notes for Bishop Enterprise's new involvement in the Invictus Games, her morning sailed by. So much so that she almost forgot how sad she had been to say good-bye to Harry.

But right around lunch time, there was a knock on the door that brought her mind and her heart immediately back to him.

"Excuse me Ma'am?" It was Jillian at the door. Maddie glanced up from her notes, her eyebrows lifting. "Mr. Fetzer from Harry Winston is here to see you."

"Mr. Fetzer..." Maddie rose to her feet with a slight shake of her head. "But I didn't call him."

"He said he had a delivery for you," Jillian pointed back towards the reception area with her thumb.

"A delivery?" Maddie was even more confused. "I guess...show him in."

With a smile, Jillian nodded, stepping out of Maddie's office with a smile. She was quick to return, Mr. Fetzer right behind her.

"Good Afternoon Doctor Bishop," he smiled warmly as he stepped into her office, extending his hand to her as she rounded the desk to greet him.

"Good Afternoon Mr. Fetzer," Maddie shook his hand, glancing at the package in his hand. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"Oh?" His smile spread higher. "But I have a delivery for you."

"A delivery?" Maddie's eyes were wide with confusion. "But I haven't even had the chance to decide between the two..."

"Ah yes," the older man nodded, moving forward to set the package on her desk, opening the velvet covered lid and reaching into the box. "It appears as though you no longer need to decide."

"I no longer need to..." Maddie's words trailed off as he pulled out both of the necklaces, placing their cases onto her desk. "I'm sorry. What?"

"They're yours."
"They're mine?!" Her eyes pulled even wider as she looked up to him.

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded, handing her a card in an envelope. "This is for you too."

"I..." She blinked. "What?"

"The card, Ma'am," he motioned for her to take it. "You might find an explanation there."

Looking down at the necklaces with disbelief, Maddie pulled the card from his fingers. Opening the envelope, she could feel a nervous sort of excitement building up inside of her. As she pulled the card out, she held her breath and when she opened it, she started breathing again.

Her smile pulled so wide as she read that her cheeks began to hurt.

"Maddie–We never got around to deciding between the two so I thought...maybe you should have them both. I hope you enjoy the premiere—even though I will spend every single moment of it sitting in the dark biting my nails and drinking expensive scotch. You're kind and brilliant and beautiful and I miss you already. Much love–H"

Pressing the card to her chest, Maddie looked down at the necklaces for a long, sweet moment and then she looked to the other two people in the room. Mr. Fetzer with a satisfied smile on his face and Jillian—with a blissful, mooned over, romantic grin on hers.

"Thank you Mr. Fetzer," Maddie shook his hand. "Thank you for bringing them over."

"It was a pleasure Ma'am," he nodded, leaning in to kiss her cheek before he excused himself and stepped from the room.

"They're from him, aren't they," Jillian's voice was low and soft, reverent, as she moved to look at the necklaces on the desk. "These two beautiful pieces of jewelry...are from him."

"When you say him did you mean Mr. Fetzer?" Maddie joked and Jillian elbowed her lightly.

"No. No." She sighed. "I meant Harry."

"Yes," Maddie couldn't help how giddy it made her. Such a beautiful extravagant gift, such an amazing gesture. He hated that she was going but he wanted her to have fun and he wanted her to look and feel beautiful. "Yes. They're from him."

"God," Jillian shook her head. "He's pretty smooth, isn't he?"

"He certainly can be," Maddie agreed, pulling her phone from her pocket. "Would you give me a minute?"

"To call him and thank him for the gifts?" Jillian snickered, backing away with her hands up. "Absolutely." With a knowing smile, she stepped out of the office, closing the door behind her.

As Maddie looked down at the jewelry, as she looked down at the handwritten note, at the sentiment, her entire chest was warm with emotion. Quite unexpectedly, her eyes welled up with tears and she wished against everything she had that she could go to him, in that moment, and hug him. And hold him; close and tight.
But all she had was this phone in her hand. And an offer.

"Madeline," he was smiling when he answered his phone.

"Henry Charles..." She shook her head as she said his name.

"See, when you say it like that, it makes me think I'm in trouble."

"You are not in trouble," she shook her head, taking a big, deep, shaky breath. "Harry..."

"You got my gift."

"I got your gifts," she stressed the plural. "And I really don't know what to say."

"Say nothing."

"I don't know what to...do," she laughed.

"Do nothing," he laughed along with her. "Though you're really going to have to choose one for the premiere. I don't think they'll go well together."

"Ha!" Her head tipped back as she laughed, as tears tipped from her eyes. "Harry..."

"Hey," he softened. "I didn't mean to make you cry."

"I know," she sniffed, smiling wide as she wiped at her cheeks. "Okay...okay..."

"Okay," he repeated.

"Hey Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Can you..." She felt the words pause in her mouth, felt her heart thump in her chest, and then—glancing at a photo she kept of Bishop on a shelf—she pushed forward. "Can you be ready Thursday night?"

"Thursday night?" She could almost see the look on his face as he processed her words. "For what?"

"For the weekend," she answered with her heart in her throat.

"But...it's Bishop's birthday," he reminded her, his hopes already up.

"I know what it is," her voice was soft and quiet but her tone was steady.

"But you said you did your thing alone and..."

"Harry," the emotion tipped into her voice and he stopped. "Can you be ready on Thursday night?"

"Yes." His answer was instant. Immediate.
"And I can have you for the weekend?"

"Of course." It was reflex. She could have him as long as she wanted him.

"Okay," she felt the most wonderful sense of relief wash through her and a whole new round of tears well up in her eyes. "I'll pick you up in the Bishop jet. Be in the private terminals at 9pm. Pack for the tropics."

"Maddie, what in the hell..." He laughed; happy and nervous and ready for whatever she had for him.

"Trust me?" Her lips curled up higher.

"Of course." With everything he had.

"Then I'll see you Thursday night."
Harry fully expected this trip to be full of emotional moments, he expected that over the course of the weekend, he was going to feel nearly every feeling it was possible to have. And he was prepared for that. Though he hadn't quite expected his emotions to stir quite so easily at the mere sight of her plane taxiing closer to where he was waiting next to his car. With his bag at his feet and his heart on his sleeve, he was ready to venture off to wherever it was Maddie wanted to take him.

When the door to the plane opened and the steps folded down, he reached for his bag and took a few steps forward. When Maddie appeared at the top of the stairs with a smile on her face and her hair tossing wildly in the wind, he paused. His feet, his thoughts, his heart.

_God_, he thought to himself. _I love her so much._

Maddie was quick down the steps, stopping at the bottom as he approached her.

"You're here," she sighed with a smile, her eyes shining in the moonlight as she looked up at him.

"You told me to be."

"You just...do whatever I tell you to do?" She was teasing, he knew it. But he meant his answer with all his heart.

"Yes," he nodded. "I do whatever you tell me to."

"You're sure about this?" She nodded back towards the jet behind her.

"Absolutely."

"You know...we only drink Scotch on this trip," she warned with half a grin.

"Okay," he shrugged.

"And I'm probably going to cry..." She wanted to be honest, wanted him to know.

Meeting her eyes, he swallowed at the lump in his throat. "Okay."

"And you want to be there for all of that?" She lifted her eyebrows. "To watch me mourn another man? Watch me celebrate a man who isn't you?"

Nodding, he took a step closer, reaching up cup her face in his hands. "Yes Maddie. I want to be there...for all of that."

Blinking at the tears she had been expecting on the entire flight, Maddie sniffed and nodded and reached up to take his hand. "Come on then. We have a long flight ahead of us."

"Okay," he nodded, following happily as she lead him up the stairs. "You want to tell me where we're going?"
"Oh no, no, Captain," she tightened her hold on his fingers. "But you'll know soon enough."

And soon enough, he did. They were nearing their descent, moving slower through the sky, dropping slightly in altitude and, with Maddie's feet lounging in his lap while she read a book, he glanced out the window and happened to catch a landscape that looked familiar to him; peaks and valleys, twists and turns that he knew like he knew the avenues of home.

"Oh my God..." His voice was just above a whisper as he sat up in his chair, his hand holding onto her feet as he moved.

"Harry?" Maddie glanced up from her book, confused for the briefest of moments before she caught it.

The realization washing over his face. "Maddie..." When his eyes turned to hers, she saw that the emotions were already beginning. "We're...are we in Bendal?"

She swallowed and she nodded and she sat her book aside. Pulling her feet from his lap, she sat up in her chair. "Yes." She laughed as he peered out the window, bending closer so he could take it in.

"I never thought..." He shook his head. "Bendal?"

"Mmmm," she nodded, taking a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "There's something I want to show you."

Harry turned to her then, full of questions but when he saw the look on her face, when he saw how much this trip already meant to her, his questions quieted. Soon he would see, soon he would have answers. And as much as Bendal was to him, this trip, this place, wasn't about just him. Not this time. So he sat back in his chair and he held tight to her hand. And when the pilot announced their impending landing, he buckled his seatbelt and held even tighter to her--knowing that landing was the hardest part for her.

There was a car and driver waiting for them when they landed and for a brief moment, Harry had completely forgotten that Maddie now lived in this world of immense wealth and privilege, that even without him there, she was flying in jets and riding in cars with drivers. His lips curled up in a smile as he thought of it, as he remembered this life of a Bishop that Maddie now lived.

Harry watched Maddie closely as their car drove them from the airport. He studied her face, her posture as they drove further and further into the country, away from the lights and the streets. He could see any tension left in her shoulders pull away, he could see her sink into ease and comfort and the same sort of relaxed peacefulness he had seen on her face when he had first met her so many years ago--in this very same country. And when they pulled up a long, twisting road that wove up through a few hills, he watched as a feeling of home settled over her.

The car pulled to a stop in front of a house; large and sprawling when compared to other homes. But it was simple and wide and open and even if he hadn't come with her, he would know it was hers. It was welcoming and humble and he loved it in an instant. The sun was barely beginning to peak up over the horizon, the day beginning to make its way to them there in the Bendal countryside. When he turned to look back at Maddie, she looked beautiful; immaculate. Like she belonged here.

"Maddie..." Everything inside of him felt warmer as he looked from her to the house, to the land
"I just..." She took in a long, shaky breath, moving to stand next to him as he took it all in. "I suddenly had all of this money." She didn't try to fight the tears that pushed through as she remembered it all. "I didn't know what to do with it for so long but then...on his first birthday after..." She sniffed and smiled through her sadness. "I came to Bendal...running from it all and I found this space and this chance to use some of that money...in a way that felt true to him, true to our life together..."

"So you bought the land..." Harry was in awe.

"Mmm," she nodded. "And I built this home, this...escape."

"But how did you get the land?" He shook his head, looking out over the expansive, gorgeous land around them. "They're a little hesitant about selling it off and..."

"They are," she agreed. "I had to make some promises, sign some agreements. I had to stay within certain building limits. It can't get much bigger than it is now. I can't impede upon the mountain view and..." She drifted off as they both looked towards the hills. "And I made a donation to a local charity focused on helping children. To help with housing and building and..."

"What charity?" Harry asked, honing in on that detail.

"I don't know, it's..." Maddie shook her head, her cheeks flushing just a bit in the dawn, knowing that her ability to avoid it was slipping out of her grasp.

"I know all of the charities in the region and I..." When his voice faded, Maddie turned to look at him and she saw the moment it struck him. "My God. Maddie. You were the large donation to Sentebale."

"Harry..." She was soft and sweet as she turned to face him, her hand reaching out for his.

"I can't believe it," he shook his head, his mind jumping back in time, remembering. "I even asked about the money, asked where it had come from and nobody told me."

"Well sure," Maddie shrugged. "I asked them not to. It was a condition on the donation..."

"But why?"

"Because..." Her voice caught in her throat as she looked back to the house. "It wasn't about you. Or me really. It was about this...place. This place that means so much to me." She didn't even try to fight the waves of emotion as they hit her. This was why she was here. "This place where I came to recover from losing my father, this place where I...where I found you." She looked up to him then, smiling as she wiped at the tears on her cheeks. "This place where I found myself again, where I realized my feelings for Bishop. There's just...so much of me here. This is as much my home as any of the places I've lived. Even more so sometimes..." She sighed, turning to face the house. "I wanted to keep it for me. So I asked them not to."

They stood there in front of this house, in front of her home, for a long time. The light from the sun was reaching further and further into the sky, the wind whipping less and less as the night slipped away.
"And you brought me here..." He didn't know what to say.

"Yes," she turned back to him, smiling as she reached for his hand. "I brought you here."

"That's..." He was struggling to find the words. "That means a great deal to me Maddie, that you wanted to bring me here."

"Well," she tightened her hold on his fingers. "You mean a great deal to me Harry."

And there it was, right out in the open, in the warm, wonderful Bendal air.

"Come on," Maddie tugged at his hand, pulling him from the whirlpool of emotions she had stirred up inside of him. "There's a reason we travelled overnight." She was pulling him towards the house. "You don't want to miss this."

She pulled him into the house, stopping only long enough to drop bags. Without letting go of his hand, she hurried to the bar where Harry couldn't help but notice the shelves of only the finest of Scotches. She chose a bottle quickly, handing it off to him as she picked out two glasses and then they were in motion again. Heading towards the back of the house, Harry's eyes grew wide as they stepped into the living room lined with floor to ceiling windows. But when he saw the view, he nearly tripped over his own feet.

"Jesus..." He breathed, following Maddie out onto the deck, stunned and amazed at what was before him. She had built the house over an expansive valley. As the sun came up over the peaks in the distance, it illuminated everything in his line of sight. Blues and pinks and the deepest, warmest oranges and golds rolled over the hills, sparkled in the water that ran through the valley and struck him. "Maddie..."

"I know," she turned a wide smile to him. She knew exactly what he was feeling, she still felt that way every time she saw it herself. "Here." She came to a stop at the edge of the deck, dropping his hand as she sat the glasses on the ledge in front of her. Taking the bottle of Scotch from Harry who still stood stunned and slack jawed, she turned her eyes back to the view, back to the sunrise, and she poured two drinks.

"This is just..." Harry shook his head, wishing there were a way to burn this image in his head permanently. He thought of taking a photo, though he knew it would never capture this. And maybe that was the point.

"I told you," she handed him a glass and let out a long slow breath. "I had something I wanted to show you."

"I don't know what to say," he moved in next to her at the ledge, not wanting to lose contact. "I'm speechless."

"Good," Maddie turned a sweet smile to him, blinking at the tears in her eyes. "You're supposed to be." Her voice, barely a whisper, caught in her throat and it moved Harry from the view in front of him.

"Hey..." He softened.

"It's okay," she shook her head slightly, lifting her glass to him. "To Bishop."
Swallowing, Harry nodded. "To Bishop."

Their glasses clinked together and their eyes turned back to the miraculous view before them, back to the dawning of this glorious day. With tears in their eyes and a mix of emotions in their hearts, they drank a toast to him—the first of many.

And so the weekend began.

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"You're sure you know where we're going?" Harry called out to Maddie who was a few paces ahead of him on the path she was carving out on this hike.

"Of course," she laughed, the sound echoing up through the canyon around them. After the sun had risen impressively in the sky, they had finished their Scotch and crawled into bed to catch up on their sleep. When they woke that afternoon, Maddie had made a meal and insisted that they take a very specific hike that afternoon into the evening. Since Harry had committed to jump into whatever this weekend brought to him, he agreed. So they dressed for a hike and they loaded their packs—dinner in hers, Scotch in his—and they set out, hiking down into the valley that stretched below her house. Once they had reached the floor of the canyon, they began following the twists and turns of the river. "Do you doubt me?" She turned back to look at him. Though she was wearing a wide brimmed hat and sunglasses, he swore he could see amusement dancing in her eyes.

"Never." He answered with a smirk.

It was a warm day and the sun, uninhibited by clouds, had been following them for the duration of the hike. Harry, thankful Maddie had allowed them to pack water along with their Scotch, took a long drink from his bottle and kept his eyes ahead, locked on this beautiful woman who he had committed to follow—wherever she went, whenever she went. And he was happy to do it—thankful even.

It wasn't long before Maddie drew to a pause, pulling her sunglasses from her eyes as she scanned the world around her, searching for something.

"There we go..." She exhaled as her lips curled up. "Come on...you're going to love this."

Nodding, Harry adjusted the pack on his back and he followed. He was sure she was right. He loved that they were in Bendal. Loved the home she had built on this stunning plot of land. Loved the sunrise they had caught.

Loved her.

There was no doubt in his mind he was going to love whatever it was she was taking him to. And, when they rounded a tall, jagged rock that stuck out of the side of the world like it was a hidden door to another world, he found that he was right.

"Jesus..." He chuckled, coming to a stop as they stepped out onto a well hidden beach, as he looked out at the ocean. "I had no idea we were so close to water..."

"Isn't it something?" Maddie called back to him, setting down her pack as she continued to walk to the edge of the beach, to the edge of the world. Pulling off her shoes, her socks, Maddie went right
into the water, stopping as the waves lapped at her ankles and she turned her face up to the sun.

"Yes..." Harry answered. It really was something, to be there with her. Struck by it all, he stood still, watching as her feet kicked in the water, as she twirled around, cooling off from the hike. And then she stopped and looked right at him.

With a wide smile, and wide, open arms, she beckoned. "Are you coming?"

In answer he sat his pack next to hers, bending to pull off his shoes, his socks, and then he went right for her. The water was a welcome burst of cold on his skin and her hand a welcome burst of warmth as she reached for him. "Wow..." Harry breathed, shaking his head as he looked out at the water, as he looked at the way she seemed to glisten in it.

"Welcome," she sighed, her eyes focused out on the vast expanse of it all. As Harry looked over at her, as he studied the new curves to her smile, as he noted the warm color of her skin and the bounce in her steps, he realized–there was still so much of her that he had yet to discover, so much he had yet to learn. And he hoped, he hoped, that she would let him.

They stayed there on that beach for the longest time, playing in the water, walking through the stretch of sand. They stayed there until the sun began to dip on the horizon, until the water in front of them began to glow warm from the impending sunset. And just when Harry thought Maddie was going to suggest they head back, she reached for her bag and pulled out dinner.

"You know it'll be dark by the time we're heading back," he told her something he knew she knew.

"It will be," Maddie nodded in a way that told him he was right, a smile on her face suggesting she had done this before. "Are you worried?"

"A little," he laughed, being honest.

"About?" She glanced up at him as she arranged their food on the big blanket she had put down.

"I don't know, maybe lions?" His eyebrows rose, amusement on his face. "We are in Africa."

"We are," Maddie nodded, her lips curling up as she looked up at him. "How about this...I promise to protect you from the lions."

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back. "You're going to protect me from the lions."

"I am," she nodded enthusiastically, settling in on the blanket, watching him as he did the same. "The lions don't mess with me. Not here. Not on Bishop's birthday." She was so certain, so sure, that Harry nearly believed her.

"Okay..." He let it go, reaching for some food. "Is this what you do every year?" He glanced around them. "The hike and the meal and the Scotch?"

"Hmmm..." She smiled around the bite in her mouth, nodding as she swallowed. "Mostly. I come here, to Bendal. I stay in the house and I do drink a lot of Scotch." They both chuckled at that. "I usually get in a hike," she looked out at the ocean, calm and gorgeous as the sun dipped lower. "And I always come to the water."

"I see," Harry could barely take his eyes from her as he ate. "It's a beautiful place Maddie, a perfect
place to remember him."

"Yeah?" She looked to him, seeking his confirmation–strangely desiring his approval.

"Yeah," he nodded. "He would... he would have loved it here. So much to do, so many ways to live."

"Yeah..." Maddie sighed, her smile faltering just a little. "I wish he could have seen it." Quite suddenly Bishop's absence, the loss of him, rushed into the space between them. "I still miss him," she whispered, looking down at the glass of Scotch in her hand. "Every day I miss him."

"I know," Harry admitted quietly, his heart aching in his chest. "I know you do."

"I'm sorry," she shook her head. "I know it's not..."

"If I could bring him back for you I would." Harry's words cut into her train of thought, the sincerity on his face cut into her heart. She blinked and began to cry and Harry took a shaky breath and continued. "I'd do anything to have him back Maddie... anything to put him here with you."

With tears on her cheeks and half a smile on her lips, her head tipped to the side as she looked to him. "You know that that would mean that you wouldn't be here with me." She shook her head. "You'd be alone in London and I..."

