The Unexpected Journey

by joschroefanfic

Summary

The Unexpected Journey is the story of a young woman who sets out on a mission and finds a surprising, royal, detour. I began writing this story on Tumblr several years ago and followed a suggestion to post it here. It's a tad fluffy, a dash dramatic, but a lot of fun.

One small Author's Note: Because I am not sure I can write about another country with authority without knowing more about it, I am creating a country-for storytelling purposes. It is in Southern Africa. It has a rich cultural history with proud, wonderful people but it has also been host to poverty and famine and more recent outbursts of violence and trauma. The country will be known as Bendal and has absolutely NOT been modeled after any one particular country. I hope you will allow me these small creativities.
Chapter 1

From the very moment she had stepped foot on the dry, honey colored ground of Bendal, she had known the importance of this experience. She had specifically sought out Doctors Without Borders. She had worked meticulously on her application, she had gone through a series of interviews, signed the contracts, received the vaccinations; all with the knowledge that this journey would be one of the most impactful of her life. And she was ready for that.

She needed that.

She had wanted to leave, to escape all that had happened at home; wanted to be as far away from her life as she could possibly be. And this, this warm, rural countryside of Bendal was exactly that. Though, when Madeline "Maddie" Forrester had taken this position, less than a year after finishing her PhD in Child Psychology, she had never imagined the unexpected road this journey would take her down; or who would be on that road by her side.

Ten months into her year-long contract, Maddie had become a part of the community. Though her blonde hair, pale skin, and "American accent" had initially caused her to be the center of discussion and a fair amount of curiosity among the children, her unassuming position and sweet personality had won over the community leaders she worked with and the children she served. They had accepted her as one of theirs and she felt more at home with them than she had in her own home just before she had left the states.

Later in life when she would remember that morning, she would remember that it had been unseasonably warm. She woke to find the heat already invading the small flat she shared with Ella, a nurse out of the Ireland office. Ella had grown up in Dublin and had wanted to see the world. She was bubbly and bright and an instant friend to Maddie. This particular morning was the start of a big day in the community. Despite the recently growing violence among two long-feuding tribal sects, leaders in the small, rural area were coming together to open what Maddie would call a Food Bank; a Co-op of sorts where people could come together and trade, barter or exchange services for goods. Though it was a local initiative, it had backing from big names across the country and through outside charitable organizations. Just the night before Maddie had listened loosely as Ella had, for the fifth time that week, listed off a multitude of famous names involved with such groups. Though Maddie had very little interest in such things, she would smile and nod—because Ella loved it and she loved Ella.

Maddie was excited for the Food Bank. It was something that brought purpose to the community; a sense of identity and unity. Many of the children she worked with were working to prepare for the Grand Opening that afternoon and the confidence she saw in them as they worked was priceless. Pulling on a loose pair of Bermuda shorts, a t-shirt, sunglasses and sturdy sandals, she tied her hair back in a curly mess of a ponytail and set out for the building that would house the food bank. There was still much work to be done.

When she arrived, she was pointed to a truck loaded with boxes that needed to be moved from the truck to the building. Hopping up onto the trailer of the truck, she went straight to work. About midway through, she heard a voice call up to her from over the side of the trailer. She smiled down at a man; late twenties, tall; dressed casually with a ball cap on to shield his eyes. He must be new; she thought. Maybe he was with the Peace Corps or here on a Gap Year excursion.

Taking a moment to pause from her work, she leaned against the side of the truck and called down to him.

"You look a little lost." She watched as he looked around for a second before turning his head up to see her.
"I suppose that I am," he grinned. "Do you think you might be able to point me in the right direction?"

"Well, if you're here to help, I have a whole truck full of boxes that need to be moved inside." She gestured behind her. "Think you can handle some heavy lifting?" There was a moment, a tiny brief moment where he seemed slightly startled; confused. But he recovered quickly and nodded.

"I believe that I can."

"Fantastic! Now...get up here."

"Yes ma'am."

"Wait, I'm sorry, I didn't get your name." She shielded her eyes with her hand as she looked down at him.

"I'm Harry," he smiled, reaching his hand up towards where she stood on the back of the trailer.