"You'd be with him," Harry finished. "I know. I know what it would mean," he whispered, his heart breaking at just how much he meant what he was saying. "And God, Maddie, if I could bring him back for you... I would."

Biting at her lip to keep from breaking down, Maddie tore her eyes away from Harry, turning her face up to the sky, up to the breeze as she pressed them shut and took a few long, deep breaths. "Let me go..." She whispered the words into the remains of the day around them.

"Sorry?" Harry's heart leapt into his throat.

"That's what he wrote..." Maddie's eyes opened and she brought her glass to her lips, swallowing a sip of Scotch as she remembered. "In a letter he left for me with his will... he said lots of warm, wonderful things," she didn't even bother to wipe at the tears coming from her eyes. "And then he said 'Let me go.'"

"Oh Maddie..." His hand lifted as though he were going to reach for her, but it pulled back, not wanting to take away from her memories of Bishop.

"The last thing I would ever, ever want is for somebody as bright and as wonderful as you wallowing in my memory forever..." She seemed to drift away there on that beach, to a different place and a different time, to the night she read that letter for the first time. "Pick yourself up and you go on and live this beautiful life we were living..." With a deep breath, she tried for a smile, looking up at the stars appearing in the sky, at the heavens stretched out endlessly above them. "When you find happy again, when you find that moment, that chance to be happy, to embrace something bright and wonderful–you do what you did with me. You reach out with both hands and you take it." She let out a laugh laced in tears and she turned her eyes to Harry. "It's yours. Hold onto it, keep it close. And never ever feel bad."

Her gaze was fixed on Harry's and the heaviness of the moment, the gravity in hearing Maddie
speak Bishop's words, was a lot to take and the weight of it all was great. And there on the beach, on the edge of the earth, Harry was crying. Over the loss of his best friend, over the loss of the love of his life—over her return—over her heartbreak. "He loved you..." He spoke the reassurances he knew she didn't need. "More than anything in the entire world."

"I know," Maddie sighed, her smile pulling higher as she took in a deep breath. "If there's anything I know for sure, it's that Jamie Bishop loved me..." She shook her head, shrugging her shoulders. "More than anything in the entire world." Swallowing at the lump in her throat, she tipped her glass back and finished her Scotch. And then, surprising Harry, she sat it down and rose to her feet. "Come on."

"What?" He was startled from his grief, looking up at her with her hand held out to him. "Where are we...."

"Come on," she waved her hand in front of his face, waiting for him to take it.

And he did. Putting his hand in hers, he rose to his feet. Pulling at his hand, Maddie moved to the water. It was darker and it was colder but she didn't stop. The water rushed towards them, washing over their ankles, their calves, their knees. Tightening her hold on him, they went deeper and deeper until they were standing, fully clothed and slightly tipsy in waist deep water.

She was quiet for a long, long time, holding onto his hand as the sun sank, as the water curled around them. What Harry didn't know, what he couldn't tell, was that, in her mind, she was going through the ways Bishop had taught her how to live, the ways he had taught her how to embrace the joy around her. She was going through the long list of things he had brought into her life—Harry included. And she was thanking him, for each and every one of them.

And then she turned to Harry. "You were second on the list you know..."

"Sorry?" He whispered the word, unsure as to what she meant.

"Of the people Bishop loved most in the world," she smiled sweetly. "You were second on that list."

In his chest his heart ached, the tears in his eyes welling up as he nodded his head. He knew. He knew that just as much as she knew that. Her fingers tightened their hold on his, keeping him there with her as both of their minds drifted to Bishop.

"Happy Birthday Jamie..." Maddie whispered into wind. Turning a smile to Harry, she kissed his shoulder and then, letting him go, she turned towards the shore—leaving him with his memories, in his own moment.

It was a little bit longer before Harry came out of the water. And Maddie was there waiting for him. With their stuff packed up and her bag on her back, she was standing tall and sweet, with a smile—waiting for him. Her hand stretched out as he walked towards her, tired and heavy with emotion. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," he sighed, taking her hand, needing the connection. "I'm...ha...." He sucked in a breath. "Thank you for bringing me here."

Maddie's face brightened, her smile widening and her eyes dancing. "Thank you for coming here with me." Tugging at his fingers, she took a step back. "Come on Wales...the later it gets, the
They returned to the house safe and sound and settled into this new, warm space between them. After showers to wash away the salt water and the strain of the hike, they dressed in warm, comfortable clothes and they moved into the living room. With the lights left off so they could enjoy the view of the night sky, of the moonlight valley that seemed to surround them, Maddie sank onto the couch with a blanket tucked around her and a glass of Scotch in her hand. It had been a long day, full of memories new and old. Harry was just a little behind her, a little slower to come to the couch. But when he did, he had his own glass of Scotch in one hand and something else in the other.

"I thought..." His voice was low as he held it out to her. "I thought you should see this." 

"What is that?" Maddie's eyes shifted to the folded, worn paper in his fingers, curiosity in her eyes. 

"That..." Harry sucked in a deep breath, blowing it out slowly. "These are Bishop's last words to me." 

His words resonated around her and Maddie adjusted in her seat. "Is that..." 

"The letter that was left for me in his will, yes." 

"Oh my God. You still have that?"

"Of course I still have that. Do you still have the one he left for you?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Though it's burned into my soul, yes."

"I...ahem. I used to carry it with me wherever I went, like I needed him there so I could go about my day, so I could hate myself less."

"And now?"

"Now...not as much," Harry shook his head. "But I thought I should have it here...today..."

"May I?" She was nervous, hesitant a she asked and when he nodded and held it out to her, she felt her emotions swirl as she took it. She sat her glass of Scotch on the table in front of them and very carefully, she unfolded the page. Seeing Bishop's handwriting brought tears to her eyes and her vision blurred, making it impossible to read the words.

But she didn't need to read them because Harry had it memorized. "I wouldn't trade my time with her for anything in the world." His voice was low and heavy as he recited it word for word, cracking with emotion as he did. "But I would give everything else if I could take back the hurt it caused you. I hope more than anything that by the time you're reading this letter, we've made up." Maddie swallowed at the sobs in her throat, knowing she wasn't the only one crying on that couch.
That we've spent a long night with an expensive bottle of scotch and we've worked things out...."
Maddie reached out then, her hand a comfort as it rested on his arm. "But just in case we haven't....you should know. I am sorry. And I love you."

They sat there together for the longest time, letting it settle. Maddie moved quietly as she folded the paper, leaning forward as she sat it on the table next to her Scotch. She wanted to give Harry a moment to let this happen, to let his feelings about Bishop, about their friendship, to rise to the surface. But then, as she looked over at him, as she let her mind take a step forward, as she let herself come back to the present, all she wanted to do was to comfort him—in the same ways he had been comforting her as they took this journey together.

So she moved. Pulling the blanket back and off her legs, she moved over to him. Harry's eyes widened with surprise when she took his glass from his hand and set it aside, even more so when she climbed into his lap.

"Maddie..." He breathed as he sat back, making room for her there.

"Harry..." She smiled, very purposeful as she settled in, putting both of her hands on him, sliding them slowly up his shoulders to his face. "I am happy again..." Her eyes were bright with tears as she recalled the words Bishop had written to her but the way she was smiling down at him took over his soul. "You are the bright and wonderful he was talking about. You are my chance to be happy again and..." She blinked at the tears and swallowed and the emotions and she sighed into Harry. "And I am holding onto you Harry. I am keeping you close..."

"Maddie..." His voice cracked as his arms moved around her, as every single part of him ached to be with her.

"And I don't feel bad," she leaned in to kiss him, wanting desperately to move them from the sadness, wanting to embrace just how happy she was. "I feel...amazing." Harry groaned at her words, at the feel of her lips on his. "I feel like I can breathe again, like I can live again...Harry...please..." Her eyes were wide and vulnerable as she looked down at him. "Love me Harry? Please...love me..."

This moment for him was too heavy for words, too full for anything else but this. With a nod, he moved to her. His arms tightening around her, his lips seeking solace with hers. And there on the couch in her beautiful home in Bendal, Harry made love to Maddie with a new sense of purpose, with a new sort of drive, with a new future building up in both of their hearts.

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When Maddie woke the first time that night, they were curled up together on the couch. With their clothes strewn about, she was wrapped up in Harry and a large blanket and she desperately had to pee. She was careful as she moved from his arms, quiet as she hurried to the bathroom and when she returned, she was soft with her steps. Looking out through the windows, she smiled at the night. It was clear and bright and she could see for miles but when she turned back to Harry still asleep on the couch, with his mussed up hair and a smile on his face, she couldn't help but think that the view from the deck wasn't the most beautiful thing she could look at.

And quite suddenly, her world shifted. Her cheeks flushed pink and her body warmed and her heart, her heart swelled with a fresh, new emotion. But it wasn't foreign. In fact it was something she had felt before, something she had once felt for him—but not for a very long time. It startled her as she stood there in the living room looking down at this man she had loved once before, at this
man who had been put back in her life. At this man who she...

"Oh my God," she whispered, her fingers pressing to her lips as her mind stumbled over the realization that was happening inside of her. She hadn't expected this. Not here, not now. Not on this day. But there it was, taking over her heart.

Shaking her head, she shook it off, her heart thumping wildly in her chest. She moved forward then, reaching for the glasses on the table to take them to the kitchen before she went crazy and woke him up to tell him—to tell him what exactly?

"Jesus Maddie," she could feel her stomach swirl with excitement, with this nervous sort of energy and just as she thought she was going to burst from it all, she looked down and she saw that piece of folded, worn paper.

The letter Bishop had left for Harry.

She sat the glasses back on the table and she reached for the note. Sitting down on the end of the couch by Harry's feet, she opened it up and she read it. Over and over again, her eyes scanned the words, the writing that she remembered. Over and over again, she read the sentiment, the same one Harry had recited for her earlier that night. And her mind shifted—back to Bishop, back to the loss of him, back to the reason that they had come here, back to the reason she had this home in the first place.

And the smile faded away from her face.

Folding the paper, she sat it back on the table. With less energy, with less drive, with less of the wild patter in her heart, she crawled back under the covers, back into Harry's arms and, in the warmth and safety that was him, she tried to go back to sleep, tried to sink back into the restful slumber she had found there that night.

But something had jarred her mind, something had shaken her heart and when she finally managed to fall back asleep, it wasn't the warm wonderful memories that awaited her.

It was the dark, heartbreaking ones.

Though she was safe and sound in the confines of Harry's arms, in the vast land of Bendal, in her mind, in her dreams, she was in the Bishop home, in the French countryside, in the bed where she had spent her last night with Bishop.

And her phone was ringing.

When she 'woke up' and looked around her, she was confused and afraid. The details were so real, so vivid and even though she half knew she was dreaming, everything about it felt so real.

Just as she had years ago, she reached for her phone.

Just as she had years ago, she felt her heart race in her chest.

And even though she knew that nothing good would come of it, she answered. And she held her breath.

Somewhere deep inside, somewhere in her mind where she knew this was a dream, that she was
reliving this nightmare, she prepared herself to hear Ian's voice, to hear him tell her the words he had told her that horrible night so long ago.

But when the voice on the other end spoke, it wasn't his. And it struck her like a sharp blow to the chest.

"Madeline darling," it was deep and rich and much too familiar. "It's Charles."

Her head began to shake, her stomach began to turn and she wanted more than anything to wake from this dream, from this new nightmare that was already tearing her apart.

"No..." The word scratched as it came from her throat. "No, no, no, no, no..." She wanted to run, wanted to escape. But she couldn't.

She couldn't escape this nightmare version of the truth she hadn't been able to escape years ago.

As terror washed over her, as panic sat in, it was Charles' voice that broke her heart this time.

"It's Harry. He's...he's gone. There was a malfunction on his plane during landing and..."

"NO!" She cried out in the dream, loud and desperate as she wrenched herself from this hell she now found herself in.

The second time Maddie woke that night, she was covered in a nervous sweat. With her heart pounding in her throat and her mind racing a mile a minute–she knew she was going to be sick. With little grace, she moved from Harry's arms and rushed to the bathroom where she unloaded the contents of her stomach.

Sweating and breathing heavy, Maddie was completely and utterly shaken. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she barely recognized the woman she saw. When she splashed water on her face, she could barely feel the cold wetness against her skin. And when she stepped back into the living room, when she looked to a blissfully sleeping Harry, she felt nothing of the warmth she had felt before.

All she felt was worry. All she felt was upset. All she felt was fear.

And all she could hear, over the loud pounding of her heart was Charles' voice saying those same horrible words that Ian had said to her years ago.

And in the place in her heart where she had just that night felt the realizations of love, she felt nothing but the overwhelming urge to run and hide and protect herself.

At all costs.

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Harry woke with a stir, at the wisp of a breeze or the slightest of sound. He woke and before his eyes even opened, he reached for her. But he was alone there on that couch. Maddie was gone. His eyes pulled open and he sat up, searching the dark room for signs of her. Just when he started to wonder, just when he started to question, the corner of his eye caught sight of something on the deck.
A breath of relief pushed from his lungs. It was her; sitting on the deck in the dark of the night.

He rose from the couch, bending to snatch up his clothes. Stepping into his boxers, pulling on his t-shirt, he wrapped a blanket around him and he stepped outside onto the deck, into the crisp air of the lingering night.

Maddie was sitting on the very edge of a chair at the very edge of the deck. She was completely dressed and in the dark and he suddenly felt very nervous. With the curve of her frown, with the distant look on her face, his stomach turned. Something was wrong.

"Maddie?" Her eyes snapped up to his, startled to see him there, to hear his voice. "Sorry," he held his hands up with a smile. "I didn't mean to scare you..." He shook his head, watching as her eyes pulled away from him, back to the distance she seemed to be lost in. "Is everything okay?" He looked around them, searching for some sort of clue to her strange disposition. "What are you doing out here?"

The tone of her voice when she spoke was low and ominous, her words heavy with honesty. "I was thinking about leaving."

"Now?" He felt his pulse begin to race. "In the middle of the night?"

"Yes." Her voice cracked around the word, the stone cold look on her face cracking with emotion.

"Without waking me?" He wasn't sure what made him ask, but her answer broke his heart.

"Yes..."

"But why?" He moved in front of her then, bending down so that he was closer. "Why would you want to leave here without me?"

"Because..." Her eyes were wide and shaky and full of something that made his heart drop into his stomach. As much as it pained her, as much as it hurt her to hurt him, all she had was the truth. So she gave it to him. "Because I don't know if I can do this."
Chapter 33

PREMIERE

By all accounts it was meant to be a magical evening. She was standing in her bedroom in New York in a beautiful gown that made her feel graceful and sexy and confident. Her hair was pulled up and back and messy—in the way that it was supposed to look messy instead of the I-just-rolled-out-of-bed-and-did-this-myself way. Her makeup had been perfected; smoky and smoldering and perfect for the red carpet premiere she was preparing for.

In only a matter of minutes a car would pull up in front of her stately building and a handsome man in a brilliant tuxedo would be coming to fetch her, to take her out to a wonderful evening filled with champagne and food and a movie that not only meant something to the two of them—but one she wanted to see. Everything was ready, everything was perfect. Everything was in place.

But when she turned to look in her floor-length mirror, when she did a quick head to toe assessment of herself, all she could see was what was missing and it made her heart sink right down to the impeccable shoes she was wearing.

Her fingers lifted to her collarbone, her eyes focusing on her neck, bare and jewelry free. And then she misted over. Turning away from her reflection, she swallowed at the emotions creeping higher in her throat and she moved over to her dresser. For what felt like the twentieth time that night, she looked down at the two necklaces laid out on her dresser, at the two pieces of artwork chosen specifically for this dress, for this night. The topsy turvy feeling in her stomach returned and she had to close her eyes.

What she needed to do was pick one. Pick one and put it on and be ready to go when Charlie arrived—this was all that was left to complete her outfit, to complete the night. But when she looked down at the necklaces Harry had sent her, the grand gesture of support he had made, all she could see was him.

Harry and the look on his face when she had broken his heart, when she had told him no, when she had sent him away. All she could see was the hurt and the upset and the sadness. He had been lingering in her thoughts, in her heart since the moment things ended in Bendal and now, this night when she needed to get dressed and go out, it seemed as though she couldn't hold off his memory much longer.

No matter the amount of champagne she sipped, no matter the peppy playlist, no matter the ridiculous pep-talks she tried to give herself—she couldn't escape the way he had cracked and fallen that night, the way he had left, the way she had pushed him out.

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BENDAL-ONE WEEK EARLIER

"Because..." Her eyes were wide and shaky and full of something that made his heart drop into his stomach. As much as it pained her, as much as it hurt her to hurt him, all she had was the truth. So she gave it to him. "Because I don't know if I can do this."
The confusion that registered across his face was deep and genuine. "You can't do...can't do what?"

As she looked up at him then, she felt the enormous storm of emotions rush to the surface and despite every intention to the contrary, she started to cry. She was instantly mad at herself, for feeling this way, for being in this situation, for not being able to keep the tears at bay even long enough to end it.

"Hey..." Harry's voice was soft and reassuring as he moved closer, bending down so that his eyes were level with hers. His hands were cautious as they reached out to her, resting on the arms of her chair. "What's going on Maddie? Please tell me..."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, avoiding his eyes as she wiped at her own, as she sniffed and tried to stifle the tears. "I thought...I thought I was strong enough, that I was brave enough..."

"What?" Harry's eyes narrowed as he leaned closer. "What do you mean?"

"But I'm not," her eyes lifted to his, wide and wet and full of sadness and regret. "I'm not brave enough and I'm not strong enough."

"Not strong enough for what Maddie?" Despite the panic that was growing inside of him, the corners of Harry's mouth curled up slightly at the absurdity of Maddie being anything but strong and brave. "Not brave enough for what?"

"Loving you." Though the words she spoke should have warmed him, the way she said them made every nerve in his body stand on alert.

"You...You..." Harry struggled with his words, with his breath.

"I can't," she cut in before he could find either. Her hands were soft as they moved to his arms. "I can't go any further with this, with you." She gulped and steeled herself. "I know it's too much to ask that you understand and I don't expect you to," she shook her head. "But you have to know, had I thought it would end up like this, I would have never..."

"End up like this?" Harry's voice cracked as he repeated her words. "End up like what?"

"Over." Her eyes welled up as she said it, as she felt it. "This is over. I can't do this anymore. I can't let my feelings become more. I can't." Her head shook again, her eyes wide and shaky as her feelings scattered. "I have to go."

Harry stood as she stood, took half a step away from her as she moved forward, the shock from it all delaying his reactions. "Wait." He reached for her. "Wait. What...what happened? Did I do something wrong?"

"No," Maddie turned sad eyes up to him, her mouth curving down into a frown as she shook her head. "Of course not."

"Did I say something..."

"No, no," she shook her head, her hands gentle as they pulled his from her. "It's nothing like that Harry. You've been perfect."
"Then what is it Maddie?" He was scared and desperate and hated the dread that was rising in his chest. "Help me understand. I thought we were having a wonderful trip."

"We were," she nodded. "It has been amazing to be here with you..."

"And you let me in," he moved in closer to her, wanting more than anything to wrap his arms around her and make whatever was making her so nervous go away. "You let me get closer to you."

"I know," she whispered, gulping at the lump in her throat, trying to stop the tears in her eyes.

"And last night..." He reached out to her with one hand, his other moving over his chest. "Maddie, when we made love last night, it felt..." He let out a breath he seemed to be holding, his heart aching as he remembered. "It couldn't have been just me."

"It wasn't," she shook her head, her own heart cracking in her chest. "It wasn't just you."

"Then what? What happened between then and now that makes you want to leave? What happened to change your mind?"

Maddie stood stock still there on the deck in front of him, her heart and her mind racing as she remembered exactly what had happened, as the vividly real details of her horrible dream came to life, as her stomach wrenched at the way it made her feel to think of losing him. And she knew that she wouldn't survive it, knew that it would kill her. Sniffing at her tears, Maddie stood tall and reached out to him. Her hand rested on the one he was resting on his chest and she met his desperate eyes. "I'm sorry Harry. I'm so very sorry and I know you'll never forgive me for this but...I have to go. I have to." With a turn of her heel, Maddie moved away from him, into the house.

"Pull it together," Maddie spoke to herself, her voice firm and harsh and meant to snap her back to the present. She couldn't think of Harry, not now, not tonight. She couldn't have his laughter in her ears, she couldn't spend the night thinking of his smile, of the sound of his voice. She couldn't spend the night wishing his arms were around her. Sucking in her breath, she closed her eyes and turned away from the necklaces for a moment. "Come on."