"Nice to meet you Harry. I'm Maddie," she returned his smile and his outstretched hand.

"It's a pleasure, Maddie." His handshake was warm and firm and put her at ease.

Seeing the light freckling across his nose and the wisps of red hair sticking out from under his cap, she hoped he had been generous with the sunblock. So many of the newbies had suffered from a scorching sunburn. It was almost a rite of passage. "Now...how about you stop standing around and help me unload this food?"

"Absolutely," he grinned; instantly falling victim to the elation he felt when he encountered somebody who had absolutely no idea who he was. He glanced around with slight paranoia for a sign of the group of people that usually followed where he went. Finding that they had been successfully distracted, he lifted himself up onto the truck and, with a sigh of relief, did as he was told.

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They were about half way through the boxes when they fell into step with each other. Finding the silence to be slightly disconcerting, she went for small talk.

"So..." Maddie smiled at him as they moved past each other. "Where are you from?"

"Um..." He lifted a box into his arms. "I'm from England. You?"

"The United States."

"How long have you been here?" He asked as he followed her to where they were stacking the boxes inside.

"Ten months," she smiled; surprised at how fast the time had passed. "You?"

"I arrived today."

"I guessed as much." He grinned at the way she smiled at him; couldn't help it. "Well, welcome to Bendal."

"Thank you," he nodded, returning to the truck. "I appreciate that."
"Of course," she stepped aside so that he could walk past her with another arm full. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ella moving quickly in her direction. Deciding it might be time for a quick break, Maddie hopped off the truck and met her friend.

"Ella love, how are you?" She smiled sweetly, but Ella shook her head and reached for her friend's arm. "What is going on?"

"What are you doing?!" Ella's voice was hushed as she pulled Maddie to the side. But something about the tone made Maddie feel like she was being yelled at.

"I'm...I'm unloading the truck," she glanced back towards the trailer in confusion.

"No!" Ella's teeth clenched; her eyes growing pointed. "What...are...you...doing?" The long pauses between her words were meant to drive home her point.

"I am unloading...the...truck..." Maddie mimicked the pauses, but Ella was not amused.

"Do you have any idea who that is?" Though Ella's eyes didn't move in the slightest, Maddie knew exactly who she was talking about.

"As a matter of fact, I do. His name is Harry. He arrived today. He was standing around looking lost, so I put him to work. It's not a..."

"You put him to work?!"

"Yes of course. He said he was here for the opening and asked for direction and..."

"Ohmygod," Ella's words ran together as she whispered frantically to her friend. "He's coming over. He's coming...Oh God. Do I look okay?"

"You look fine," Maddie snickered. "What is wrong with..." Her words trailed off as he joined them. Maddie could feel Ella's fingers digging into her arm and she desperately wanted to pull her friend aside and splash some cold water in her face. Maybe the heat was going to her brain. She smiled up at him apologetically. "Harry, this is my friend, Ella. Ella, this is Harry." And as she turned towards her friend, she prayed that she had pulled it together. And she had; mostly.

"Ella," Harry's eyes were dazzling as he extended a hand. Ella managed to take a breath before she held out her hand and uttered the words that would bring Maddie's world to a halt.

"Your Royal Highness."

And in the split second that followed, three things happened all at once. Ella—well versed on the ways of the Monarchy—dipped into the slightest of curtsies. Harry—realizing he was no longer incognito—hid his disappointment with a well-trained smile that had been the result of a lifetime of publicity. And Maddie—Maddie who was normally witty, intelligent, at the top of her game—felt absolutely thrown.

"I'm sorry," her headed moved quickly as she looked from Ella to Harry and back again; the confusion causing her to feel slightly off balance. "Did you just say..."

Her brain kicked into overdrive just as her words seemed to fail her. Looking back at Harry, she finally saw it. The red hair, the light freckles, the deep blue eyes and the million-dollar smile. It was surreal. She had never, in her wildest dreams, expected to see him here. "I'm sorry. You..." She shook her head in disbelief. "Are you Prince..."

"Harry," he finished for her. This he was used to; people discovering who he was. "Yes."
"THE Prince Harry?"

"One and the same."