She really couldn't spend the night remembering the way she had ended things with him, the pleas he had made, his refusal to let her do it, and ultimately his surrender.

No. She couldn't remember that or she would spend the entire night in a pool of sobs on the floor.

And she had certainly had nights like that since.

But tonight she had somewhere to be, something to do that she had been looking forward to for a long time, with somebody who deserved more than her half-hearted attention.

"Charlie," she said his name aloud, smiling as she did. She felt an enormous amount of gratitude that it was him she was seeing that evening. He was funny and charming and so easygoing that she knew the night was going to be great fun and, as much as it were possible, her mind would be
occupied for the night. She would be able to think of something other than the great big mess she had created in Bendal that night.

When her buzzer sounded out, her eyes flew open and she could feel her tension slipping away. Charlie was there. As her smile pulled higher and her excitement returned, she hurried from the room, towards the door.

And there on her dresser sat the two necklaces from Harry, untouched. Unworn.

Her heels sounded out on the hardwood floor as she walked through the house, her breath coming up easier. With a smile, she pulled open the door and she was greeted with that warm, bright smile she had known so well.

"Charlie," her head tipped to the side as she looked him over. "Handsome as ever."

"Madeline," his voice was deep and rich as he spoke her name, leaning in to kiss her cheeks in greeting. "You look..."

"Nice?" She offered, stepping aside, gesturing for him to step in.

"I was going to say stunning," he shook his head. "But nice works just as well." He turned to watch her shut the door behind him. "I cannot thank you enough for agreeing to come with me tonight. I couldn't think of anyone I'd rather spend it with than you."

"Well," Maddie shrugged, feeling lighter now that he was here, now that there were distractions. "I'm honored you wanted to take me."

"And your boyfriend?" His eyes followed her closely as she moved to fetch her clutch. "He's come round about tonight?"

"He's..." Maddie opened her clutch, checking for her slim wallet, her lip-gloss, her phone. Trying to rid her mind of Harry, she shook her head. Sucking in a breath she pulled a smile and stood tall. "Yes. Something like that." Closing her clutch, she moved towards him. "Shall we go? I would imagine there's a car waiting?"

"There is," he nodded, striking and gallant as he moved towards the door, offering her his arm. "At your service."

"Why thank you," Maddie's smile was wide and bright and not at all giving away the twisted up emotions she was trying to keep at bay. As Charlie followed her out of her place, her fingers brushed against her bare neck and despite her very best efforts to ignore it, she couldn't help but recall that night in Bendal when Harry had followed her into the house, begging her to stop, to stay, to not do what it was she ultimately did.

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BENDAL

"Stop!" Harry's voice was rushed and frantic as he followed her into the house. "Stop. Please..." He hurried towards her, distracted only for a moment at the sight of her packed luggage. "Please Maddie...please don't leave me."
"Harry..." Maddie shook her head, battling tears and imminent regret.

"I know that I deserve it," he moved to her side, his eyes wide and sad and desperate to stop her. "I know that if you believe in any sort of karma, this is what's coming my way, but please, please..."

"This isn't about karma, Harry," she could feel her heart sinking further in her chest. She had known this would come up but it hurt so much more than she had suspected. "This isn't about what you deserve."

"Then what is it about Maddie?" Harry stood tall in front of her, his hand pressed to his chest, trying to keep his heart inside, trying to keep her there. "You've never been anything but honest with me, please don't stop now. What's going on? Why are you packed? Why are you ending this before we even get a chance to..."

"I'm afraid," her voice croaked as she spoke up, cracking as her eyes welled up. "I'm afraid to get in any deeper than I already am. I'm afraid to...to love you." She gulped and wiped at her eyes and steeled herself. She had made a decision. "For reasons that have nothing to do with what happened between us the last time we were together."

"But, but..." Harry blinked and shook his head, totally thrown. "What reasons could there possibly be?"

Maddie looked up to him then, with a fear and sadness and defeat in her eyes. He was right. She had always been honest and what harm could come from being honest now, at the end. "I can't lose you Harry."

"Lose me?" Confusion seeped into every nook and cranny of his being. "You couldn't lose me though. Good God Maddie, never in a million years. It's impossible."

"It's not impossible," she shook her head at him, her eyes narrowing.

"I swear to you, swear to you that I'm not going anywhere, that nothing you could say or do could ever make me walk away from you. Maddie, Maddie, you have to know that I have zero intention of ever leaving you..." His hands moved to her shoulders, his eyes focused on hers, wanting her to see that he meant it with all he had.

"Willingly." Maddie finished his sentence with a heavily weighted word.

"Willingly?" Harry breathed the word, a wave of their shared history washing over him. "Willingly. Maddie..." His emotions stirred this time; less panicked, more sorrow.

"Losing you the first time, as painful as it was..." Maddie bit her lip for a moment, fighting tears. "It wasn't the biggest loss I've been handed."

"Ah." The wind fell swiftly out of his sail. He didn't quite know how to argue with that. His heart was breaking in his chest and his mind simply wasn't fast enough to collect the pieces, to keep it together. Swallowing, he took a deep breath and a cautious step towards her.

"I can't do that again." She shook her head as she took a step away from him. "I can't love like that and lose like that and...make it. I won't make it."

Harry wasn't sure what to do next but watching her wide, scattered eyes and the slight tremble in
her lip, he knew he had to do something. "I know that the end of our engagement was nowhere in
the same realm as the loss of your husband..."

"No," she shook her head, trying not to cry. "No it wasn't."

"No," Harry agreed. "But I've made a similar decision before, I've let my fear of loss supersede
everything else in my life, I let it make decisions for me that I've regretted since then, decisions I'll
continue to regret for the rest of my life. And Maddie..." He moved forward cautiously, his hands
up in front of him as though he was showing her that he had nothing to harm her with. "Ending this,
ending things with me because you're afraid, you'll regret that decision forever."

"Maybe I will," she shrugged her shoulders, wiping absently from her eyes. "Maybe you're
right and maybe I'm making a huge mistake. But it's my decision, my mistake to make."

Harry swallowed, hating the look of resolution in her eyes. "Maybe," he whispered. "But what
then?"

"What do you mean 'what then'?"

"I mean what after it's over?" He took another slow, cautious step towards her. "What are you
going to do after things are over here? Are you going to cut off ties to the people that love you? To
the people who care about you? Are you going to shut off the side of you that craves that kind of
connection, that kind of intimacy?"

"I don't know!" She shook her head. "I don't know."

"It doesn't work, Maddie." He moved in then, his hands on her cheeks, his close proximity wanting
to force her to look at him, wanting to force her out of her head and back into this moment with
him. "I've tried it. I've tried to live that life and it doesn't work. It'll break your heart more than any
of this ever could..."

"You don't know that..."

"I do know that!" he nodded his head. "I do. I..."

"Just because it worked out that way for you doesn't mean it'll work that way for me!" Maddie
yelled.

"Fine! Fine." Harry's hands flew up. "Fine...then tell me this. If Bishop were here..."

"Don't," Maddie's face instantly fell in sorrow, the tears she had been fighting spilling out in
abundance. "Don't bring him up."

"You knew him better than any of us," Harry pressed forward, his own emotions stirring as he
thought of his best friend. "And you know that he wouldn't want you to do this. He wouldn't want
you to sign up for a life that was loveless and empty and..."

"Stop it," she held up her hand to him.

"Think about what he would say..."

"NO!" She yelled, her voice reverberating throughout the tall room. "No! Bishop doesn't get a say
here! He doesn't get to dictate how I live my life now that he's gone!"

"Fine. Fine. But you know that I'm right. You know that he would be sad to see you like this..."

"Yes," she nodded, biting her lip as she stood taller. "And I know that he didn't have to take the call I had to take. He didn't have to face what I had to face." She wiped at her eyes, her forehead furrowing as she looked at him. "If he had been the one that was left behind, if he had been the one to see my body cold and lifeless, if he had been the one to claim my personal effects, to plan my service, to spread my ashes, to face a whole entire existence alone in the life we were going to share..." Her voice peaked and her heart sank. "You think he'd be so quick to bounce back to a life that was full and happy?"

"No," Harry whispered, defeated and sad. "I think I'd have to commit him to a Mental Facility somewhere...after I fished him out of a pool of Scotch."

The room fell silent at the weight in his words, at how close to the truth he probably was. And as it settled around them, all that was left was this decision Maddie seemed determined to make.

"I can't..." It was sad and weak. "I can't lose you like I lost him. I can't worry about you every time you get on a plane..."

"Then I won't get on a plane." He was quick to retort.

"You're being ridiculous." She shook her head as she moved away from him.

"I'm not," he followed. "I'm not! I don't have to fly! We'll restrict my travel only to places I can get to by boat or the chunnel..."

At that Maddie's tears increased. "You can't do that."

"I can do whatever I want," Harry moved in again, seeing what he thought was his chance. "Maddie please, please. Don't do what I did. Don't let fear control your decisions..."

"But they're my decisions," Maddie cut him off and when she looked up at him this time, the calmness in her eyes scared him. "You told me I would be in charge this time Harry, that I had all the control."

"I know," Harry spoke over the growing lump in his throat. "I meant it."

"I know," she echoed his words. "And I'm telling you I can't do this. I am so very sorry that this is where we've ended up but I am begging you to just please, please. Harry...don't make me move any further, don't make me risk my heart again. Please. Please. I can't do it. I thought I could but I can't."

Everything inside of him ached as he looked down at her, as he saw the severity in her pleas, the desperation in her eyes. Everything inside of him ached as she asked him, begged him to do the one thing he swore he would never, ever do again.

Walk away from her.

But she was right. He had told her at the very beginning that she would have all of the control, that she would be the one to make the decisions and now she was claiming that right—even if it hurt
them both in the end.

He honestly didn't know in that moment which way to go, which option would prove to her just how much he loved her, just how much he meant it. Because he had meant it and he did love her.

So he nodded his head and moved in closer. Taking her face in his hands, he tried to keep it together on the outside while on the inside he absolutely crumbled.

"I'll go." He could barely speak the words. "Everything in me wants to fight you on this, wants to keep you from doing something you'll regret. But I'll let you be in charge and...I'll go. It will...break my heart. And yours, I would imagine. But I'll go." His eyes closed as his forehead pressed to hers. "I will love you as long as I live Maddie Bishop. And anytime you need me, anytime you need anything you just...you know where I am."

"I'm so sorry Harry..." She cried as her hands reached up to him then, feeling the loss of him all over again. "I never meant to hurt you..."

"Shhh..." He shook his head, taking another minute before he opened his eyes to look at her. "I know you didn't. I'm not sure you have it in you."

"I just..."

"Please know that when that moment inevitably comes, that moment when you don't feel as solid about this decision, when you don't feel as sure about the choices you made...please know that I've been there." He swallowed and pulled himself away from her with great effort. "And I'll be here."

Maddie couldn't speak, couldn't find words or reason really through her tears and her upset.

"I'll just go pack my things," Harry nodded towards the room they had been staying in. "I'll be out in ten minutes." Moving quickly, before she could see him fall apart, Harry pressed a kiss to her forehead and took a few long strides around her.

And there Maddie stood–alone with her fears and regrets and her ghosts.
Chapter 34

Maddie could still remember the way it felt to watch him leave that night.

She had offered him the Bishop jet, fueled and ready to take him home–or wherever he liked. He had thought for a moment of rejecting the offer and flying home commercial. He wasn't sure he could spend the flight surrounded by her, but the idea of completely losing it on a plane full of strangers who had camera phones and no loyalties to him, drove him to accept.

When he had finally left her standing there in that hot Bendal air, Maddie remembered feeling nothing but cold.

Just like she felt this night. This warm, wonderful night when she was in the company of such a friend, when she was wearing this beautiful gown and ready for this marvelous evening...she felt nothing but cold.

In truth, that was how she had felt since the moment Harry had done as she asked. Cold. And empty. And struggling to pump life back into her life.

Though Charlie was talking to her across the back seat, giving her some bit of information about the premiere, about how they would enter the venue, about the party afterwards, Maddie's mind was somewhere else altogether.

Her mind was in Bendal, in her living room, watching as Harry walked away.

Her mind was in France, in the country house, watching as Bishop flashed her his final smile, sent her his final wink before he left for London.

Her mind was in London, in their Kensington apartment, watching as Harry buckled under the fear of losing her.

Her mind was such a mess, her heart even more so. So on this night that was supposed to be full of warmth and laughter and ease–she felt cold and alone. And the place in her heart that had come back alive when she had flown to London to kiss Harry was empty. And the knowledge of just how much her life loving husband would have hated that was looming in her mind.

"Maddie?" Charlie called to her; charm and sweetness.

"Hmm?" She turned her eyes to him, her fingers lifting up to her neck, blindly seeking to play with her necklace. And then her eyes went wide. "Oh my God."

"What's going on over there?" Charlie moved to the edge of his seat as he focused in on her. "Is something the matter?"

"I..." Maddie's throat suddenly felt dry, her heart thumping in a slight panic. "Yes. I..." She felt scattered and dizzy and irrationally upset. "I forgot my necklace." Her hand moved up to her throat. "We have to go back. I need to go back. Can we please go back?" Her eyes were wide as she looked to him, pleading and a bit frantic and when he nodded his head, he could see the relief wash over her face.
"Of course we can." Though he didn't know why it was so important to her, he could see that it was. So he called to the driver and asked him to turn around.

Maddie had never moved so fast in a dress so constricting in her life. Promising a quick return, she sprang from the car. She was up to her apartment as fast as the elevator could move, her foot tapping impatiently the entire time. When she pushed into her place, her heels clicked on the hardwood as she hurried down the hallway into her room and right over to the dresser where the two necklaces sat; beautiful and waiting.

For a reason that had yet to register, tears rose to her eyes. Her fingers trembled as she reached for them, tracing over the simplicity of one, the ornateness of the other. The decision before her was a basic one; which necklace to wear. But inside of her was a much more complicated decision, a decision she thought she had already made, a decision that had been looming over her for a week.

"Harry..." When she whispered his name, the corners of her mouth curled up and despite the tears in her eyes, they lit up. "Maddie Bishop what is wrong with you?" Spinning away from the dresser for a moment, she pressed her eyes closed and took a deep breath.

And then she took another.

She needed to focus. She needed to pull it together and focus. Letting out a sigh, she shook her head--she needed to stop thinking so much. Some things were better left to her gut. In an act of instinct, of reflex, she opened her eyes and spun around, her fingers lifting a necklace easily from the dresser--without a second guess.

She already felt more together, more calm and at ease.

She walked down the hall as she fastened it into place and when she stopped in front of the mirror in the entryway to make sure it was laying right, her eyes drifted briefly from her reflection to a photo that sat on her stand. It was one she had taken of Bishop while he was laughing, one where he was giving her this look that at the very same time seemed smug and flirty and amused. Sometimes she missed him so much it hurt and sometimes she could almost hear what it is he would have to say to her.

Tonight just happened to be both.

With a smile, she patted the necklace and then her chest over her heart. "Yes Jamie..." She sighed as she glanced down at him. "I know." Looking up in the mirror at herself once more, she sucked in a breath and pulled herself together. "Come on. It's going to be a great night." Her fingers traced the necklace one last time before she hurried back down to the car, to her date--to her evening.

"That's a beautiful necklace," Charlie smiled over to her as the car pulled back into traffic. "Excellent choice."

"Thank you," Maddie returned the smile, relaxed and ready for whatever the night held in store for them. "It was a gift."

"Oh?" Charlie's eyebrows rose. "A gift from who?"

"From Harry," her voice was soft as she spoke his name, her eyes betraying her as she pulled them away from Charlie, as she looked into some far off place in the past.
"Ah yes," Charlie chuckled, warm and easy. "Now that you mention him..."

"You have something to say about Harry?" Her smile curled higher as she looked back to him.

"No, not really," Charlie shook his head. "Just that I was only a little hurt to discover that while the distance between New York and LA kept you from a relationship with me, the distance between New York and London..." He waved his hand at her, offering a humorous wink and a grin.

"Ah," she nodded slowly, her cheeks flushing as she looked down at her hands, wondering if she should tell him the status of her relationship with Harry, wondering if she should keep that to herself, not wanting to pull attention from the point of the evening. She decided against it, swallowing back her emotions, she pulled a smile. "Only a little hurt?"

"Only a little," he laughed along with her. "And it was mostly my ego." With a shrug of his shoulders, Maddie sighed.

"Aw now, come on. Don't let it hit your ego," she reached for his hand. "It was all really about...timing."

"Maybe," Charlie shook his head, holding her fingers in his hand as his voice lowered, as he drew in closer. "Or maybe you found the bright and wonderful your husband was hoping you would find."

Maddie's eyes went wide as all of her emotions stirred and rose to the surface. Hearing Charlie quote Bishop's letter like that, hearing him attach Harry to it all made her heart jump in her chest. "I'm sorry. What?" She whispered.

"Oh hey, I'm sorry," he squeezed her hand. "I didn't mean to make you upset."

"You didn't," she shook her head. "I just...you remembered the letter?"

"Of course," he nodded. "The romance of it all sat with me for a very long time. The fact that he wrote you the letter, that you carried it with you, that you...Christ Maddie, that you were strong enough to pull yourself together and do what he wanted you to do...embrace something bright..." Truthfully the entire thing had resonated with him, had stuck with him long after their brief romance had come to an end. "It was heavy and lovely and when I saw you and Harry together, when I came to see you after the accident, well...I could see why it was that you and I didn't work out."

"Charlie..." Maddie's voice was caught in her throat.

"I mean, my damaged ego aside and all," he joked with her, wanting to add a little levity to the moment.

It worked and Maddie smiled, taking a long relaxing breath as his words settled into her mind, into her heart.

"You look wonderful by the way," Charlie continued to move the conversation along. "I see no remnants of the accident. Are you feeling better as well?"

Maddie opened her mouth to answer him but her voice was silenced by conflict. She honestly didn't
know how she was feeling. She had been too focused on trying to protect herself from feeling. "Yes," she answered with a quick shake of her head, her eyes betraying her in such a way that even he could see it, across the dark backseat of the car. "I'm feeling great." Sucking in a breath, she brought her hands together and turned her attention to him, to this night. "Tell me one more time about when we arrive? You're going to have them smuggle me in through the laundry entrance?"

Her eyes danced with humor as she winked at him.

And it worked. It drew wide laughter from him and it pulled them from the discussion at hand. "Yes, yes exactly," he clapped his hands together. "No, no. Really. We can do this however you like. I have one of my assistants ready to escort you to your seat. If you prefer, I can have the driver take you around back and she can meet you there. Or you can simply walk behind the platform with her while I take on the press..." He shrugged his shoulders. "Of course you can always just...walk right in with me. It'll raise a ton of eyebrows, even more questions, and you'll be bombarded with photos and rumors. I'm game if you are, but I'm not sure your boyfriend will be as amused by it all from all the way across the pond."

"Sorry?" Maddie's eyes narrowed at his last words.

"I mean, if it were me and my girlfriend was headed out, looking like that, with somebody like me..." His lips curled up and she saw the dance in his eyes that told her his ego was clearly doing just fine. "I'd be watching media like crazy, looking for pictures or coverage of it all." He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sure Harry's doing the same, at home in London, trying to catch a glimpse of you and that necklace...and just how close you're standing to me. Don't you think?"

"Ha." Maddie let out a laugh, shaking her head with an uncertain feeling in her stomach. "No, no. I don't...I can't imagine he's doing anything like that."

"Nah?" Charlie shrugged and dismissed it. "Bigger man than I."

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He knew better, he really did. He had spent the entire day knowing that this was the last thing he should be doing. He had spent the entire day knowing that this was exactly what he would end up doing.

He should have gone to sleep hours ago. He should have gone out with Sean and Kiki. He should have had multiple cocktails at Leo's. He should have gotten piss ass drunk and passed out ensuring that he would sleep through it all, well into the next day, well past the photos of her.

He should have done a great many things but here he was; middle of the night, not a light on in the house, in the worn leather chair in the corner of his office with unruly hair and an untrimmed beard.

His second glass of scotch in one hand and his laptop perched on his knees—looking for her.

In all honesty, even if he had had the willpower to make himself go out that night, he wouldn't have been able to. Once any one of his friends took a look at him, they would have known what had happened in Bendal and he simply couldn't face that yet. So he hadn't told them. He had avoided meeting up with them and, thankfully, his life was just busy enough, just crazy enough, that none of them thought anything was amiss at his absence. It had happened before, it made sense.