"Of course," Maddie could feel the flush of embarrassment warm her cheeks. "Well I feel incredibly foolish."

"Please don't," he reached a hand out to her; hating the discomfort that went along with moments such as these.

"I just ordered the Crown Prince of England to unload a truck full of food." She was having a hard time believing it, even as she spoke the words out loud.

"Yes," Ella whispered with narrowed eyes. "Yes. You. Did."

"No," Harry shook his head. "You didn't order me to do anything. I asked, you answered and..." He sighed and rolled his eyes. "And I'm not a Crown Prince. We don't really..."

"Oh God..." Maddie groaned; her hands moving to her stomach.

She hated this feeling. She was educated, well-read and, by most accounts, had an understanding and appreciation for the world outside of the country she had grown up in. Yet here she was, so daft that she hadn't recognized one of the most recognizable faces in the world. It was just short of humiliating. And he was being so nice about it; it almost made it worse. Taking a deep breath, she forced her nerves to calm down. Turning to him with pleading eyes, she smiled. "I have to apologize."

"No, you don't." He was quick with the protest.

"But I insist."

"As do I." His voice lowered and he leaned closer to her. "Please. There is no need for you to apologize. I should have told you but I...I actually prefer it when people don't recognize me and...and I was happy to help with the truck."

"But, I..." Maddie began again. But before she had a chance to explain, she was interrupted by a small group of men with urgency in their step and relief in their voices.

"Sir!" One of them looked Harry over and let out a breath. "We've been looking for..."

"It's quite alright," Harry assured them all with a smile. "I was just speaking with Maddie and Ella." He nodded to the two of them and Maddie could have sworn she heard Ella squeal just a tiny bit.

"Hello," the gentleman nodded at the two of them and turned his attention quickly to Harry. "Sir, they are ready for your briefing now. We really should be going."

"Of course," he nodded. "Ella, it was lovely to meet you. And Maddie," he turned his eyes on hers, hoping she would see that he was being genuine. "It was truly a pleasure working with you this afternoon. Thank you." And with a blink of an eye, he was escorted away from them; taking all of Maddie's humility with her as he left.

"Oh my God..." Ella muttered as her friend let out a breath; finding no better words to describe the moment. Prince Harry of Wales had stepped into their day, unloaded box after box, and then—with grace and aplomb—he had stepped out; leaving behind an elated Ella and a shaken Maddie in his wake.
Chapter 2

As the morning gave way to the afternoon, the preparations gave way to the event. Though Ella would not be able to attend—as she was working that night at the makeshift Emergency Room housed in their main facilities, Maddie would be going to support the project and the efforts of many of their friends and coworkers. Ella was sure to school Maddie on royal etiquette, should she happen to run into the Prince again. While Maddie assured her she would do all she could to avoid him altogether, Ella insisted and Maddie caved.

Armed with her crash course in behavior, Maddie arrived at the site just in time to see Khenda and Collins take the stage and begin the small ceremony they had planned. Khenda was the Site Director and, for all intents and purposes, Maddie's direct supervisor. She was a native of Bendal; having moved to France at a young age. After attending University, she had traveled around the world and had been with Doctors Without Borders for over ten years. Bendal had once again become her home. She lived with her long term partner Collins. He was a tall, muscular bald man who spoke several languages and loved Khenda unlike anything Maddie had ever been witness too. They were wonderful people to be around and they had a deep appreciation and knowledge of local customs and culture. Maddie smiled as Khenda invited the Prince to the stage to cut the ribbon and just like that, the party was underway.

Waiting for the swarms of people to enter, she spoke to a few coworkers, said hello to a few of the children she worked with, and eventually made her way inside. She was standing close to an anesthesiologist she had met from Spain, sipping on a cold drink when Khenda flew into her line of vision.

"Maddie, come with me," Khenda commanded; holding tight to her arm as she led her through the crowd. "There is somebody I want you to meet." She knew exactly where this was headed; the surprise guest that had everyone chattering. Yes, she knew exactly where this was headed. She opened her mouth to protest; to tell her friend and mentor that she had already met him—already humiliated herself enough for one day, thank you very much. But it was too late. Before she could even mutter a polite no, Khenda was tapping his shoulder. He turned towards them; his face brightening immediately.

"Khenda!" He leaned in to place a kiss to her cheek, his eyes sweeping to meet Maddie's for a second.

"Your Royal Highness," Khenda responded with a jocular familiarity; having known him for many years. "I would like you to meet my good friend and colleague, Dr. Forrester." She smiled affectionately at Maddie. "And this is Prince Harry the founding patron of Sentebale. I was just telling him what an asset you have been to the community."

"Oh wow, thank you," Maddie blushed at the compliment.

"I'm sorry," Khenda interrupted apologetically. Her eyes were focused on something across the room. "I see that my attention is needed elsewhere. Please, excuse me," she looked to Harry who smiled warmly.

"Of course," Harry nodded and waved her off. "We'll be fine without you." And, as she hurried away, he turned a wide smile to Maddie. "So, we meet again." And she couldn't help the smirk that played at her lips. Her initial anxiety about the mornings' meeting had faded and she found herself much more relaxed this time around.

"Your highness," a twinkle of playfulness shone in her eyes as she looked up at him this time.
"You'll forgive my American ignorance; am I supposed to curtsey to you each time I meet you or just the first?"

"Ha," he masked his grin by taking a sip from his drink. "Well, it's all a matter of your own comfort level. You are, in fact, not required to bow or curtsey at all, Doctor." His lips twitched at the new bit of knowledge he now had about the woman who stood before him. "It seems like I'm not the only one who kept their title a secret, no?"

"It's not quite the same thing," she protested; enjoying the liveliness persona he exuded.

"Oh I think it is." He nodded. "So, Doctor..."

"It's Maddie," she waved her hand; instantly realizing that interrupting a Prince was probably high on the list of Ella's 'Do Not' list. "I'm sorry. But, if you don't mind, please call me Maddie, Sir."

"Sir?!" He laughed. "It's Harry," he pointed at his chest. "Remember? I'm just Harry."

"I'm not sure it's appropriate for me to call you that. My friend Ella would just..."

"It is," he interrupted her. "I assure you."

"Fine. Harry it is."

"Thank you."

"Harry," her voice was low; growing serious in the moment. "I really must apologize."

"I thought we had settled this already."

"Yes, well..."

"No," he shook his head again; his voice more forceful. "Do you have any idea how refreshing it is to meet people who do not know who I am? People who treat me like...like a new arrival in Bendal who simply needs to help unload a truck?"

"No. I guess I don't."

"No, you don't. Now please, please stop apologizing. I enjoyed my time with you this afternoon and you apologizing for it is..."

"Getting old?" She offered with a laugh.

"Yes."

"Fine. I cede your point. I will refrain from apologizing for the rest of the evening."

"Thank God," he sighed; a relaxed smile lighting up his face again.

"But you have to know, I am not normally daft and uninformed."

"I never imagined that you were." And in the beat that their eyes met, her breath hitched in her lungs. "And for the record, not knowing who I am—in no way indicates a person's level of intellect."

"Point taken," she smiled and softened. "But truly, that must not happen to you very often."

"It doesn't," he shook his head. "But it's really nice when it does."
"So strange," her eyes squinted slightly as she watched him nod hellos to people as they passed.

"Did you just call a Prince strange? To his face?" He smirked and, because she didn't know what else to do, she nodded. "Well okay then." A moment of comfortable silence settled between them and Maddie was unsure of what to do next. Was it impolite to occupy his time when he should clearly be talking to people much more important than she? Was it impolite to excuse herself and leave a Prince standing alone? Before she could formulate an answer, Khenda was returning. She smiled first at Harry and then turned expectant eyes to Maddie. She knew that look well, she was about to ask a favor.

"Madeline," her voice was warm. "I hate to impose upon you, but do you think that you might be able to help me out with something?"

"Absolutely," Maddie nodded. "Don't worry about it. What can I do?" She looked across the room, wondering what it was she was being sent off to handle.

"I promised Harry a tour of the new facility we're working out of across camp and I am being pulled into something here that needs my attention." She glanced behind her and smiled to Harry. "Would it be okay if Doctor Forrester accompanied you on the tour I promised?"