So he had avoided them all week, he had turned down their invitations that day, and here he was,
heartbroken and lovesick and all of the horribly accurate clichés that could be attached to this man who felt just completely wrecked over this woman.

He wished he could be angry, wished he could hate her, wished he could turn to his tried and true tactics of forgetting and moving on. He knew that that option awaited him. There was plenty of alcohol, even more women out there who would take him on for an evening. But he couldn't do it. He didn't want to do it.

He didn't want to be angry, he didn't want to hate her, he didn't want to get drunk and get laid and he absolutely didn't want to move on. Somewhere in the deep recesses of his muddled mind, he knew he would have to eventually, that he couldn't wallow forever, that even if he decided never to date again, he couldn't just hide out under a bunch of coats and hope this would go away—no matter how much he willed it to be true.

But tonight wasn't the time for moving on. No, he shook his head with a bitter huff of a laugh, tonight was for getting drunk alone and using the media which he often detested to get a glimpse of her.

This woman who he was apparently fated to love from afar.

So as the sun had set on this day, Harry succumbed to this dark part of himself. He took a long drink from his glass and sat it aside. With a deep breath of resignation, he typed her name into google with Charlie's and he hit "Enter".

He knew better, he really did. He knew that seeing images of her out with somebody else would most likely kill him. But he really couldn't help it. He had to see her.

He had to.

And then, with a sharp intake of breath, and a feeling not unlike falling, he did.

He saw her.

"There she is," Charlie pointed to the young woman waiting just down the block for their car to pull up to the premiere. "Red skirt, black jacket."

"Miriam?" Maddie clarified as the car pulled forward, bringing them closer to the lit up walkway and the mass of media gathered for the premiere.

"Mmm Hmm," Charlie nodded, turning his bright smile to her as he reached for her hand. "We'll step out of the car together and then she'll lead you around behind the media lane." His fingers squeezed hers. "I'll meet you at the end of it all and we'll head to our seats. Sound okay?"

"It sounds perfect," Maddie smiled wide as she squeezed his hand in return. "I'm really excited to see the film, Charlie. I remember bits and pieces from when you were filming here in the studio. I remember how excited you were about what you were producing. And the trailers I've seen are just remarkable and..." She sighed and scooted closer, held tighter to his hand. "I'm very proud that I get to see it for the first time with you. I have nothing but fond memories of our time together while you were here."
"Wow..." Charlie shook his head at her, his charming grin in full force as he bent to kiss her hand. "Half of me thinks that maybe Miriam had a hand in putting you here tonight, to make sure I'm smiling like a fool when I step out of this car."

Maddie's head tipped back as she laughed. "And the other half?"

"The other half..." He pulled at her hand, bringing her closer to him as he moved in closer to her. "The other half is just incredibly grateful to have you here." Leaning in, he placed a small, sweet kiss to her cheek. "Thank you for that."

"You're welcome for that," she smiled as his fingers slipped from hers, his eyes darting out at the crowd that awaited him.

"Are you ready?"

"Ha!" She laughed. "If I'm not?"

"We can do another lap around the block?" He suggested with a smirk.

"I'm ready," she nodded, waving off any bit of nervousness that might have been creeping in. In all honesty, she had faced larger crowds than this, more cameras. But this wasn't the moment to tell him that. "Go get 'em."

"Absolutely," he grinned. "I'll see you on the other side."

As the car came to a stop and his door pulled open, Maddie took a deep breath, gave a wide smile and graciously took his outstretched hand as she stepped out of the car to join him. They shared a quick smile before he dropped her hand, a quick nod before Miriam stepped forward and lead Maddie away. In all it probably lasted less than five seconds.

But in those five seconds a multitude of photos were taken. And while there were some in the world who saw them and raised questions and rumors, and some in the world who saw them and couldn't care less—there was one in the world who saw them and simply couldn't look away.

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If somebody had asked him what it felt like to see those shots of Maddie that night, to see her stepping out of the car with her hand in Charlie's, to see her in that dress with that smile, he wouldn't have been able to answer them.

Not because he wasn't sure what he felt—but because he was feeling everything.

It was the strangest sort of thing, to be so blissfully thankful to see her and so very sad to see her without him. At the very same time that it tightened his stomach with jealousy to see her with Charlie, it relieved the pressure in his chest to see her smiling, to see her happy.

And then he saw the necklace she had chosen and tears rose to his eyes. She was wearing it. After all that had gone down, she was wearing it. And he wasn't sure if he should be upset or thrilled and he wasn't sure if she meant for the gesture to make him feel either.

But it did both. In a great big way it did both.
Sighing back into his chair, he tore his eyes from the screen and ran his fingers back through his hair.

"Goddamn it Maddie..." His voice was low and heavy, just like his heart, as he thought of how they had ended, how much they had been through, how much hope he still held onto...even though he knew better. He took another drink, draining his glass and then he turned back to the photos.

She was beautiful, absolutely beautiful, and seeing her there in that dress, with that smile, wearing that necklace...he wished it made him hate her, wished it made him detest her decision.

But it didn't. It just made him miss her, made him hope and pray for some kind of divine intervention that would lead her back to him.

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"That was amazing!!" Maddie's eyes were wide and her voice was high and the way she clapped her hands together was full of a childlike excitement that made Charlie's entire being warm.

"You enjoyed the film?" He let out a small chuckle, relaxing as they settled into the car that would take them from the premiere to the party.

"Are you kidding!!" Her fingers wrapped around his arm. "The scenery was phenomenal, the writing was just...top of the line. And you?" She turned to face him. "You were unbelievable."

"You think so?"

"I know so!" She sank back into the chair. "It was just...wow..."

"Thank you," he leaned back with her, turning his face to look at her.

"Of course," she waved her hand at him.

"No. I mean it." He leaned in a little closer, growing slightly more serious. "Thank you. When I made this film I was...at peace. I was at peace for a lot of reasons but one of them...was because of you."

"Me?" Maddie whispered, stunned by his admission.

"Don't look so surprised."

"I am so surprised." She laughed.

"You shouldn't be."

"I..." She blinked, shaking her head. "I don't know what to say."

"You say nothing," he shrugged his shoulders, loosening his tie as the car set into traffic. "The timing of us...it was right for me too."

Maddie stayed quiet for a moment, watching the lights from the city flash across his face as they drove through town. "Would you believe that I'm just self-centered enough that I never even thought about it that way?"
Charlie chuckled and shook his head. "I would never believe that you were self-centered Madeline."

"Well believe it," she laughed at herself. "I'm really glad it was good for you too."

"It was great for me," he corrected. "You reminded me that relationships can be fun and easy, that they should be fun and easy. With the right person of course."

"Of course," Maddie nodded, the emotions she had managed to quell earlier that night began to rise and stir.

"And...as luck would have it, I think maybe I've found her," the smile on his face drew wider, his eyes drifting off for just a moment.

"You have?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, genuine interest and curiosity in her voice.

"Mmm," he nodded. "Her name is Morgana. She's a jewelry designer in LA and she's..." His voice drifted off, his eyes growing soft and Maddie could see just how smitten he was.

"Charlie..." Her head tipped to the side. "Look at you."

"What?" He laughed, completely caught.

"What?" She sighed, nudging him gently as she debated giving him a hard time. "Nothing. You just look incredibly happy."

"I am incredibly happy," he agreed, not even caring that she could see it written all over his face. "And you? Things with the Prince are still going well?"

Maddie's eyes blinked at the mention of Harry, tears welling up as she pulled her eyes and her hand from his. She hadn't wanted to talk about Harry tonight, hadn't wanted to get into all that had happened. But before she could mask the way her heart sank into her gut, Charlie caught it.

"Hey, hold on," his eyes narrowed as he caught the shift in her mood. "What's going on? What's happened?"

"Nothing," she shook her head again, looking down at her hands in her lap, letting out a small puff of a laugh. "Nothing we should be talking about tonight," she turned her eyes up to him. "We're supposed to be celebrating, we're supposed to be lively and jovial and..."

"And we're supposed to be friends," he cut her off, his voice low, his eyes caring.

"We are friends."

"Then tell me," he nodded to her. "I mentioned Harry and you looked like you were going to cry. Is something wrong?"

Wrong? Maddie had to bite at her lip to keep from sobbing, the weight of it all was so heavy. Was something wrong? Yes, she gulped at the lump in her throat. Everything was wrong.

Sighing, her head tipped back onto the seat, nodding slowly. "Harry and I we're...over." She turned
her face to look at him, her eyes dark and sad.

"What?!" The stun was evident on his face. "What do you mean over?"

"We broke up."

"But..." He shook his head. "I don't understand. When I saw you just a few weeks ago, he was clearly taken with you and that speech he made to the press. I mean...he basically told the world he was in love with you and to back off and give you space. Why would he do that, lay it all out in front of the media, if he were going to end things? I just..."

"It wasn't him," Maddie corrected him, her heart aching in her chest at the memory of it all. "It was me. I ended things."

"You?" Charlie moved back in his seat, as though her admission had knocked him back just a bit. "But...why?"

"Charlie, we really don't have to talk about this right now," she shook her head at him. "We just watched an amazing film and we're on our way to celebrate your success. The last thing we need to be doing is rehashing my relationship with Harry."

"I don't know if it's the last thing we need to be doing. Maddie," his hand moved to his chest, his eyes soft on her.

"It is. I assure you." But something in the way she said it, the hitch in her voice, the lack of certainty in her eyes, something made him press forward.

"Did...did something happen?"

"No," she shook her head, the tears in her eyes welling up as she faced it all again here in this car with Charlie. "Nothing happened."

"Then I'm confused," he was genuine and touchingly sweet as he spoke to her. Maddie could see that he was trying to be a friend to her, that even on this night that was so totally his night to shine, he was being her friend. The sentiment of it all made her want to be honest with him. But the next words out of his mouth made her want to cry. "You see..." He leaned closer. "When I saw you together at your place and even after that in the press...you seemed so happy, so at ease. I could have sworn he was the bright and wonderful your husband told you to go for."

With no more will to hold them back, the tears in Maddie's eyes brimmed over. "The bright and wonderful..." She could barely whisper the words, her resolve was so shaken.

"Yeah," Charlie reached into his pocket, pulling out his handkerchief and offering it to her. "You really looked like you were...how did he put it? Reaching with both hands? I don't remember exactly. But you looked so happy Maddie."

"I did..." She sniffed, wiping at her eyes, trying not to mess up her makeup, knowing it was only a matter of time before they arrived where they were headed. "I was."

"Then what happened?"

She wasn't sure she could explain it to him, wasn't really sure she could explain it to herself any
more. "I was afraid." Her blunt honesty surprised her. There was something about Charlie, something about this moment that brought it out in her.

"Afraid?" His eyebrows lifted. "I didn't think you were afraid of anything."

"But I am," she shook her head slowly, sniffing as she turned wide, wet eyes up to him.

"Of what?"

"Of the end," she answered in a weak, quiet voice. "Of losing him. Of falling in love with him and being left...alone." It broke her heart to say it, just as it broke his to hear it. But then, even as the mood in the back of the car was saturated with sadness and the haze of loss, Charlie reached for her hand. With bright, shining blue eyes and a hesitant smile, his next words hit her hard.

"Forgive me but...it seems to me that you're already facing all of those fears. Right now."

"I'm sorry?" Her eyes narrowed and her heart began to beat faster in her chest.

"You're afraid of things ending, yet you ended them," he pointed out, holding onto her hand even though she tried to pull it back. "You're afraid of losing him, yet you lost him." Maddie's eyes were wide and a bit shaky as she processed his words, as it all settled over her. "You're afraid of falling in love with him and being left alone?" He let out a small laugh as though he knew something she didn't, something obvious that she hadn't quite realized. "And yet here you are...alone."

"But..." Maddie shook her head, her mind reeling.

"I saw you with him, I see you now. Are you really trying to tell me that you're not already in love with him?"

"I..." Maddie opened her mouth, ready to disagree, ready to refute his assumptions, ready to explain to him that she had left Harry in Bendal in order to avoid any and all of this. But something in her heart stopped her and the words fell flat. Her pulse was quick and the pit of her stomach was twisted in knots and she couldn't get air into her lungs fast enough. Her hand rose to her throat and her fingers landed on her necklace.

Her necklace from Harry.

"My God..." She breathed the words as she looked to Charlie, as she struggled for something to anchor her, to bring her back from this crazy spiral as she faced a truth she had been working so hard to avoid.

"You know," Charlie patted her hand comfortingly, seeing her struggle, wanting to offer her the stability she was seeking, the clarity she needed. "It seems to me that everything comes to an end eventually. In all relationships there is loss and hurt—at some point or another." In a way that was completely full of love and friendship, he gave her the nudge she didn't know she needed. "If you had known that your husband was going to die so early, would you still have married him?"

"Yes." Her answer was absolute.

"You wouldn't have left early? In order to avoid the pain and the loss?"

"Never." She shook her head. "Never in a million years would I have missed out on that."
"Okay," he smiled, offering her a slight shrug, a pointed nod. "Then why exactly is it you're willing to miss out on this? With Harry?"

"I..." Maddie blinked and suddenly all of the chaos inside of her head went silent and all she could hear was her heart. Her eyes pressed closed and she took a long, slow breath. Stop. The wiser side of her was finally prevailing. Stop what you're doing. Stop running like a fool. When she opened her eyes, she looked down at the necklace resting under her fingers. Big and bright and ornate. Just like the life she should be leading. Then she looked up at Charlie who was watching her with a wide, expectant smile. And for the first time in a long time, she felt warm again.

"Or are you?" He encouraged her once more to be honest with him, with herself.

And when she was, it was the most freeing thing in the world. With a strong, clear, certain voice, she shook her head. "No. No, I'm not."

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"Fuck," Harry sighed under his breath as his car neared the gates of Kensington.

His morning had been long and boring and rough. After a night of Scotch and longing, he had passed out in his office chair only to be woken bright and early by the alarm on his phone. With a hangover that rivaled nearly every previous one, he had risen. Showered and dressed, he ate a few bites of toast, downed a cup of coffee and some ibuprofen and headed to work, to his morning full of meetings.

As the last of his appointments drew to a close, he decided it was time to face the fact that he was simply too old for an all night Scotch bender and he vowed that he'd get his shit together.

Tomorrow.

For today he was done, thankfully. With a few last notes for Thomas and a quick pick up of folders from his assistant, Harry was out the door and heading home. He had every intention of eating something completely unhealthy and then taking a nap—a nap he hoped would last until the next morning. Maybe then he'd be able to face the realities he had been avoiding.

The gates opened and his car pulled through and with a sigh of relief, his head fell back against the headrest and his eyes closed. "Thank God," he groaned to Jim and the driver, grateful to be home. He rolled up his shirt sleeves and loosened a top button. Rubbing at his temples, he longed to crawl into his bed. The car pulled to a stop but his normal peppy step was lagging as he stayed put there in the backseat.

"Sir?" Jim's voice called to him after a moment.

"Was thinking I might just nap here," Harry grumbled, only half joking. "Can you just put it in park and leave a window open?"

"No...Sir." Jim's voice was stern, drawing Harry from his fantasy of slumber.

"What is it?" Harry's eyes pulled open, his lips curving into a frown as he looked over the seat at Jim.
Without a word, Jim nodded towards the window, towards the house, gesturing for Harry to take a look for himself.

With a glare of frustration and exhaustion, Harry sat up in his seat. "What the hell is..." He turned to look where Jim had nodded.

And all of the air rushed from his lungs.

Maddie. Looking just as she had in the photos he had seen the night before–gorgeous gown, elegant updo, and that necklace–she was sitting on his front steps with her hands in her lap and her eyes watching the car. And he was certain he was seeing things.

Rubbing his eyes, his head shook in confusion. "Am I losing my mind or is she really..."

"She really is," Jim cut in, a small smile tugging at his lips, a flash of hope in his eyes.

"But..." Harry was stunned, his mind drawing to a halt. "What is she doing here?"

Jim masked his chuckle with a cough. "I don't know Sir, but I would imagine if you, you know, get out of the car, she just might tell you."

"Right." Harry nodded, taking a deep breath. "Right." Leaving his things there in the backseat, his bag, his suit coat, he opened the door and stepped out into the bright London afternoon.

With every step Harry took up that walk towards her, Maddie could feel her heart beating faster, could feel the nervousness in her stomach swelling, and she could feel her conviction growing more and more solid. As he drew near, she rose to her feet, brushing her hands over the skirt of her gown, an ill attempt at smoothing out the wrinkles from the abrupt, last minute flight over the Atlantic.

"Maddie?" Harry's voice was rough as he looked down at her, still not quite sure he wasn't seeing things.

"Hi," she was so nervous that there was a shake to her voice.

"Are you really..."

"I'm sorry to just show up like this..."

"Don't apologize," Harry shook his head, watching her closely, craving a clue, but Maddie kept talking.

"...on your doorstep in the middle of the day without so much of a phone call. I just jumped on the plane and didn't even think..."

"It's fine," he waved his hand. "I just..." He looked her over, everything inside of him wanting her. "You jumped on a plane?" He took in her dress, her shoes, her jewelry. "Maddie you wore this to the premiere last night."

"I know, I..." She stalled, her heart catching on his admission. "You saw?"

"I..." He stumbled, his cheeks flushing in slight embarrassment. "Yes. I saw." His arms crossed
over his chest. "You looked beautiful. You look beautiful. And happy. You looked happy." He sucked in a breath and forced his eyes to hers, even though his heart ached even more when he did. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have been searching but I couldn't help myself Maddie." He looked down at his shoes, knowing that he should keep his mouth shut, knowing that he had promised himself to pull it together but having her there in front of him, the hope it stirred up couldn't be quelled. "I had to see you. Even if it was across the ocean, even if it was with another man. I had to see you." The exhaustion he felt from the night before made it so much easier for his emotions to surface and his voice waivered when he spoke. "I just miss you so much. I do. I..." When his eyes lifted cautiously back up to hers, he saw tears there and then he saw her smile. Wide and warm and confusing his chaotic mind, his fragile heart. "Why are you..."

"I miss you too," Maddie's voice was heavy and just as full of emotion as his.

"Is that why you're here?" He searched her eyes, nervous and excited and so afraid of the way she could break him. "Did you fly here from the premiere to tell me that you miss me?"

"No," she shook her head, her fingers lifting to wipe at the tears slipping from her eyes as hope slipped from his heart.

"Then why are you..." Harry shook his head.

"Because," she shrugged her shoulders and lifted a smile to him that made his heart jump in his chest, made him hold his breath. "I love you."

Her words hit him like a truck and he took a full step back as he tried to absorb them, as he tried to keep his heart from bursting out of his chest. Misreading his move, Maddie reached out to him, a frantic look taking over her eyes.

"I'm sorry Harry I...I know it's probably too late, that the door has probably closed for me..."

"No, there's no door..." Harry shook his head, but Maddie could barely hear him as she hurried forward with her explanation.

"But the moment I figured out what the hell I've actually been feeling, I went straight to the airport. I flew here from the premiere to tell you that I love you and that I spent the entire trip hoping that I'm not too late to say that, too late to take back the decision I made in Bandal, too late to let you know that I was wrong. I don't want to be without you, even if it means I might...even if it means I might lose you someday." She shook her head, not wanting to allow a moment of sadness into this. "I love you Harry. I do. Please, please tell me I'm not too late?"

And then, with a sigh full of relief and a feeling not unlike flying, Harry took a step forward, echoed her smile, and he kissed her.

It was the single easiest thing he had ever done; welcoming her back into his arms, back into his heart.
The second Harry kissed her, Maddie knew in her bones that she had made the right decision, that jumping on that plane in the middle of the night was exactly what she was supposed to be doing. Sinking into his arms, into him, she felt more at peace, more content than she had all week. She sighed as her mouth opened under his, moaned softly as his arms wrapped around her. And when his lips left hers, they left a smile and the slightest of pouts that it was over.

"So...no then?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted, her eyes dancing as she smiled up at him.

"No?" He shook his head, confused at her question.

"I'm not too late?"

"No." Harry shook his head more firmly, his arms tightening around her. "You're not too late, you're..." He took in a shaky breath, letting it out in a long, slow blow. "There's no 'too late' for you Maddie."

"Thank God," she whispered, her emotions gathering and growing as relief washed over her.

"Did you...did you mean it?" He knew the answer before he asked but the part of him that was still a little insecure, the part of him that still believed he didn't really deserve this had to make sure.