"I think that it would," Harry nodded and tuned to Maddie. "If that is alright with you Doctor?"

"Of course," Maddie nodded, forcing her eyes wide and innocent. "It would be a pleasure, your highness."

"Thank you," Khenda, oblivious to the back and forth that was occurring, leaned to kiss them both. "There is a car waiting outside to take you both over, with your security team—of course."

"Thank you Khenda," Harry nodded and, stepping aside, he gestured for Maddie to lead the way. "After you." As Maddie lead the Prince from the room towards the awaiting car, she could almost hear Ella chastising her for walking before the Prince. Shaking her friend from her mind, Maddie smiled and stepped into the car.

As she ushered him through the new facility, pointing out various features, she was more purposeful in her pacing. She was more aware of the conflict inside her. Though she knew there were protocols, ways to be around royalty, she knew none of them. And it certainly didn't help that he made her feel so at ease that she forgot who he was and was most likely committing what Ella would deem as high crimes. His security team kept a respectable distance as they made their way through the complex.

"So," he leaned closer to her. "You're a doctor."

"A PhD," she corrected him with a smile. "Not an MD."

"Are you here with the Peace Corps?"

"No," she grinned as she recalled the two years she spent in the Dominican Republic through the Peace Corps a few years ago.

"Do you work for the State Department?"

"No," she shook her head. "Though maybe someday I will."

"Well..." He held his hands out in surrender. "I give up. What do you do?"
"I am a licensed Psychologist; a therapist."

"A therapist?" He raised his eyebrows. "I cannot imagine that is a profitable business here."

"I'm not here for the money."

"Then why are you here?" And he couldn't help but notice the way she instantly tensed at the question. There was a palpable moment of anxiety between them; one that she broke with a radiant smile that only served to lower his own defenses.

"I am here through Doctors Without Borders," she explained with a casual shrug. He could tell there was more to her reasoning that what she was providing, but he wasn't one to push. "I am a Child Psychologist and..."

"You work with..." He interrupted and then caught himself. "I'm sorry that was terribly rude of me." She smiled and shook her head; dismissing it. "You work with the kids?"

"I do," she nodded, her smile growing warm as she thought of them. "My specialty is in childhood trauma." She watched as his eyes grew darker and they shared a moment of silence for the trauma and violence they both knew was all too prevalent among the youth of the population they were both serving in very different ways. "So I spend a lot of time with the children in the area."

"That must be..." He trailed off, needing to clear his throat of the lump that grew there.

"It is," she agreed. "How about you?"

"Me?"

"What brings you here?"

"I have an organization; a charity which I oversee."

"So I've heard," she smiled as she thought of Ella; who would most assuredly fall over if she saw her now. "But certainly you can oversee such a thing from London. What brought you all the way down here? For the opening of what is essentially a Food Bank?" He paused for only a moment before answering.

"I love it here," his voice was soft; low—honest. "Since the first time I visited, I have loved it here. It's wide and open and the people are so...welcoming. It's such a warm culture; such happy people—even when they have circumstances that, by most standards, should make them unhappy, they seem so..."

"Content?" Maddie offered. The corner of his mouth turned up in a half smile.

"Yes," he took a deep breath. "And I owe Khenda multiple favors." They both laughed at that. "Of course there is the added benefit that the majority of the people here have absolutely no idea who I am."

"Ah yes," her cheeks flushed light pink. "The anonymity you seek—even at the cost of deception."

"The anonymity which you take for granted."

"I suppose," she agreed.

"You like it here," he observed.
"I love it here," she corrected.

"How long have you been here?"

"Ten months," her eyes stared off into the distance as she thought over the last ten months of her life. "Ten of twelve."

"You leave in two months?"

"I can stay longer," she smiled. "My original contract is up in two months. But, if I want, I can stay longer."

"You're thinking about it," he commented, watching the way her eyes danced as she spoke.

"I really am." She looked down at her hands, clasped together in front of her. "My mother would love for me to come home. She doesn't think it's safe here. She worries."

"Of course," Harry nodded. "And your father? What does he think?" And suddenly, Maddie's feet simply stopped moving. Harry slowed to a stop next to her. "I'm sorry did I say something wrong?" He was confused by the look on her face.