"Yes," her voice was emphatic, her eyes welling up. "God. Yes. Harry..." She moved in closer then, her arms wrapping around his waist, her body leaning into his. "I would never play around with..."

"I know," he cut her off, his finger lifting to her face, his smile sweet and genuine. "I know that. I just had to hear you say it."

"I love you," she smiled up at him, rising on her toes so she could kiss him again. "I do. I love you and I just...I don't want to try to fight it any more. This week was just, it was a disaster and I should have known better than to run but I...I ran." She kissed him again, her eyes searching his. "Forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," he shook his head. "And you're here now."

"I am here now," she nodded, her nose brushing against his as she did. "And I'm not going anywhere."

"You have no idea how it feels to hear that," he caught her gaze for a moment, wanting her to see, wanting her to know. "I love you too Maddie."

"I know you do," her voice caught in her throat, her fingers sliding down his chest, over his heart. "I know you do."

"Good," he smiled, leaning in closer. "Tell me, would you like to come inside?"

"I would," she nodded, her hands moving to his arms, curling around his biceps. "Are you on a
lunch break? Do you have to go back?"

"No, no," he shook his head, knowing he should move to open the door but not wanting to let her go. "I'm actually finished at the office for the day. I had a few meetings and then I brought some work home. I..." His lips twitched higher, his hands pressing her closer to him. "I didn't sleep well last night."

"No," Maddie's smile tugged up. "I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be," he sighed as he hugged her then, his arms wrapping completely around her, his cheek pressing against hers. "You're here now," he pressed a kiss to her temple. "I imagine I'll sleep brilliantly tonight."

"I certainly hope so," Maddie laughed, her head tipping back. "Come on Captain. Let's go inside, have some lunch? Maybe a nap?"

"Yes," Harry nodded with a chuckle as they moved towards the door. "And maybe you want to change out of your gown?"

"Now that you mention it," she sighed with laughter. "This is literally the only thing I brought with me."

"This?" Harry's eyebrows lifted, his face registering amusement. "You didn't pack a bag?"

"No," Maddie giggled, looking down at her gown, her heels. "This and my clutch. I don't know what the hell I was thinking..." With a sigh, she looked back up at him. "I suppose I wasn't thinking much."

"Come on," Harry nodded towards the house. "We'll find you something to wear, we'll figure it out. You're here now and everything else...we'll figure it out." He reached to open the door, standing aside as Maddie moved past him into the house.

"Yes." She nodded, completely smitten, undeniably taken, with him. "Yes we will."

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"It was a dream." They were piled into Harry's bed when Maddie finally brought it up. Both of them in sweats and t-shirts, they had brought food upstairs and there, among the fluffy blankets and comfortable pillows, Maddie swallowed a bite of her food and opened up the discussion. With his drink to his mouth, Harry's eyes lifted to hers, his eyebrows rising in question. "That night, in Bendal."

"You know you don't have to explain," Harry shook his head, setting his drink down. "I never thought you did."

Maddie felt tears rise to her eyes at the way he was looking at her, with such certainty, such assuredness. Nodding her head, she sniffed at the tears and took a deep breath. Even if he didn't
think she needed to explain, she wouldn't be able to move forward until she did. "That night in Bendal, after we...after we made love in the living room. I fell asleep in your arms..."

"I remember," he smiled at the memory, at the peacefulness that came with knowing he would get to do it again.

"I knew then that I was falling in love with you again," she shook her head at how crazy she had been, how blind and afraid. "I could feel it then, you know? That draw, that need, that inability to imagine being without you..."

"I know exactly what you mean," Harry couldn't help how mushy he felt when she spoke to him like that, when she looked at him like that.

Though her cheeks flushed pink and her body warmed, she continued. "I fell asleep so content, so peaceful..." She sucked in a breath and let it out. "And then I had the dream."

"The dream?" Harry's eyes narrowed in confusion.

"Yeah..." Maddie nodded her head, pulling her eyes from his down to her hands that were fidgeting in her lap. She hated the sadness she knew was about to rush into the room, into this warm space, but there really was no way to avoid it. This story had to be told. Lifting her eyes back to his, she went for it. "Do you remember the night Bishop died?"

"Yes." Harry's voice dipped low, his answer automatic "I think I'll remember it for the rest of my life."

"I know I will," Maddie agreed, sadness slipping into her voice. "I can still remember every detail of that night." Harry was silent as he watched her move from the bed, as she began to walk around the room, struggling as she pulled up memories he knew broke her heart. "We were on our honeymoon..." Tears rose to her eyes and she looked over to him, looking for some sort of sign that this was okay, this topic, this discussion. Swallowing back his own emotions, Harry held her eyes and nodded, offering as much of a smile as he could. Returning it, she took a shaky breath and continued. "He had a quick meeting in London he had to go to and I had stayed behind at the house in France. I wanted to go with him but he had insisted I stay..." She paused, leaning back against his dresser, looking down at her feet in Harry's too-big socks. "He was going to come back and we were going to continue on..." She smiled as she sniffed and took a deep breath before her eyes swung back up to meet Harry's. "I was asleep when my phone rang. I...I can still remember what I was wearing and how I was laying. I remember the blankets and I remember the ringtone. Fuck...I remember exactly what time it was." She shook her head, watching as Harry felt what she was saying. "Ian called and woke me up and for as long as I live I'll never forget the sound of his voice or the words that he said. It'll just be etched in my mind forever."

"I know," Harry nodded, trying to ignore the sick feeling in his stomach, the ache in his heart.

Maddie matched his nod, pushing away from the dresser, returning to her pacing. "There have been a few times over the years when I've had these dreams about that night." She sucked in a breath. "And each time I've had it, the details are so vivid, so on point that I feel like it's happening all over again, like I'm losing him all over again. I wake up terrified and devastated and I relive it all over again."

"Does it happen often?"
"No," she shook her head, biting at her bottom lip to keep from crying. "Thank God."

"But it happened that night?" Without thinking he moved closer to the edge of the bed, closer to her. "In Bendal? You had this dream?"

"Yes," she whispered, her eyes welling up. "And no."

"Sorry, I'm..."

"I had the dream," Maddie explained. "And everything was the same; the house in France, the time on the clock, the ringtone. Fuck, I was even wearing the same thing," her stomach was stirring as she battled her emotions, struggling with the memory, preparing to say the words. "But. When I answered the phone, instead of Ian's voice it was...it was your father." She blinked at the tears that came and her voice wavered when she spoke. "And it wasn't Bishop who had died in a plane crash. It was you."

When Maddie's head hung down, when she began to cry, Harry's heart cracked in his chest. He was up and off the bed in seconds, moving to her side, reaching for her. "Hey...hey..."

"I'm sorry," she waved her hand at him, trying to bring it all back in. "I don't want to fall apart, I don't want to cry..."

"But you can do both of those things here," he shook his head at her, bending so that he could meet her eyes.

"But I don't want to," she shook her head. "I want to be happy and in love and I want to...ha...I want to move forward." She sucked in a long, deep breath, her fingers smudging at the tears on her cheeks. "I just...I woke up from that dream and I looked down at you and all I could see, all I could hear, all I could think about was what it would feel like to lose you like I lost him and I just...I couldn't do it." Her eyes were wide and scattered as she looked to him. "My heart wasn't even in the equation, my feelings were totally shut down. I was acting on this crazy basal instinct and I just...the only thing I could think of to do was...run."

"It makes sense Maddie..."

"But it doesn't," she shook her head, her hand reaching out and landing softly on his chest. "Last night on our way to the after party, Charlie asked me...if I had known that I would lose Bishop if I would have never married him and God, Harry...my answer is no." She shook her head, her eyes brimming with fresh tears. "I would have still been with him, I would have still loved him and...and then something clicked." She snapped her fingers. "I would be stupid not to be with you. Because I was afraid of loss? I would be stupid not to love you. And I do Harry. I love you so much."

Harry sighed, struggling to stay rooted in his spot, to be an anchor as she drifted. "I love you too Maddie."

"And I'm so sorry," she wiped at her eyes, smiling up at him through her tears. "I'm so sorry we've spent this week apart, that I freaked out."

"You really don't have to apologize Maddie."

"But..."
"But nothing," he shook his head, standing tall as he continued. "I'll never forget that day in the bookstore Maddie." Her eyes went wide at the mention of that day. "I'll never forget what it felt like to worry and wait, what it felt like to not know...and you came back to me. In twenty minutes, I had you there in my arms and I was such a wreck that I..." His voice trailed off, they both knew all too well what had happened then. "I can't even imagine what would have happened to me if you hadn't come back." The heaviness to his words, to what they conjured up, made his shoulders sag at the weight. "I don't know how you do it," he looked up to her then. "I don't know how you've managed to come back from it all, to even risk it again..." He took a deep breath. "I understand why you left in Bendal Maddie. Hell, I would have understood if you had never come back."

"Harry..." She held onto him then, with her fingers wrapped around his arms and a smile on her face.

"But I'm really, really happy you did," reaching up to wipe at the tears under her eyes.

"So am I." She reached up to take one of his hands in hers, loving the way it felt to have his skin on hers, so much of her chaotic mind settling now that she was back in his arms. Sighing she took a step forward, putting wrapping herself up in him.

As if second nature, he hugged her to him, his lips pressing soft kisses to her head, to her cheeks. "I am so sorry that you have that dream."

"I know," she whispered, turning to look up at him, her chin resting against his chest. "Me too."

"And, for what it's worth, you should know that I meant what I said that night." His hands were soft on her back.

"What was that?" Maddie took a deep, cleansing breath, bringing it back.

"If you want me to stay out of the air..." He didn't want to make her sad by reminding her.

"Oh Harry," she rolled her eyes at herself. "That's crazy and you know it." She shook her head with a laugh as she thought about him even suggesting that to anyone officially.

"I could make it work!" He insisted, laughing along with her, happy she felt better about it but meaning every word of it.

"No you couldn't," she disagreed. "It's a ridiculous notion and it's not necessary," she shook her head, moving in closer, putting herself further in his arms. "I'm going to be okay, Harry. I almost always have a realistic perspective on it. I almost always know what the odds are..." She swallowed, her eyes warm and sweet as they looked up at him. "That doesn't mean I'm not going to worry, that I'm not going to hold my breath when you fly, that I'm not going to be mildly crazy until you call and tell me you're safe on the ground..."

"Then I swear that I will always do that," he cut in offering the first of many promises he would end up making to her that night. "Every time I fly, as soon as I'm on the ground."

"Yeah?" As she looked up at him, her smile faded into a yawn. "Sorry..." She pressed her face to his chest, muffling her yawn and her laughter.

"Yes," Harry chuckled. "Come on love, come to bed with me?" He nodded his head back towards his large, comfy, inviting bed. "Let's catch up on our sleep and when we wake up..."
"We can figure out the rest?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows.

Though he wasn't sure what the upcoming conversations held for them, though he had no idea the magnitude of topics Maddie was going to lay before him, he knew he was ready to face just about anything–as long as she was there. And she was. With her arms wrapped around him and her body snuggled into his, she was there. "Yes," he breathed. "When we wake up we can figure out the rest."

When Maddie woke later that afternoon, she felt more rested and content than she had all week. Her body was relaxed, her mind calm and peaceful and her body knew exactly where she was, even before her eyes opened to verify it.

Tucked into Harry's bed at Kensington Palace, Maddie sighed into a wide smile sank into this happiness she was finished denying herself. Stretching her arms up and out, she pulled her eyes open and reached for him.

Her lips turned down in only the briefest of frowns when she found his side of the bed empty. But they curled right back up when she shrugged and slipped out from under the blankets. Feeling more at home and at ease in his space than she thought she probably should, she decided to go find him. Pulling her hair up into a haphazard ponytail, she padded down the hallway.

"Harry?" She called out, peeking inside open doorways. "Captain?" Her hands ran along the banister as she took to the stairs. It was late in the afternoon, the sun shining bright and low through the windows. As she reached the first level, she could hear music and she moved towards it. She slowed to a stop outside his office, quiet as she peeked inside. Harry stood tall in the middle of the room, his back to her as he read over the paperwork in his hand, his head bobbing along to the music he was listening to.

Stifling a giggle, Maddie crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the doorframe, very conscious of the fact that she really could do this all evening–watch him. But as her eyes scanned down over his broad shoulders, his strong back, her skin flushed warm and she suddenly wanted something even more. Something that would make this reunion of theirs complete. With a smirk on her lips and amusement in her eyes, she cleared her throat.

Harry's head rose as he turned back towards the sound, his face lighting up as he took her in. His hands fell to his side, the papers in them all but forgotten. "Good Morning."

"Morning?" She arched an eyebrow as she stepped into the room. "Is it dinner time yet?"

"Nearly," Harry nodded, tossing his papers to the table next to him as he walked towards her. "Why? Are you hungry?" His hands reached out for her as she moved right into his space.

"Mmmm," she nodded, biting at her bottom lip, her hands running up his chest, her eyes glinting as she grinned up at him. "Though maybe not for food."

Harry's head tipped back in laughter as Maddie's cheeks flushed pink. "Oh is that so?" Despite his amusement, there was instant, instinctual response from his body. He had wanted her since he woke up rested and relaxed. "Did you come down here to take me back to bed?"
"I came down here to take you wherever you'd let me." Maddie was a little embarrassed with how forward she felt, for how much she wanted him–only a very little. "But if you're busy..."

"I'm not busy." He shook his head, his hands moving over her, drawing her in.

"If you need to finish reading..." Her hands moved back down his chest, slowing over his stomach.

"I don't," he assured her.

"I mean, just because I showed up at your doorstep in the middle of the day..." She sighed as her head tipped to the side, her fingers trailing along the waist of his track pants. "Doesn't mean you have to stop what you're doing and..."

For the second time that day, Harry took a step forward and kissed her–his lips silencing her words, her protests. Much like the first time, he felt like he was flying. Much like the first time, she felt like she was coming home.

But this time–much unlike the first time–was more sexy than sweet, more insistent than soft. Both held the love that passed between them but this one–this one held the lust, the want, the need.

When Maddie's lips parted under his, when Harry's tongue tipped in to meet hers, nearly everything else drifted away. The documents he was reading, the meetings he was preparing for, the premiere from the night before, all of the angst and chaos from the last week.

It was all gone.

All that remained was Maddie and Harry. His lips. Her hands. And this all-consuming drive they had for the other. Lifting her up into his arms, Harry drew her legs around his waist and moved, without thought, without haste for the dark, sturdy desk behind them.

It felt like forever since he had had her, felt like years and years since she had given in to him.

But there on that desk in his office with the music playing around them and the sun nearing the horizon, both of those things were going to happen.

And Harry would never again be able to sit at that desk without remembering the way his name fell from her lips that afternoon of their reunion.

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"Okay..." Maddie stepped out of Harry's bathroom wrapped in a towel, a cloud of steam following behind her. "We have a problem."

"A problem?" Harry's eyes narrowed as he turned to look at her. He had showered first and was finishing dressing as she jumped in behind him. "What kind of problem?"

"Well..." She moved closer to him. "I'm showered and clean and ready to get dressed yet all I have is..."

"Your gown," Harry's grin pulled higher on his face. "Well, your gown and my track pants."

"Yes," Maddie nodded, noticing the way his eyes were taking their time looking over her current
"While I refuse to call that a problem for me..." He chuckled and pulled his eyes back up to hers. "I can see how it just might be for you."

"It just might be."

"Well, what are our options?" He thought for a moment. "I can call Thomas, send him out to pick up something?"

"You want to send Thomas shopping for my underwear?"

"No," Harry shook his head with a laugh. "No I suppose I don't. You want me to go out?"

"Ha!" Maddie giggled as she smoothed lotion over her legs. "I'd love to see what you came back with."

"Hey..." Harry pressed his hand to his chest. "You wound me. I think I would do well."

"I'm sure you would Captain," she moved to him then, tipping up on her toes to kiss him. "Okay. Tell me this. How big of a deal would it be if we both went out?"

"Both of us?" He lifted his eyebrows, thinking for a moment before he shrugged. "I don't think it would be a big deal but..."

"What if I were wearing your clothes?" She cut him off before he could ask. "I think I can pull off these track pants and a t-shirt, at least long enough to buy something else to put on."

"Sure..." He looked at what she was pointing to. "What about shoes?"

"Remember the running shoes you bought as a joke?"

"I do," Harry chuckled. "Joke's on me?"

"It is," Maddie sighed, her face turning serious for a moment. "But if cameras caught us."

"Ah," Harry nodded, instantly knowing what she meant. "If?"

"They'd know these were your clothes," she nodded towards his pants, towards his shirt. "They'd make assumptions..."

"Correct assumptions," Harry offered, his arms crossing over his chest as he thought it over.

"Fair," Maddie agreed. "But still."

"Yeah," he nodded, his eyes lifting to hers. "You tell me Maddie."

"Tell you what?"

"You care if the world thinks you're sleeping with me again?"

"As if they don't already think that," she lifted an eyebrow.
"Agreed. But having a visual seals it up a bit, no?"

"No. It does," she sat down on the edge of his bed. "Would your father care?"

"I can't imagine why," Harry shook his head, knowing exactly where his father stood on stuff like this.

"And you?" She looked up to him, sweet and soft. "Anything going on for you that can't take this kind of scandalous hit?"

"Scandalous hit?" A loud burst of laughter pushed from his lips. "Please." Taking a deep breath, he moved to stand in front of her. "But we both know it's not the men who take the brunt of this kind of thing."

"True," Maddie nodded. Then, with a smile and a shrug, she made a decision. "Let's go for it. We can run out and I can pick up a few necessary items. I can go do a bigger trip tomorrow when you're at the office. Does that work?"

"It does for me," Harry nodded. "Can I take you to dinner afterwards?"

"You can," Maddie smiled up at him. "Just let me pull my hair up and throw on these clothes and try to look as put together as I can."

"Okay," Harry watched as she scooped the clothes up from the bed and headed towards the bathroom. "Hey Maddie?"

"Hmmm?" She turned back towards him.

"Just wondering..." He smiled as he looked her over. "If one of the items on our list is knickers...does that mean that when we go out you're...?"

"Not wearing any?" She finished his sentence for him. "Yes. That's exactly what that means."

"Oh good God..." Harry pressed his hand to his chest, his eyes hazing over as Maddie's laughter echoed from the bathroom.

The photos from their evening out in London hit the internet the next morning. While Harry was at the office in meetings and Maddie lunched with Ian, the photos of the two of them laughing and holding hands as they shopped through the city made their way into the hands of all.

The very same bloggers who had, less than twenty-four hours ago chided Maddie for slipping out with Charlie, hinting that it may be the end of the road for her and Harry, were shaking their heads at pictures that clearly indicated otherwise. Maddie was clearly wearing his clothes and Harry—holding her hand tightly to him, carrying her bags without a second thought—clearly couldn't care less who knew it.

"You look happy," Ian nodded his head towards the phone in Maddie's hand.

"Oh?" Maddie flushed slightly, stuffing her phone back into her pocket. He had excused himself
from the table to take a phone call from the office and she had taken a quick glimpse.

"In the photos," he smiled as he returned to his seat. "With Harry. The two of you look happy."

Maddie's eyes lifted to meet her father-in-law's and despite the mild sheepishness she felt, she smiled and nodded. "We are happy. Very happy."

"And you're still recovering well?" Ian's eyes softened as he looked her over. He had seen her since then but he had to be sure. "From the accident?"

"I am," she reached out to pat his hand. "I know I gave you quite a scare."

"You gave us all quite a scare," he asserted, shaking his head. "If I could wrap you in tissue paper and keep you tucked away safe forever..." He chuckled at himself, squeezing her fingers in his.

"I know the feeling," Maddie's smile twitched just a tiny bit, the two of them sharing a moment of understanding, of a deep, deep love and affection.

"You know..." Ian cleared his throat, releasing her hand so that he could reach for his drink. "I saw the speech Henry gave, at the press conference in New York."

"Ah yes," Maddie swallowed as she remembered. It seemed like so long ago; the accident, the press conference. "That was quite the spectacle, no?"

"Spectacle?" Ian rose his eyebrows, looking at her over the rim of his cup. Smiling, he finished his drink and sat it back down. "I was going to say 'declaration of love', but..."

Maddie sighed into a smile. "I suppose it was that too."

"I suppose so," Ian waited a moment and then asked the question that had to have been hanging over the heads of Maddie and Harry—even if it hadn't occurred to them yet. "So tell me, my darling. What's next for the two of you?"

Maddie's mouth opened, as though to answer, but she stopped short of speaking words. Looking across the table at Ian Bishop, she felt her heart warm and her eyes fill with tears and the greatest sense of joy ran through her body. Truth was, she didn't know what was next. But she absolutely knew what her instinctual, gut level reaction was to what she wanted to be next for the two of them.

"Wow..." She breathed at just how heavy it was when it hit her, how heavy and certain.

"Are you okay?" Ian smiled as he asked, noticing the flush in her cheeks, the grin that could only mean one thing.

"I am," she nodded, reaching for her drink. "I don't know what's next for us," she shook her head and took a quick sip. "But. I do love him." Her eyes watched his for some sort of reaction, but all she saw was love and support, and it made her heart warm. "And he...he loves me."

"Of course he does," Ian chuckled. "Of course he does." Sitting taller in his chair, he leaned in closer, his voice lowering just a bit. "You should know that...whatever happens, I'm here. I will love you and support you no matter."

"Thank you for that Ian..."
"And," he cut in, lifting a finger to her, his eyes narrowing as his lips curled higher. "You should also know...that I will always be slightly biased towards any and all options that might bring you back to this side of the pond."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back in laughter. "Of course!"

"Consider yourself warned, my dear," he patted her hand then, settling back into his chair, watching the blissful happiness on Maddie's face.

When Maddie left Ian and Michael that afternoon, her mind had drifted. Somewhere in the past, somewhere in the future, she was wandering through her ghosts, looking at what was next for her. When Ian had asked her the question, there had been a quick, automatic response on her lips—one that had surprised her. One that had brought an instant feeling of resolve and peace to her soul. But before she went with that answer, she had a few things lingering in her mind, a few moments she needed to visit.

Some were for Harry and some...some were for her once broken, once fragile heart.

So, after she left Ian and Michael, she didn't return to Kensington straight away. Instead, she slipped into a taxi and she gave the driver an address she knew from memory, an address that had once been home for her.

Stepping into the place that had been Bishop's, she expected there to be emotion, she even expected tears. And there were both—plenty of both. But, as she moved further inside, she was awash with the most amazing sense of calm.

She shouldn't have been surprised. Bishop had always had that effect on her; since the day her engagement to Harry had ended and she had come running here. He had opened his home, his arms, his heart to her—in a way really only Bishop could. This had become a place of refuge and solace.

And after, when they became a couple, it had become her home. A place of joy and laughter and only the fondest of memories. She wondered what it might have been like if they had stayed in London instead of moving to New York, if he hadn't jumped up so quickly and volunteered to move. She knew that she would have moved here, they would have made a home here. She smiled as she thought of what this place had been like with him in, sighed as she thought of their home in New York.

Now, as she stood in this empty home, as she walked through the rooms she knew so well, she not only saw the past—she saw a future. A future where she lived in this space, where she created new memories. She could see herself painting the walls and arranging furniture. She could see herself taking over Bishop's office—leaving the dark, masculine colors as an homage to him. She could see herself planting a small garden in the back and cooking in the spacious kitchen.

She could see herself calling this home again.

As the certainty of it all settled over her, she had a piece of her answer to what was next firmly in place. But she couldn't answer the next piece alone—she needed Harry for that.
After making a few quick mental notes about the place, she locked the door and gave this home a silent promise to return.

When Harry's car pulled to a stop outside his Kensington apartment, he already had a wide, giddy smile on his face because he knew that Maddie was in there. She had texted him on his way home, told him she was making dinner, told him she missed him, told him she loved him.

Told him she loved him.

Sighing, he had to fight the urge to skip up the walk towards his front door. But for the fact that he knew Jim would never let him live it down, he just might have. Instead he kept his cool and made his way home.

The second he stepped inside, he was surrounded by her. The music was playing, he could smell food cooking. Nearly tripping over her re-discarded running shoes, Harry chuckled and kicked them aside. When he looked up, he saw her. With a wide, easy smile on her face, she was sitting patiently on the stairs watching as he fumbled his way into his house.

"Welcome home," her grin deepened as he took a few steps towards her. Her eyes danced as he bent to kiss her.

"Would it be too much to tell you it feels more like home with you here?"

"Mmm..." She smiled against his lips. "Maybe. But I like to hear it all the same."

"Good," he kissed her once more before turning to set his items aside; his suit coat, his tie. Rolling up his sleeves, he turned back to her. "How was lunch with Ian and Michael?"

"Lovely," she answered, warming as she thought of them. "How did all of the meetings go?"

"Really well," he nodded, moving to take a seat next to her on the stairs. "We met on Invictus all morning and then in the afternoon..." His train of thought was sidetracked by a hardcover book sitting next to Maddie on the stairs. "What's this?" He pulled it up from the step, squinting as he read the title.

"It's a book," Maddie took a deep breath, her eyes focusing on the book in his hands as he sat down next to her. "About urban gardening."

"I see that." Curious, Harry flipped through the pages. "Are you going to try to garden at your place in New York?" He glanced over to her. "I'm not sure how much room you have on those balconies but..."

"No, no," Maddie shook her head, her hand resting gently on his arm. "Not in New York."

"No?" He lifted his eyebrows, smiling at the feel of her touch. "I guess I'm confused..." He turned the book over in his hands, reading the title, looking over the cover. "I don't recognize this book. Did you find it here or..."

"I bought it," Maddie took in a breath as she reached for the book. Meeting his eyes as she pulled it into her lap, she offered a supportive smile and let him in. "I went to the bookstore this afternoon."
"The bookstore?" He shook his head, not following her for a split second. "Ah," Maddie could see the understanding register. His jaw tightened, his shoulders squared. "The bookstore."

"Yes," she nodded. Setting the book aside, her fingers returned to his arm; warm and soothing. "After lunch with Ian and Michael, I had a few...issues I wanted to resolve."

"You went back to the bookstore..." He swallowed the lump that rose in his throat, tried to manage the instinctual nervousness that seemed to take over when he thought of her there, when he remembered that moment from their past. "Can I ask..."

"Why?" Maddie offered and Harry nodded. Her fingers slipped down to his hand, pulling his into both of hers. "At lunch Ian asked me what was next...for you and I."

"Oh?" Harry's eyebrows lifted, a sudden rush of adrenaline filling his veins. This was it–a moment he had been anxious and excited about. "And what was your answer?"

"Ha..." Maddie chuckled at the look on his face, at the wide, hopeful glint to his eyes. "My answer..." She let out a long breath. "My answer to Ian was that I really don't know." Her eyes lifted to his. "My answer to you..." She bit her lower lip then, her smile pulling higher as she looked up to him and Harry could feel his heart pounding in his chest.

"Listen..." Harry's voice was low when he spoke. "You should know that today I..."

"Hold on," Maddie tugged on his hand, cutting him off. "I'm sorry. I just...would it be okay if I went first?"

Sucking in a breath to steady his pulse, Harry nodded. "Of course. Go ahead."

"Thank you," she nodded, patting his hand in hers. Looking out at the foyer, she took a deep breath and thought for a moment, finding that even though she knew that she wanted to be the one to start, she was entirely sure where to start. She thought about telling him about her stop at the bookstore, she thought about telling him about her trip to Bishop's old place, but in the end she went with the conclusion she had drawn at the end of this long, introspective day. Turning her eyes back to him, she shrugged and let out a light, soft laugh. "I'm ready to come back."

"What?" Harry's wide eyes blinked, stunned. "I...what?" He was shocked and, based on the smile he seemed to have no control over, Maddie guessed he was pleased.

"To London." Her hand tightened its hold on his as she clarified. "I'm ready to come back to London. I don't want to sell my place in New York but I'm ready to have one here."

"You don't have to do that." Harry shook his head, his senses overloading as her words and their meaning resonated in his heart.

"I know I don't." She smiled up at him, her body turning towards his, excitement in her eyes. "I don't have to do anything Harry but God..." She sucked in a deep breath and laughed. "I want to be with you, with you. I want to see you on those random weekday evenings and sleep in with you on the weekends and surprise you at lunch. I need to be closer to you and you can't move to New York."

Harry was beside himself he was so happy. As both of his hands reached out to her, he shrugged
his shoulders. "Maybe I can."

"Ha." Her head tipped back, knowing he must be high from the news to suggest such a thing.

"No, I mean it. Maybe I can."

"Did you suddenly forget who your father is or..."

"No, I haven't forgotten."

"Everything about you is here in London, your entire life...." She glanced around the room, the space around them.

"You're wrong. Maddie, you're wrong." He moved in closer to her, pulling her hands over to him. "Everything about me? My entire life? That's only true at this exact moment and it's only true because you're here in my home. If you weren't..."

"Harry..."

"Please," he lifted his eyebrows to her before bending to kiss the tops of her hands. "Please listen for just a moment?" Clearing her throat, Maddie nodded. "This afternoon I had a meeting with my father."

"You had a meeting with your father?" Maddie was shocked.

"Yes," he nodded, hurrying ahead. "I met with him this afternoon and talked about the possibility of me in New York."

"What?!" Maddie pulled back, floored. "But...why? And...what?!" She shook her head. "Surely he wouldn't even consider such a thing."

"He would," Harry was soft and gentle as he let her in on his afternoon. "Granted, he's not a complete fan of the idea. But he does see my point."

"Which is?"

"Which is..." Harry took a deep breath. "I love you Maddie and I want to be with you. For those random weekday nights and those surprise lunches...I want those things too. And the truth of the matter is that you've given up your life for me once. And look what I did with it. I don't know how I begin to ask you to do that again."

"But you didn't ask..." She shook her head but Harry continued on.

"So I went to him and we talked about it."

"I don't know what to say." She was so shocked, so surprised. Never in her wildest imagination, in all the time she had spent that day imagining their future together, did she think that it could possibly involve Harry moving to New York.

"Nothing," he shrugged his shoulders. "And nothing has been settled. We talked about Princess Madeleine of Sweden. She lives in New York with her husband and their children. Her sister is in line to be the Queen."
"Sure," Maddie thought it over for a second. "But there are some pretty distinct differences, no?"

"There are," Harry nodded. "My father suggested I talk to William about it..."

"Harry..."

"So I'm going to get on his calendar and..."

"Harry."

"And I'm just going to see. I'm going to see Maddie."

"But."

"But what?" He lifted his eyebrows with an exasperated laugh. "But what Maddie?"

"But..." She sighed, scooting closer to him. "But what if I want to move to London?"

"You..." He trailed off, not sure how to counter that.

"What if I stopped by Bishop's old place this afternoon?"

"You did?" His eyes widened.

"I did," her smile pulled higher. "And what if while I was there, I made mental notes about wall paint and decorations..."

"Maddie..." Harry's voice was low and husky.

"What if I want to live there?" Though she felt full of emotions, it wasn't overwhelming and it wasn't heavy in sadness. "What if I want to move back? And live in Bishop's old place? What if I want to be here, to be with you?"

"I just..." Harry shook his head, swallowing at the lump in his throat. "I don't know Maddie."

"You don't know if you want me here?" She knew the answer to that without guessing, but she loved the smile it brought to his face.

"Of course I want you here. But..."

"But?" She cut him off. "I want to be here Harry. I want to come back to London. I want to move into Bishop's place. I want to...I want to plant a garden in the backyard..." She reached for the book and held it up, her eyes wide and her laughter easy. "I want to be here. I appreciate you going to your father and I love you for thinking of it. But Harry, Harry..." Her hands moved to his face. "I'm telling you that you don't have to. We can have random weekday nights and sleeping in on the weekends and...we can have them all here. If you're okay with it..."

"Okay with it?" The words barely came out, he was so touched. "I am so far past okay with it. But..."

"No buts," she shook her head, her hand moving over his mouth. "No buts. Don't you think we've
had enough reasons 'why not'? Maybe we just stick with the reasons why for a while? Okay?" She felt his mouth open under her hand and she shook her head. "Okay?!

Nodding his head, he reached up and pulled her hand from his mouth. "Okay." He bent to kiss it. "Okay. I'll do...whatever you want Maddie." His eyes shifted up to meet hers. "Whatever you want."

"Thank you," she leaned in to kiss him; soft and easy and so familiar it made her heart swell. "Thank you." Pressing her forehead to his, she bit her bottom lip for just a moment. "Now. When you say 'whatever I want'..."

"Ha!" Harry's laughter echoed around them. "Okay, okay. Well I meant every word. So tell me, what do you want?" He pulled back just a bit, still holding onto her. "You want me to paint a few rooms? Help you with the garden?"

"Yes," Maddie grinned. "I want all of those things. But first..." She pulled in a shaky breath. "First I want you to come to Colorado with me." She bit her bottom lip, watching as Harry's eyes went wide.

"Colorado?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I need you to come to Colorado with me, to see my mother, to face my family. She...she doesn't hate you Harry. She doesn't even feel as strongly about you as Kyle does. But she is going to want to lay eyes on you before I move back to London to be with you."

Harry only thought about it for a split second, if even that, before he nodded his head in agreement. "Okay. Okay. If you want me to go see your family, then we go see your family."

"That easy?"

"That easy?" He snickered. "Yes, that easy, that uncomplicated. I know that it won't be the...easiest trip but I really don't need it to be. I can face whatever they want to toss this way. And more." He shrugged his shoulders. "I will come with you to Colorado and see your mother. And Kyle—if you want me to."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "I don't know that that's necessary but I'll keep you posted."

"Fair enough," Harry shrugged. "I'm in. You just tell me when and I'm there."

"Okay," Maddie's smile deepened. "Okay."

"Okay," Harry's smile matched hers. "Are you really moving to London?"

Maddie felt her eyes well up as she nodded. "I really, really am."

"I can't believe it..." He shook his head. "That I'm this lucky, that this horrible week has ended so well. I can't believe you're going to move here."

"Well believe it, Captain," she squeezed his hands. "Because sooner or later, you're going to get tired of me in that bathtub of yours."

"Never," he laughed. "I'll never get tired of you in that bathtub. Tell me, when do you think you'll
"I don't know," she shook her head. "I have a few things to do with the place here in London, a few things to work out with Ian..."

"Do you think he'll be okay with the move?"

"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back. "I think he'd pack the boxes himself."

"Lovely," Harry grinned.

"I have a few things to figure out," she shrugged, her smile slipping sweet. "But we'll figure them out."

"Yes," Harry nodded, leaning to kiss her. "We'll figure them out. And, in the mean time..." He patted her hands and rose to his feet. "Now...should we celebrate? With some food and champagne perhaps?"

"Yes, yes absolutely," Maddie nodded, taking his outstretched hand to help her as she stood. Their hands stayed locked together as they walked through the living room and into the kitchen. He let go of her only to collect a bottle of something chilled and bubbly.

"Here we go..." He sat it down on the counter and searched for glasses.

And Maddie, watching him as he moved, brimming with excitement at this new part of their lives, felt an overwhelming urge, a desire quite unlike any she had felt in a long time. "Hey Harry?" She heard her voice before she realized she was speaking, unable to contain what it was that was running through her mind.

"Hmm?" Harry glanced up at her as he sat down the glasses and began to peel the foil from the bottle.

"Can I ask another question?"

"You can," he chuckled as he nodded, his focus on the cork as he slowly maneuvered it off.

"Well..." She stood across the island from him, her hands pressed into the stone counter as she gave in to instinct and let her heart continue to lead the way. "We're talking about all of these...big things. Me moving to London, you going to see my mother..."

"Sure," he answered, the corners of his lips curling up as she mentioned it.

"And I just...I have to ask," she sucked in a breath and focused all of her attentions on him. "With all of these big things happening for us, I can't help but wonder..." Her voice cracked slightly as she spoke the words. "Do you think...I don't know, do you think you could ever see yourself getting married again?"

As the cork broke free from the bottle of champagne with a pop and a fizz, Harry's eyes lifted to look at Maddie; wide and completely stunned.
"You're nervous," Maddie stood next to Harry in the gravel drive that ran next to her mother's home. Schedules and delays had brought them to Colorado later than they had planned and the day was slipping away behind the mountains in the far distance. The cars had rolled to a stop and the team of protection officers had begun unloading their own bags as Harry had reached for his and Maddie's.

But when he turned to look up at the big house, when he remembered the last time he had been there—when he remembered the first time he had been there—the emotions that came with those memories had struck him harder than he would have guessed. "Yes," he exhaled, surprising them both with his admission. Swallowing at the lump in his throat, his eyes pulled away from the house and turned to look at her. Though his heart eased when he saw her smiling up at him, his anxiety didn't necessarily follow. "Yes. I'm nervous."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded her head, not wanting to dismiss his feelings, particularly about this. But she moved in closer to his side, she tucked her arm into his and put her hand firmly into his. "I suppose I could tell you all sorts of little white lies about how everything is forgotten and forgiven and all will go wonderfully well..."

"Ha!" Harry laughed at that.

"Or..." She took a deep breath and shrugged her shoulders. "I can tell you that when I told her we were coming, she didn't sound mad. She wasn't bitter. She didn't make any jokes or complain. She just...she told me she was excited to see me and asked when she should expect a phone call from Jim."

"Well..." Harry let out a breath he had been holding and swallowed. "I suppose that's something."

"Yes," Maddie nodded with a smile. "That's something." Turning to press a kiss to his shoulder, she squeezed his hand in hers. "The only way to get this over with is to..."

"Get it over with?" Harry smirked, lifting an eyebrow. "Yeah okay. Okay. Let's go." Tightening his hold on her hand, Harry took a step forward but Maddie stayed still, tugging on his hand to stop him. "What is it?"

With a wide smile and a worry-less walk, she moved towards him. Pressing a kiss to his lips, her smile stretched higher. "I love you Harry Wales." With one more kiss, she moved around him, pulling him with her. "Come on. Let's go see my mother."

When they stepped into the house, Hannah was waiting for them. Casual in the kitchen with a cup of coffee and a home decor magazine opened up in front of her, she was on her feet the second she heard the door open. They were late and she had been waiting eagerly for their arrival. Harry released Maddie's hand and hung back with Jim as she moved to hug her mother. Watching the two women embrace, Harry chewed mindlessly at his bottom lip and waited, doing his best to control the natural anxiety that came with this moment.

When they stepped from the hug, both Forrester women turned to face him; Maddie with wide bright eyes and Hannah with a steady smile. Harry sucked in a breath like it might be his last and
he took a step forward.

"Mrs. Forrester..."

"Are we really going to do that again?" She arched one eyebrow, her lips teasing at a smirk.

"No," he exhaled, shaking his head as a bit of the tension slipped from his shoulders. "I'm sorry. Hannah, of course. I'm just a little...ha." Maddie wasn't sure she had ever seen him so awkward as his cheeks flushed red, his hand rubbing at the back of his neck as he struggled to find the right words.

As much as Hannah enjoyed seeing him squirm just a little, a better part of her felt bad for making him squirm. So she stepped forward and threw him a life preserver. "It's good to see you again Harry." Her hands rested on his shoulders as she pressed a light kiss to his cheek.

Warmth flushed through his body as he took a deep breath. "Thank you," the sincerity in the words reached his eyes, his smile. "Truly. Thank you for having me back. It's really, really nice to be here."

"Of course," Hannah nodded, her smile passing between Harry and Maddie before she looked to the men gathered just behind Harry. "Welcome back gentlemen," her smile stretched higher as Jim stepped forward. "I cleared the rooms upstairs for you, please make yourself at home and feel free to do your thing."

"Thank you Mrs. Forrester," Jim returned her smile before turning to nod and give a few directions to the team. As they filed out and headed towards the stairs, Hannah turned to Maddie and Harry.

"Dinner is in the oven. It's just been keeping warm for a bit," she smiled at her daughter. "The two of you should drop your bags and come on down. I'll pour some drinks and check on the food." As she turned back towards the kitchen, she called out to them. "I put you both in Maddie's old room."

Harry waited till Hannah disappeared into the kitchen before he turned wide eyes to Maddie. "She what?" He whispered.

"You should see your face right now," Maddie snickered, reaching for her bag. "Come on...Roomie."

"Ha...you think that's funny?" Harry kept hold of both of their bags and followed along. "The last time we were here, we were sleeping in separate bedrooms."

"I remember," Maddie chuckled as they moved up the stairs.

"Did something change?" Harry was confused, but stepped into her bedroom behind her. "I mean, did she have a change or heart? Or is she messing with me?" He glanced back towards the door. "I think she's messing with me."