"No," she shook her head, her eyes welling with tears she was fighting to halt. She sniffed and smiled clumsily. "My father is... He died; about six months before I came here. He had been battling Cancer for years and right after I finished my doctorate, he...lost."

"Oh, Maddie, I..." Harry swallowed at the lump in his throat, his hand reaching out to touch her shoulder. "I am so sorry. I..." He took a step closer and allowed for a moment of silence before he spoke again. "I lost a parent too and..." He blew a breath out through his lips; of course she knew that. Everyone knew that. "I know it's not enough but...I am truly very sorry to hear that."

"Thank you," she nodded and, taking two slow deep breaths, she recovered and let her eyes rise to meet his and it hit her again; this strange sort of flutter that must have been a part of who he was, the way he smiled sweetly at her. "And I'm sorry for your loss. Though it's never..."

"I know...and thank you," he smiled and rubbed her shoulder with his hand that had not moved since they had stopped. Maddie shifted her weight and looked away, not sure how to proceed in this moment; the connection that she felt with him made her slightly uneasy. Sensing this, he cleared his throat and removed his hand from her. "Do you like candy?"

"What?" She laughed at the question.

"Humor me," he grinned. "Do you like candy?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Tell me...out of all the candy in the world, what is your favorite?"

"Ooooh..." Her smile widened and they began walking again. "That's difficult."

"Give it a moment."

"Hmmm. Oh!" Her eyes lit up. "There were these peppermints that my grandmother used to have around Christmas time. They were red and white with these little Christmas trees in them. They were soft you know...not the hard peppermints..." She smiled wide. "I used to eat so many they would make me sick and they would stick in my teeth..." Her eyes caught the smile on his face and she grew quiet; impressed with how he had moved her from such a sad story to such a
happy memory with the simplest of questions. "Nicely done." He opened his mouth then, ready to
ask her more but just as he did, the gentleman from earlier that day whose job must have been to
keep him on schedule, stepped up to them.

"Sir," he seemed apologetic as he looked from Harry to Maddie and back again. "If we're going to
get you to the plane on time..."

"We have to leave," Harry finished his sentence with regret in his voice.

"Yes sir," the man nodded and turned to Maddie. "There is a car here to take you back to the party
as well." He gestured towards the two awaiting vehicles.

"Thank you," she nodded with a smile and the man stepped away. "Well, your highness," he
snickered at her choice of words. "It was very nice meeting you today."

"As it was you," he bit his lower lip slightly as he smiled down at her. "Thank you for the
tour...and the conversation."

"And the anonymity?"

"Definitely that," he grinned; feeling the inexplicable desire to stall—wanting to stay longer,
continue the conversation, the tour...talking to her. But, surrendering to duty and itinerary, he held
his hand out to shake hers. "It was lovely meeting you Maddie. Best of luck to you here."

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice having faltered at his touch. With the tiniest of squeezes,
he let her hand drop from his and nodded towards the car awaiting her. She nodded again and
took a step towards the open door.

"Maddie?" He called out. She turned towards him as he moved to her side. "I just wanted to..."
He took a deep breath. "It gets easier." The sadness in his eyes told her exactly to what he was
referring; her father. "After a few holidays pass without them...it gets a little easier." Swallowing
the lump in her throat, she nodded and blinked. He mimicked her expression and then, in a softer
voice, "goodnight."

"Goodnight," she watched as he turned towards his car and, with one last sigh, she slipped into
the backseat and let the door close behind her. And for the second time that day the Prince was
swooshed away, leaving Maddie confused, elated and more than a little surprised at how the day
had turned out.
Two and a half weeks had passed since the opening of the food bank and Maddie's routine had returned to normal. She was back in her office seeing clients; some adults but mostly children. There were a few times a month when she was called out to a remote location—when there was an instance of localized violence. But things had been mostly in her office. She was finishing up some notes from her last session when Ella arrived. Knocking as she flew through the door, she bounced into the room; full of energy and spirit.

"Hello Ella," Maddie smiled up from her notebook.

"You are never going to believe what I heard at work last night," the smile on Ella's face was wider than Maddie had ever seen.