"Why would she be messing with you?" Maddie watched in amusement.

"Because...this is how she gets me. She's too sweet to yell and she's not angry enough to punch me like Kyle..." He shook his head and looked to Maddie, his voice lowering. "So she's putting me here in your room."
"You're telling me that you think that the way my mother has decided to...mess with you...because of what happened between the two of us is to...let you sleep in bed with me?"

"Yes!"

"Well, call me flattered," Maddie shook her head at him.

"I didn't mean it like that," his eyes softened as he looked to her. "I just meant...I'll be laying in here the whole time...thinking about it."

"Well, maybe not the whole time," Maddie tossed a flirtatious wink his way.

"You think this is funny."

"I do. I do think it's funny," sighing, she moved over to him, her arms moving up over his shoulders, curving around his neck. "Maybe she's past the point of caring if I'm sharing a bed with a boy? Maybe she thinks I'm old enough?"

"Maybe," Harry took a deep breath and let it out, turning his attention to the beautiful woman smiling up at him. His hands moved up her back, rubbing soft and slow. "It went okay, right?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded, tipping up on her toes to kiss his jaw. "It went really well. I told you...she's not out to get you Harry."

"Yeah," he smiled, bringing her closer. "Maybe you're right."

"Maybe I am," she kissed his lips. "Now come on. Let's go have a drink and some dinner with my mother." Stepping from his arms, Maddie reached for Harry's hand, pulling him with her from the room.

The evening continued on just as it had begun; polite and cordial. Easy. Hannah was nothing but pleasant as she asked about their lives; London, his family, his work. She listened to his stories and laughed at his jokes and when it was time for them all to turn in, she hugged them both and slipped downstairs.

But as Harry laid in bed next to Maddie, his mind was still stuck. He was still thinking about Hannah, about all the history that had transpired since he had last been here, since they had all last been together. And something about it all felt unfinished, something felt unsaid. So, after Maddie was sound asleep next to him, he glanced at the clock and rose from bed.

It was Friday night and he knew Hannah had a ritual. So he tugged on his socks and pulled on a long-sleeved t-shirt and he took a great big gamble.

When Harry stepped out onto the deck, Hannah's head rose just a bit but she didn't turn to look at him. With her eyes focused out over the property, settling on some far off bit of darkness in the night, she took a puff from her cigar and blew it out slowly.

"I was wondering if you were going to join me..." Her lips curled up as she spoke but her voice stayed calm and cool and that was all Harry could tell.
"I debated it for quite a while," he admitted, taking a few slow steps. "Say the word and I'll leave you..." Harry sucked in a deep breath and went for it. "However, I thought this would provide you an opportunity to say what you might be wanting to say to me, what you might have been avoiding in front of Maddie."

He stood still there behind her, waiting as she thought it over, waiting for her to tell him one way or another. She cleared her throat and sat up in her chair and when she nodded her head, Harry felt his heart jump in his chest—from relief or from fear, he wasn't quite sure.

"Join me," she waved her hand at the seat across from her. "Please?" She turned back to look at him then, a small, slight smile on her face.

Nodding, Harry swallowed back his nervousness and made his way to the seat she had offered. Meeting her gaze, he sat down across from her, sitting the bottle of whiskey he had brought with him onto the table between them. "Would you like a drink?" He lifted his eyebrows to her.

"Hmmm," she smiled, her eyes softening as she contemplated it. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt."

"I suppose," Harry agreed, leaning to pour two glasses, holding one out to her.

"Thank you," she took it, raising the glass to him before she took a sip. Wordlessly, she reached into the cigar box and handed him one. Taking her glass and her own lit cigar, she settled back into her seat, pulling her legs up underneath the blanket laying across her lap. She watched as Harry cut and lit his cigar, watched as he took a couple of puffs. When his eyes reached across the space between them, she offered him a smile.

"You've been very kind to me today," Harry began in a soft voice.

"Did you expect me to be cruel?"

"No," he shook his head quickly. "Of course not."

Hannah took a long, slow deep breath, shrugging her shoulders as she exhaled, taking a sip from her glass as she shook her head. "I know that you think I have more to say to you..."

"I can't imagine how you couldn't."

"What happened between you and Maddie is in the past."

"Yes. But it was big and it was ugly and I'm prepared to take whatever..."

Hannah laughed then, her head tipping back, her voice cracking into the cool crisp night, surprising Harry. "You're prepared to take whatever?" She sighed and looked across the cigar smoke to him. "What do you think I'm going to do? Yell at you? Scream at you? Call you names? Dress you down for the way you broke my daughter's heart?" Her voice cracked at the end, betraying the strong, steady way she was composed. "You think I want to hit you like Kyle did?"

"Hannah..." Harry moved forward in his seat, his elbows resting on his knees, ready to go.

"Harry..." She countered, the waver in her voice stopping his train of thought. Looking down at her drink, she shook her head. Without looking up at him, she began again. "When my husband died..." She stopped, swallowed, and smiled through the tears she could feel coming. "When my husband
died he took my entire heart with him." She took a sip of her drink. "I found a way to move on, a way to live my life and....and I do love the life I live. I have my family and the farm and Maddie...but I've never been able to bring myself to even think about loving again, to even think about finding somebody else." When her eyes lifted to meet his, there was worlds of emotion swimming in them. "And that's okay. That's fine for me. But when Bishop died..." She had to bite her lip to keep from crying, her heart aching as she watched the pain wash over Harry. "I was so worried about Maddie, worried that she would find herself in the same spot as I was--either by choice or just because..."

Harry nodded his head; heavy and full of sadness. Though he very much wanted to pull his eyes from hers, though he wanted to tuck into himself and grieve, he couldn't bring himself to look away from her. He couldn't leave her in this moment like this.

"I didn't want her life to be over," Hannah admitted with a sigh. "She was too young to give it up. She could still find somebody, could still fall in love and have a family. She still had a life to live and I know that Bishop was the kind of man who would want that for her too..."

"He was," Harry's voice was heavy as he spoke. "He was exactly that kind of man."

Hannah smiled as she nodded her agreement. "So I prayed and I hoped that after she made it out of the darkness, after she crawled out of the great big hole that was left when Bishop died...that maybe someday she might find a way to love again, that even if it wasn't the same, even if it was with a slightly fractured heart, that she would find a way to feel again." Blinking at the tears that slipped through her eyes, she wiped at her cheeks and she sighed. With the tiniest of smiles, she gestured to Harry. "And here you are."

"I..." Harry's throat was tight, his chest heavy with the weight of the multitude of things he was feeling in the moment. "I don't know what to say."

"I don't either," she shook her head, a light laugh passing through her lips. "There were times when the idea of you sitting here, across from me..."

"Yeah," Harry could only imagine how the possibility of this moment might have played out over the years.

"But she loves you," Hannah shrugged, the smile on her face real and genuine. Not at all forced. "She loves you and she wants to be with you and...and the truth of the matter is this. The last time I saw her this happy, Bishop was standing next to her."

"I don't know what to say to that," Harry shook his head. He had come out here ready for this conversation but the direction it had taken had slowed him up a bit.

"I don't know either," she leaned forward to sit her glass on the table, puffing on her cigar before sitting back. "Maybe...maybe it's because she loved you before. Maybe it's easier for her heart to recall those feelings. Maybe the connection the two of you had with Bishop helps..." She shook her head. "Maybe you two were meant to be together at the end of it all..." She sighed and smiled. "I don't know why or how but whatever it is...I'm grateful. I'm happy to know that she's happy again, that she's in love and that she's...that she's looking forward to the future."

"Yeah," Harry nodded, his mind was busy as it raced to keep up with all she was saying.

"That being said..." Hannah smiled then, a twisted turn of her lips that held onto laughter and irony
and a little bit of sarcasm. "You've sat across from me before."

Harry's eyes snapped up to hers, his shoulders tensing just a little at the tone of her voice.

"You flew here from London and we sat right out here," she waved her hand around them. "You looked me in the eye and you told me that you loved my daughter more than anything in the world."

"I did," Harry's voice caught in his throat. He blinked and coughed to clear it. "I do."

"You swore that you'd love her forever, that you would spend your entire life making her happy, keeping her safe..." Her words trailed off and Harry's stomach turned. This was why he had come out here tonight, this was what he was expecting. This moment where they aired the grievances and cleared the air. This was what he had wanted but as he sat there across from Hannah, listening to her sweet, kind voice began to lay truth to the matter, he could feel his heart aching in his chest.

"I know I did," he whispered, his head dipping in shame and his eyes clouding in regret.

"I'm not trying to punish you for your actions, for decisions that were made a long time ago."

"I know you're not."

"I just..." She took a deep breath. "I remember that day. I remember the look on your face, the optimism, the certainty, the love you had for my daughter." She watched his eyes, held his gaze. "I remember that guy and I swear as I'm sitting here across from you tonight, I see that guy again."

"I am that guy," Harry cut in with certainty, scooting to the edge of his chair. "I've always been that guy..."

"Always?" Her eyebrows spiked.

"I made a mistake," his hands spread out, palms up in surrender. "A great big mistake based on fear and I did the absolute worst job showing it but my heart has always been hers."

Hannah watched him for a moment, her head nodding. She believed him, but her concern was clear. "I look at you now and I see the same guy I saw that day...and I want to believe him like I believed him then. I want to trust him as I trusted him then. I want to hug him and give him my blessing..."

"But?" Harry held his breath.

"But..." Hannah breathed the word, trying to sort out her thoughts. "Maddie's heart has been through more than enough for one person, for one life. I don't know if I can stand to watch it break again."

Swallowing back the lump of nerves in his throat, Harry held Hannah's gaze and pressed his hand to his heart. "I know that you have no reason to believe me, no reason to trust me. In fact, I've offered up every single reason not to."

"Harry..."

"It would kill me to break her heart Hannah," he cut her off before she could rebuke him. "Leaving
her...leaving her broke my spirit, it destroyed me." He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. "And that's what I deserved, I know that. But now that she's back, now that she's giving me another chance to make it right, to love her the way I should have the first time...breaking her heart now? Leaving her now? It would kill me."

Hannah watched him for a long moment, her eyes trained on his. When she was convinced that he meant what he was saying, she nodded her head and the tension slipped from her face. "Well...either that or Kyle would."

Her eyes flicked over to him with a flash of amusement and they both began to laugh.

"Yes," Harry nodded, breathing a little easier. "Yes he would."

Hannah sighed, adjusting her legs underneath her blanket. "She loves you Harry. Maddie loves you. So much so that she's going to leave New York, the home she shared with Bishop..." Hannah's eyes grew teary despite the smile on her face. "That's big. That, that means something."

"It means everything," Harry offered, sincerity rich in his voice. "Good," Hannah nodded her head, taking one last puff from her cigar before she snuffed it out and took a deep breath. "She has nothing but faith in you, nothing but trust. And I'm going to choose to have faith in her, to trust in her decisions. And I'm going to believe that the man sitting across from me now has learned a great deal from the man who sat across from me years ago, from the decisions that he's made, the consequences he was handed."

"He has," Harry's voice was near pleading, his eyes wide as he hoped she could see how much he meant it. "He has."

"Okay then," Hannah nodded again; slower, softer. Taking a breath, she swallowed and rose to her feet. With her blanket in her hands, she moved over to him. Before he could stand, her hand was pressed to his shoulder and she was bending to kiss his cheek--a move that nearly brought him to tears. Pulling back only slightly, she met his eyes and the emotion in her voice was not lost on either of them. "Then you can tell them both that they have my blessing."

"I..." Harry's eyes pooled up, his heart leaping into his throat as she answered a question he hadn't even begun to be able to ask yet.

"Goodnight Harry," she pressed another kiss to his cheek and before he could find his wits, she was stepping back inside; leaving Harry alone and profoundly moved.

Harry couldn't move from his spot there on the deck for the longest time, Hannah's words having frozen him in his chair, in this moment. He sat out there in the chilled night with a cigar burning in an ashtray and a half drank glass of whiskey in his hand. With his eyes turned up towards the clear, night sky, his mind was drifting to Maddie; to their past, to their future, to the ridiculously lucky second chance she was handing him. His mind was so wrapped up in her that when he heard her voice call out to him, he was certain it was a figment of his imagination.

But then he heard her snicker, watched as she waved her hand in front of his face. "Harry?"

"Maddie?" He blinked, his eyes wide with surprise as he blinked and shook his head, laughing at
himself. "Sorry. Sorry..." He ran his hand back through his hair.

"I didn't meant to scare you," she lifted the drink from his hand and sat it aside after taking a sip.

"You didn't," he shook his head again, reaching to pull her hand into his. "I was just...thinking."

"About?" Maddie's eyes lifted, squeezing his fingers in hers.

"You," he smiled up at her. "What are you doing out here? Is everything okay? You were sound asleep when I left you..."

"I know," she held tight to his hand as she moved around him, taking a seat right next to him. "My mother woke me up."

"Your mother?" Harry turned surprised eyes to her as she tucked into his side, spreading the blanket she had brought with her over their legs. "Why did she wake you?"

"I don't know," Maddie shook her head, pressing a kiss to his chest before she rested her head against it, his arm moving easily around her. "She woke me up, told me she loved me and then she said she thought maybe you might want some company." Her hand moved down over his stomach, sliding around his waist as she hugged him close. "You doing okay out here?"

"Yes," Harry answered, rubbing warmly at her shoulder as he kissed the top of her head. "I'm doing just fine."

"Mmm," Maddie smiled, pressing her eyes closed for a moment. "You had a conversation with my mother?"

"I did."

"What was the conversation about?"

"What do you think it was about?" He smiled as he tossed it back to her.

"Aw Harry..." Maddie shook her head, her arms squeezing him tighter. "When are you going to stop feeling like you have to make amends with everyone about our past?"

"When I'm done making amends with everyone about our past."

"But you've made amends with me. That should be it."

"But it isn't," he shook his head.

She sighed in his arms. "You took a right hook from Kyle, you've had a heart-to-heart with my mother. What else could there be?"

"I don't know Maddie," he breathed deep. "But I would imagine your cousins are on the list."

"No."

"And Collins..."
"Collins?" Maddie laughed. "You do not need to make peace with Collins."

"But I do!" Harry laughed. "Or are you telling me that Collins isn't going to be a part of your future?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "But I'm telling you that YOU are going to be a part of my future. No matter what Collins says."

"Maddie listen. What I've done..."

"What you've done?!" Maddie laughed. "What you've done is between you and me. And Jesus Harry...if we're going to drag up the past, what about what I've done?"

"YOU?!" Harry laughed incredulously as he moved to sit up, turning to look at her. "What on Earth are you talking about?"

"Come on," her head tipped to the side, her voice softening. "Harry. I married your best friend."

She could see the memories of Bishop taking him over, softening his stance, his expression. "Maddie..."

"I did," she shrugged her shoulders lightly, her eyes welling up as she remembered. "I made him face feelings for me, I forced him to choose. I...I tore apart two of the best of friends and..."

"Maddie," Harry shook his head, reaching for her, wanting to pull her back to him.

"I did, Harry." She cut him off. "I married your best friend. And we've spent all this time going over the hurt and pain that you brought to this relationship but not once have we talked about the hurt and pain that I brought to this relationship."

"But..."

"But what?" She smiled softly, her fingers running down his chest, back up to his shoulders where she gave him a squeeze. "I remember the night he came back from telling you." She could feel his body tense under her hands. "He had a black eye and a broken heart and I can only imagine how he left you in London."

"He didn't hit me," Harry shook his head, his face full of sadness as he remembered. "I hit him and he refused to hit me back."

"I know," she whispered, her hands moving to collect his. "He told me."

"Listen to me," Harry's fingers held tightly to hers. "I'm not going to pretend that it was easy and I'm not going to pretend that losing his friendship was almost as bad as losing yours. It...it killed me. It was a hit I didn't see coming, a hit that knocked me clean off my feet..." He gulped and shook his head. "But I don't begrudge him his time with you and I sure as hell don't begrudge you yours with him."

"I know you don't," she bent to kiss his hand, moved to tuck in close. "And I have no regrets about any of it."

"No," Harry shook his head. "And neither would he."
"No," Maddie laughed. "He wouldn't."

"Come here..." Harry gathered her into his side, wrapping his arms around her and settling into his seat, his eyes turning up to the sky as he hugged her. "There is no pain or hurt leftover from you marrying my best friend. None. I swear it." He kissed the side of her head. "Of course Bishop fell in love you Maddie, of course he did. How could he not?"

"Ha." Maddie laughed. "How indeed?"

"Don't make fun," Harry shook his head, the chuckle rumbling in his chest vibrated Maddie's body. "He was a smart man, Maddie. I would imagine that when you...forced him to face it, when you forced him to choose...there wasn't really much of a choice to make."

"He tried so hard though," Maddie sighed as she remembered. "He tried so hard to do the right thing."

"Yeah..." Harry nodded. "But who's to say he didn't do the right thing? I would say there's an argument to be made that marrying you was absolutely the right thing."

"Hmmm..." Maddie couldn't help but smile at that. Turning her face up to look at him, her cheek pressed against his warm, strong chest. "You really think that? You really...mean all of this?"

Everything about him softened as he looked down at her, as he held her to him. "Of course I mean all of this. Of course I think that...God, Maddie....how could I not? How could I ever argue that...that marrying you could be anything other than the right thing."

Catching the look in his eyes, the set of his jaw, the way he said those words, Maddie was instantly reminded of the night before last, the night they had been sitting in his kitchen celebrating her imminent return to London, the night they had decided to come to Colorado to see Hannah. She was reminded of the way he had looked at her when she had asked him that question, when she had asked him The Question.

"Do you think...I don't know, do you think you could ever see yourself getting married again?"

He had looked to her first with complete surprise; an adorable stun taking over his face. He had completely disregarded the champagne pouring down the neck of the bottle onto his hand. He had almost forgotten how to speak.

But then he had calmed. He had taken a breath and pulled it together and he had looked at her just as he was looking at her now. He was warm and sweet and loving and so completely sure of whatever was happening in his mind at the moment.

"There are...a great many answers to that question. Some of which are loaded and complicated."

Maddie remembered the lump that had risen to her throat, the way her heart seemed to pause dramatically in her chest as she watched and waited and wished for an answer that wouldn't break her heart.

"Why don't you tell me the one that's the most simple? The one that's the least complicated?"

He had taken in her words as a sacrament. He had nodded his head and wiped his hands on a towel
and then with more bravery than she would ever know, he had walked over to where she stood at the counter. His hands were gentle and warm as they moved to her face, tipping her smile up to meet his, his eyes diving deep into hers. And then, with a light shrug of his shoulders and a smile she wasn't sure she had seen from him before, he had nodded.

"Yes." The answer had been simple; easy. Honest. "Yes, Maddie. I can see myself getting married again."

She could remember the relief she had felt that night and she could remember the heat that had shifted between them. Just as it was now on the deck at her mother's house.

"Harry..." She sighed his name, her hand sliding up his chest towards the beating of his heart.

"And you? Could you?" He asked her, his eyebrows lifting in question, his hands holding onto her as though he were nervous she would bolt.

"Could I..." She exhaled the words, not knowing what he was asking but recognizing the spike of emotion there between them.

His eyes were sparkling there in the moonlight, holding onto hope and vulnerability and such a great, deep affection for her. "Could you see yourself getting married again?" His voice was so soft and she swore she could feel his fingers tremble against her skin where he held her and she wondered if he had somehow been able to hear what she was thinking.

Laying there with her head on Harry's chest, folded up in his arms, Maddie felt her body come alive, she felt her heart stir and her eyes well up and she had to bite her bottom lip to keep from laughing–thinking it might alarm him. Swallowing back the overwhelming burst of joy, she pressed her eyes closed and counted to five.

As her smile pulled at her lips, she opened her eyes and sighed. "There are a great many answers to that question. Some of which are loaded and...complicated..." A hint of laughter lifted her voice and Harry's hands tightened their hold on her.

With a rumble of laughter, he shook his head. "Maddie would you please..."

"Yes," she cut in, pulling back from her cozy spot on his chest so that she could really look at him. "Yes. I can see myself getting married again. I can see myself having children. I can..." Smiling wider, she held his eyes and told him the truth. "I want all of those things Harry. I still want all of those things."

"Yeah?" He could barely hear his own voice.