"Um...Stevenson is finally getting a haircut?"

"No," she shook her head, slipping into the chair across from Maddie's desk. "It is way, way, WAY better than that."

"Oh really?" Maddie tossed her notebook to her desk and shifted her attention to her friend. "Tell me." Ella paused for dramatic effect.

"He's coming back."

"Who is coming back?"

"You know who."

"I really don't," Maddie shook her head with a laugh. "Wait. Is this a character from one of your shows, because, if it is, that is not you know...actual news."

"Hey!" She feigned offense for only a moment before folding her hands in her lap and smirking. "But no."

"Well then..."

"The Prince."

"The..." Maddie felt her heart jump in her chest. "You mean Harry?"

"What did I tell you about calling him that?"

"He told me to call him that!" Maddie rolled her eyes. "And is that who you're talking about when you say..."

"Yes!" Ella threw her hands up in the air. "Yes. Prince Harry of Wales. Returning to Bendal. In one week."

"Wow..." Maddie smiled as she recalled the conversations she had shared with him less than a month ago.

"Yes, wow!" Ella nodded emphatically. "And why do you suppose that is?"

"I have no idea," Maddie shook her head, her mind working overtime; excited that he would be
coming back and embarrassed to admit her excitement at such a thing.

"No idea at all?" Ella's head tipped to the side as she studied her friend.

"Nothing," Maddie looked up, catching Ella's pointed gaze. "What? You think this is somehow related to me?"

"Maybe," she shrugged.

"Ella please!" Her eyes grew wide at the absurdity. "I spoke to him for what...an hour?"

"You gave him a tour."

"And how many tours do you think a guy like that goes on in a week Ella?"

"I don't know Madeline," she sighed. "But how many of those tour guides order him to unload a truck load of food?"

"Ella," Maddie's voice dropped in warning. "He doesn't remember me. I promise you. I...I would bet on it."

"How much?" Ella leaned forward.

"He has a foundation! That is housed here! He knows Khenda and Collins! He said he owes her many favors! There is no way..."

"How much?" She seemed un-deterred by Maddie's points.

"What do you want?"

"Fifty dollars—American dollars—says The Prince remembers you."

"Without your interference," Maddie pointed at her friend.

"All on his own," Ella agreed, holding her hand out to seal the deal.

"You're on," Maddie met her friend's hand and shook it. "Start saving."

"Please. You have no idea what you're talking about."

"We'll see," Maddie shrugged. "One week."

"One week."

As the week passed by, the plans for his visit became the center of attention throughout the community. This time, his arrival was not going to be a surprise. Khenda had meeting after meeting; putting together a host of events for the five days he was going to be in Bendal. He would be meeting with dignitaries, attending lunches with community elders, entertained by student groups and local dance houses. As Khenda was still responsible for the functionalities of the camp and all who worked there, Collins was her right-hand man in all aspects of the word; taking meetings on everything from who would sit where and what sort of food they would be serving. The official word was that the Prince wanted to draw attention back to the region; showcasing the work that was being done and moving to the front of the discussion the work that was still needed. Though Maddie accepted that answer without blinking, Ella refused. She had been in the area for almost two years and she had seen the Prince twice and one of those times had been three weeks ago. She held her ground. And Maddie held hers.
When his arrival date approached, many of Maddie's colleagues were traveling together to greet him; some even making signs and bringing flowers. A group of children she worked with on a regular basis were going to wave at him. And, though she tried to underplay her own excitement, Maddie had to admit; the Prince's return was a big deal; a great moment for the community. So, she smiled as the kids talked about it and nodded as they made their plans. But when the day arrived, she stayed in the office. She had a few standing appointments that would not be making the trip to meet the plane and her expertise was definitely needed more in the office than at the airport.

Hours after he had arrived, the throngs of people began returning to camp, finding their way back to offices and classrooms; staffing their posts. As Maddie returned to her office from slipping out for a drink, she smiled a hello to the young woman who staffed the main reception desk before stepping past her to her office. And when she saw what was there, or who, her drink nearly tumbled from her hands.

"Good Afternoon Maddie," his voice stunned her as her face snapped towards the sound.