"Yeah," she whispered the word, her head nodding as she took a deep breath and laid all her cards down on the table in front of him. "When Bishop died, he took a part of my heart with him, a part that will never be back." Shaking her head, she refused to cry. "The complicated, heavy answer to that question is this...the part of my heart that's left, the whole of my heart that's still here...that's yours Harry. That's all yours."
A/N: When I originally wrote and posted this story, I experienced a great big writer's block between the last chapter you read and this one. It lasted a great amount of time and my brain simply shut down. So this is the last chapter of this story. Or more accurately, it's the last written chapter of this story. There's a little bit of a time jump. Maybe some day I'll have more in me. But on this day, it was the end.

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This wedding of Maddie's, this glorious day that had been months in the making (years and years in the making) was going to be as small and as intimate as she could ever hope for it to be–considering she was about to marry a Duke. Things were different this time. The planning, the rules–things had been different this time around. They had both been married before, Charles was King–expectations had changed. This time they were given a bit more leniency, a bit more room to personalize the day, more room to make it theirs. For that she was thankful.

For many, many things–she was thankful.

It had been a long journey, a crazy one. It had been difficult and beautiful and full of life and love and loss. Yet here she was, standing in this unbelievable gown, wearing priceless jewelry, ready to marry Harry. Her face warmed and her smile lifted and tears rose to her eyes–tears of happiness, of victory, of excitement. This last year of their journey had been an absolute whirlwind.

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It all started when she left New York. She could still remember her last night there. With nearly everything packed and ready for the movers, she had turned up the music, opened a bottle of Scotch. She had danced and laughed and let herself sink neck-deep into the many memories she had of the place. There was a lot of smiling, a lot of love and even a few moments with reflective sadness.

Like a moment very late into the night, or early into the next morning, when she took what was left of her drink and a large, warm blanket out onto the deck–when she let herself drift all the way back to the beginning of this home.

She could remember the day they had bought this apartment. Bishop had flown in just that afternoon. He had shown up at her office with a bouquet of flowers and they had set out ready to look at the two places she had narrowed it down to. But they never even made it to the second place because they had both known this was the one.

They had both known this was meant to be their home, the place where they would have a family. Though it had been brewing between them for a while, when the realtor had innocently dropped
the information that there were several private schools nearby for children...she had lit a spark.
Maddie had grown nervous and Bishop had grown mushy and when the realtor had slipped away
to give them a few moments, he had taken Maddie's hand and hauled her right out to the balcony.

Right where she now stood.

He had kissed her and hugged her and shown her the view. He had asked her if this was the view she wanted. For the next twenty years. With him.

Maddie's eyes welled up with tears as she remembered. Pressing her eyes closed, she could almost hear his voice, she could almost smell him, could almost feel him there with her.

And God how she wished he were there with her. She had so desperately wanted those twenty years with him; raising his children, building their family, waking up and falling asleep next to him for just as long as she was alive.

But he wasn't. And she couldn't.

And she had come to terms with that. She really had. She was ready to move forward, ready to embrace this new part of her life with Harry. She just wanted this one more night to revel in this wonderful, blissful, joyful time of her life.

So she cuddled up on that deck and she let her senses be flooded with memories of him as the sun rose over the city.

And then she had showered and dressed. She had said a final good-bye and she had boarded the Bishop jet for London.

When she finally arrived that evening, tired and slightly hungover, she stepped out of her car, looked up the walk to the front stoop, and there was a Prince waiting for her.

He had a sheepish smile and a light in his eyes that only reaffirmed that this was exactly where she was supposed to be.

She was up the walk and in his arms and everything felt right in the world.

Harry had kissed her—long and slow and easy—and then he had offered her two gifts that warmed her heart.

A painting—the view from the summit in Bendal that he had taken from his library.

And a promise.

With her face held between the palms of his hands and a world of emotion in his eyes, his voice cracked when he spoke.

"I know this is hard for you, that leaving New York, leaving your home must have felt like you were...leaving him. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe I'm the one who's feeling sad and reminiscent. But I want you to know that...as far as I'm concerned, you don't ever have to leave him behind. You don't ever have to be 'over' him. He can be a part of this life here too."

His words, the meaning and emotion behind them, had silenced her. So instead, she had tipped up on her toes and kissed him.

Then she hauled him inside her new home and they christened it theirs.
As this new phase of their journey began, Harry was there every step of the way.

He helped her adjust, he helped her move in. And one night, he helped her with some well-meaning destruction.

"Hey Maddie?" Harry had called to her as he looked down at stack of supplies piled in the living room; gallons of paint, brushes, drop clothes.

"Yeah?" She called back from the kitchen.

"What's all of this for?"

"I told you!" She had laughed as she came back into view, their dinner dropped off on the counter. "We're painting."

"Sure, sure," Harry nodded, leaning over a gallon of paint to reach for something. "But why...the sledgehammer?"

"Easy," with her hands on her hips, she shrugged her shoulders. "We're tearing down a wall."

"We're tearing down a wall?" Harry's eyebrows shot straight up, his laughter mixing with disbelief. "What do you mean we're tearing down a wall?"

"I mean..." Maddie had stepped over the stack of drop clothes and took the hammer from Harry's hands. "The night we ended, I came here to Bishop's..." She began to explain as she walked away from him, pointing the hammer towards a guest room. "And I spent days in that room a sobbing, aching, wreck of a mess." She stopped, cocked her head to the side and then spun around to look at Harry. "I thought that instead of risking the chance that I might remember that every time we're here....that I would just tear it down."

And so they had. The tore down a wall and demolished any lingering remnants of that darker time in their relationship.

As Maddie settled into her new home, into her new routines, her relationship with Harry only strengthened. On her first day in the London Offices of Bishop Industries, he showed up on her doorstep with coffee and a pastry. They developed a standing Friday night Date Night and a Saturday Morning sleep-in. Occasionally she would have lunch with him at his office and occasionally he would go with her to Sunday Night Dinner with Ian and Michael.

She was there in the audience beaming with pride when he opened the first Invictus Games and he was standing tall by her side when she went to Paris for a weekend getaway–ready to face Collins. Ready to reconcile more of their past.

And he had. They had.

Eventually people began to come around; her family, his fans. The press and the people. Eventually the story of the two of them became old news, it was accepted.

And eventually their private romance came to a head–eventually the inevitable 'what's next?' popped up–and when it did, it was beautiful.

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Winter had come and the snow had settled and, as was tradition, the Royal Family made their way to Sandringham for Christmas. As Charles had made many slight adjustments to the way he ran his
Monarchy and his family, an invitation was extended for Maddie to join them. Though she wouldn't be walking with the family to church, she would be there for the private celebrations, for the familial frivolity. Harry couldn't have been more excited to invite her out—though he had tried to hide his hopefulness on the chance that she might decline.

But she hadn't. Though she had been invited on a Tropical tour with Ian and Michael, though she had an open invitation at her family celebrations, she decided to go with her gut. She decided to go with her heart.

She decided to go to Sandringham with Harry.

And it was beautiful.

On the chilly, snowy Eve of Christmas, after the candlelight dinner and the after-dinner drinks and the after-after dinner festivities, Harry had convinced her to bundle up and go for a walk. Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was the smile on his face, maybe it was the fact that they could take their own private walk in the early morning hours of Christmas throughout the regal grounds of what had become a Winter Wonderland. Whatever it was, whatever the draw, Maddie had tugged on her boats and pulled on her coat and she had set out on this journey with Harry.

With her mittened hand held in his, he drew her from the house. They walked through freshly fallen powder, they walked through tall majestic trees and eventually they ended up—rosy cheeked and red-nosed—standing outside the Parish Church of Saint Mary Magdalene. Maddie had seen it before—on tv and print—and she had even seen it in person when they had visited during warmer months. But standing there with him in the stillness of this night, with the snow glistening and the promise of Christmas—it felt magical.

And in some ways it really was.

Cozying up to Harry, she tucked into his warm arms and she listened as he told her tales of his time here as a child. He told her of games they used to play as children, of hunts they had gone on as young adults. He told her of times there with his cousins, times there with friends.

And then he took a breath and told her a confession that brought the whole, quiet night to a pause.

"This is going to sound..." He shook his head with a small laugh, his eyes casting down and away from her like he might be a little embarrassed, like he might be a little nervous. "But there was this period of time...after Peter's wedding, before Will's that I thought, that I hoped that I might be able to get married here. You know, instead of the Abbey or..." He shrugged his shoulders and looked down at her, his smile sweet and sheepish. "Ridiculous right? It's just...I've attended service here more than I have at any of the others and it's a beautiful church and so much more private, more intimate..." He shrugged again and looked up at the top of the steeple as his words trailed off, his mind drifted.

Maddie's eyes followed his for a moment, looking up at the church but then they drifted back to him. His fiery red hair sticking out from under his stocking cap, his beard trimmed but mussed from the fun they had been having. She looked at the strength in his jaw, the humor in his smile, the kindness in his eyes. Tightening her hold on him, she leaned in closer and before her mind had time to catch up with her heart, she opened her mouth and sighed.

"I don't know Captain...maybe you still can."

Instantly his eyes shifted, drawing away from the tall steeple and right down to her. They were wide with surprise, his mouth opening as though he had something he wanted to say, something he
needed to stay. He couldn't seem to speak, couldn't seem to remember how to.

But Maddie could. So she moved a little closer and she shrugged her shoulders and with a smile that he thought could maybe melt snow, she asked. "Do you think your father would let you? He's obviously become more lenient and you've been married before. Maybe next time he would be open to it..."

The smile that crossed Harry's face felt larger than the church, larger than the grounds. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest and that hint of hope and expectation that he always worked to control began to bubble up. Without moving his eyes from hers, he answered as honestly as he could. "Maybe."

When Maddie's face light up, Harry wanted to kiss her. When her smile stretched further, he wanted to burn that image into his brain. But when her lip pulled in between her teeth and the look of resolution settled in her eyes, he thought he just might fall over. "It would be beautiful, wouldn't it?" She looked up at the church, taking a step away from him, a step towards the beautiful building. "In the summer with the flowers. The colors would be amazing. And the chapel...it would be small and intimate and..." She looked back to him then, the realization that she was rambling, that she was putting voice to thoughts she had so far been able to keep quiet–it brought a new flush to her cheeks. And just as she was about to reach out and take it back, to pull away from the moment, Harry took a step towards her and edged closer to it.

"Maddie are you...ha..." He laughed lightly, his eyes full of love as he looked at her. "Are you saying that you might..." It was almost as if he couldn't say it, as if he couldn't put voice to it for fear that it would shatter and slip away from him.

"I don't know," her head tipping to the side as her voice, her smile, exuded nothing but warmth. "Are you asking?"

And there it was. This moment, this thing they both desperately wanted. This thing they were both so careful about addressing. Right there, out in the open. Unavoidable against the backdrop of the crystal white snow and this still, silent night.

"I...I..." Harry stammered, took a breath and pulled it together. A hint of sadness flickered into his eyes. "How do I do that Maddie? How do I ask you, again, to spend your life with me? After....all of it?" His eyebrows lifted and his eyes widened and she could see it–the fear, the regret.

And she would have none of it. Not anymore. Stepping through the puffs of snow, she moved right to him, wrapping her arms around his waist, she snuggled in closer and she turned her smile up to him. "I thought that you and I had worked through...all of it."

"We have. But..."

"And I thought you wanted to get married again, to have children and..."

"I do! I just..."

"Because I do too Harry," she stopped his words, nearly stopping his heart. "I really, really do. And this church! This church is so beautiful and IF you were asking...."

"I am." At first it came out in a whisper. But when his eyes welled up with tears, his voice found strength. "My God Maddie...I am."

The fire and spunk and boldness Maddie had just had seemed to waver as her emotions filled up her heart, her stomach, her throat. "You are?"
His arms tightened around her, his certainty multiplying as he nodded. "Very, very poorly..."

"What do you mean?" She shook her head, confused.

"I mean..." His laugh was nervous. "I don't have a ring or..."

"I don't need a ring."

His laugh echoed around them as he shook his head at her. "And I'm not on my knees..." Though he tried to pull back, tried to change that fact, Maddie held him tighter, wanting him right there with her when it happened.

"I don't want you on your knees."

"But yes..." He gulped as his eyes searched hers, as he laid it all out there. "I'm asking. Marry me?" His eyebrows lifted in question. "Here, in this chapel? Be my wife?"

Even now as Maddie stood in her room at Sandringham dressed in her gown and ready to go become his wife, she still felt her adrenaline race, she still felt the same jolt of excitement and unabashed happiness as she had felt that night in the snow.

That night they had gone back to their room where they tucked away in bed, laughing and planning and making love into the wee hours of the morning. He had left her side only to walk with his family to church. Maddie had stayed curled up in bed, warm and cozy as she watched the tv, grinning from ear to ear as her fiancé made the walk he made every year.

Though this year there was something different. This year he was overjoyed. And though everyone could see it, though observers commented on it–only Maddie knew the reason behind that beaming grin.

They would end up telling her family later that afternoon, telling his just after that. And so began a crazy, hazy, beautiful time.

A ring was selected. Interviews were given. Plans were made. And the blissfulness that had started in that snow packed, star filled night–it had carried with them throughout it all.

And here they were, on the cusp of getting married.

Soon she would leave her suite and she would meet him at the bottom of the grand staircase. They would pause for a few photos, they would have a few minutes alone to reflect and connect. Together they would step into the car, together they would drive to the church, and together they would walk into the beautiful, glorious St. Mary's–now surrounded by flowers instead of snow. Now drenched in sunlight and warmth instead of starlight and chill.

They would wed in front of a small, close congregation and only a handful of cameras. Following the ceremony, they would take the same walk back that the Royal Family took on Christmas Day. They would greet well-wishers, accept congratulations and make their first appearance as husband and wife. Harry already had plans of kissing her there, just before the gates, just before they would wave their good-byes and slip back into Sandringham. There they would enjoy a dinner and a reception and celebrate their union with their loved ones before embarking on this new part of their journey where they were husband and wife.

But first. She had a gift.
For her life, she would never forget the look on Harry's face when he looked up at her from the bottom of the stairs. She could feel his love for her beaming from his wide smile, from his bright eyes. He watched her walk down the stairs for as long as he could before he started up after her. Meeting her about midway, they came to a stop together.

"My God..." He shook his head slowly, his eyes sweeping lovingly down over before finding home in her eyes. "You look unbelievable."

"Yeah?" She flushed only slightly as he took her hands, as they drew together. "You clean up quite spectacularly yourself." Her fingers, only slightly shaky, moved to the lapels of his morning suit, smoothing over his tie.

"Thank you," he reached up to stroke her cheek, to tap her nose. "And you're not at all worried that we're breaking tradition right now? Seeing each other, I mean?"

"No," she shook her head, her smile full of certainty. "I'm fine with breaking tradition."

"Good," his voice lowered as his eyes glanced down towards the small handful of people waiting at the bottom of the stairs ready to photograph them and move them along. "How would you feel about breaking another?"

Her smile pulled higher and, with light in her eyes, she nodded. She had her very own plans to do just that.

As Harry's grin slipped cheeky, he took a step forward, closed the distance between them and he kissed her.

It was hot and slow and not at all the sort of kiss he should be giving her before they were both being called to be professional and appropriate.

But he couldn't help it and she didn't care.

When the kiss ended they were both breathless, they were both flushed, and they were both beyond ready to become man and wife.

"Shall we?" Harry whispered against her lips as he kissed her once more.

"Mmmm," she nodded. They should go; they had to take photos, they had to get in the car. They had to get to the Church. "Wait..." Her hands lifted, her fingers circling his wrists, pulling his hands from her cheeks down into hers. Holding onto him, she turned to the small handful of people waiting, their eyes discreetly averted. "Excuse me?" She called to them. "Would you all mind giving us the room for a moment please?"

"What?" Harry's eyes narrowed in curiosity. "What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"Yes," she nodded, turning back to him with a reassuring smile. "Yes. I promise." She looked back down at the group. "It will just be a moment." As Harry nodded his agreement, the handful of people disappeared, slipping from the room and closing doors behind them.

There they stood in the middle of the staircase, primped and pressed and dressed for their wedding. Harry waited until he felt certain the room was clear and then, with her hands in his, he turned to face her. "What is it love? What's going on?"

Maddie looked up to him with wide eyes, giving away her nervousness, and when she smiled, it was shaky. But it was wide and happy. "I think we should sit down."
"Sit down?" He laughed, his eyes narrowing even further--more than a little confused.

"Yes," Maddie nodded, her hand dropping from his as she moved to do just that.

"Oh-kay." Though he didn't quite understand, he followed her down to sit on the step next to her. "Maddie, I..."

"I love you," she said it so loud, so clear, that the sound of it surprised him. His confusion cracked and his smile returned.

"I love you too."

"And I can't wait to be your wife," she pulled his hands into her lap. "I hope you know how much I want to be your wife, how excited I am to start this life together."

"I do," he softened even further as he leaned closer. "And I hope you know that there is no way I could possibly be happier on this day, in this moment, than I am right now." Harry saw a look flash in her eyes at his words, he saw her smile twitch, he felt her fingers flex in his. As she took in a shaky breath, she tightened her hold on him and fought back what appeared to be tears. "Maddie?" He searched her eyes for answers.

"Maybe..." Her voice was whisper quiet, cracking as she spoke. "Maybe you're wrong. Maybe there is a way you could be happier?"

"What are you talking about?" A confused laugh pushed through his lips. "Maybe I could be happier?! No..." He shook his head quickly, his hands dropping hers so he could pull her closer, draw her in. "I've waited a long time for this, this chance to be with you, to finally be with you. And here we are, in just under an hour I'm going to be standing in St. Mary's marrying the most amazing woman I've ever had the pleasure to love and you think there's something else that would make me happier? Maddie, darling, I love you but..."

"I'm pregnant." It was soft and quiet--so much so that he barely heard her. But he had. She saw the color rush to his face and she swore she could see his mind spiral in his wide, deep blue eyes. Her hands moved quickly to him, sliding up his shoulders to his face. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I know it's probably horrible for me to drop this on you right now, right before the wedding but I couldn't keep it to myself anymore. I couldn't be the only one who knew..." She swallowed the lump in her throat, licked her lips and moved in closer. "I've wanted to be the night of our stag and hen parties, when we got together at Kiki's and we couldn't wait till we got home." She watched as he blinked, remembering that night. "And then I...I wasn't feeling well these last few days and then Amy made a joke about being pregnant so yesterday I..."

"Yesterday?" Harry's eyebrows lifted over his dazed eyes. "You found out yesterday?"

"Yes," she nodded, her lips pressing together in effort to keep from crying. "I found out yesterday and I was going to wait to tell you when we were on our honeymoon but I couldn't, I just....I couldn't." She took a deep breath and stroked her fingers over his cheeks. "Harry...Harry...I'm pregnant."

Maddie sat in silence, waiting on the edge of her seat, on the edge of the step, watching him process it, watching him comprehend what she was saying.

When it settled, when it really settled, Harry's face brightened, lit up the entire room and ignited her heart. As the tears rose to his eyes, he pulled her to him and she went. Right into his strong, warm, protective arms.
"Oh my God," he whispered into her hair, holding her so tight, she worried they were crushing the flowers on his lapel. "Oh my God Maddie. I was wrong."

"Wrong?" She asked through a teary voice.

"Yes," he pulled back from her, immediately gathering her face into the palms of his hands. "Happier. I..." He swallowed at the lump of emotion in his throat. "I just...I didn't know it was possible to be this happy. Oh my God. Maddie. You're really pregnant?!" When he pulled back this time, he looked her over–amazement and joy written all over his face.

"Yes Captain," she leaned in to kiss him once more. "I'm really pregnant."

Harry let out a breath of relief and gratitude, his forehead pressing against hers. He had to take a minute, had to thank all of the Gods and all of the fates for allowing him to have this moment. This moment where he was marrying Maddie, where she was making him a husband and a father.

And he knew that according to no set of rules did he deserve this. There was nothing in his life he had ever done that warranted such happiness, such joy. But he wanted it, he wanted it more than anything in the world. And instead of questioning it, instead of even bothering with whether or not he deserved it, he was going to take a page from his soon-to-be wife, from his best friend who he knew was smiling down on the both of them.

He was going to reach out with both hands and he was going to take it like it was his.

Because it was. This was his life, his glorious, beautiful, complete life. And even though this journey had taken longer, even though it had included great loss and great pain, this journey had brought him here.

To Maddie, to their baby, to this beautiful future and this glorious now.

Chapter End Notes

Well.....that's it for The Alternate Journey. I hope you've enjoyed it. Let me know.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!