"Oh my God!" She exclaimed scattering to catch the glass bottle before it crashed everywhere.

"You know," his smile was teasing as he moved quickly to her side and reached a hand out to help steady her. "You really shouldn't leave your office door open like that. There's no telling who might wander in." Smiling her thanks for his stable arm, she regained her composure and smiled.

"That is an excellent tip, your highness," his lips pulled up in a smirk. "Who knew that they just allowed the Crown Prince to roam about freely."

"Oh-ho!" He laughed out loud; clapping his hands together. There was something about her spunk that kept him hanging. "You do know that I am not actually a..."

"I do," she nodded, her initial shock wearing off and giving way to the warm happy feeling that was washing over her as she spoke. "But the look on your face when I say it is hilarious."

"Hilarious?" His face twisted up.

"Cute?" She offered.

"Cute?" His face softened and she blushed.

"I'm sorry," she took a breath. "I have to admit, I am incredibly surprised to find you here; alone even." She looked around for the group that usually accompanied him.

"I'm not alone," he glanced at his watch. "I have a meeting down the hall in about two minutes. When Khenda told me that your office was so close, I had to stop by and say hello."

"Well," Maddie tried to quiet her pounding heart. "That was very sweet of you."

"Yes well," he moved towards the door then, turning to smile at her. "I'm not sure if you heard, but I'll be in town for five days."

"I did hear something along those lines."

"Okay," he stalled in her doorway. "Maybe I'll see you again?"

"Maybe," she nodded, her eyes dropping from his in nervousness.

"Oh!" He exclaimed. "I almost forgot. I brought you something."
"You..." She watched as he moved across her office towards the bookshelves he had been standing near when she had entered. "I'm sorry, you brought me something?"

"Yes. I thought you might enjoy these," and when he turned to face her, in his hands was a bag full of the chewy peppermint candies she had remembered eating with her grandmother as a child. Her throat grew tight and her eyes grew slightly teary as they traveled from the bag in his hands to his face where he had the most wonderful expression.

"I..." She breathed. "I don't know what to say."

"Thank you is usually customary," he ribbed her playfully as he sat the bag onto her desk and looked at his watch before heading back towards the door. Maddie watched in stunned silence as he moved past her.

"Harry," she called out. He turned to face her, seemingly nervous. Her eyes met his as her hand moved sub-consciously to rest over her heart. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," and with one final smile, he stepped from the room; late for his meeting.

Maddie moved to her desk; her legs slower than she remembered and, as she sank into her chair, her eyes stayed focused on the bag of peppermints. Her mind spiraled around her; sorting through what had just happened and the many reasons why it just happened and the only thing that she knew for sure?

She owed Ella fifty American dollars.
Before Maddie had the chance to enjoy a piece of the candy Harry had presented her with, she was pulled from her office and off to work with a patient who had just come into the Emergency Room. And from that point on, her day was bustling. She met with child after child until, finally, that evening she had a chance to pause. She caught up on her notes and moved around; tidying up her office, putting things away and preparing for the next day. As she slid some books back onto her shelf, she heard a knock on the door and turned towards it; sleepiness evident on her face. Though she brightened instantly when she saw who it was.

"You're still here?" He smiled.

"I am," she returned the grin. "You're finished with your meeting?"

"Just," he nodded. "May I come in?"

"Since when do you ask permission?" She teased, but gestured for him to enter. He stepped into the room and, with more time this time, he looked around; taking it all in. "How was the meeting?" She almost laughed at how easy the small talk slipped from her mouth.

"It was good," he answered without turning to look at her, his eyes scanning the shelves and bins. "You have...a lot of toys in here."

"Yes," she chuckled. "I use them with the children."

"You play with the children?" His eyebrows rose in question.

"Sort of," she moved to stand next to him. "It's a technique; play therapy. There are ways to use the toys, ways for them to tell their story and...well...children tend to talk more when their hands are busy, form alignments easier."

"Do you find the same to be true for adults?"

"Sometimes," she nodded; watching as his fingers traveled over the labels on the bins, stroking the fur of a few of the stuffed animals she held on a shelf.

"Khenda was telling me that sometimes you are called out to a site, to work in an emergent situation. Is that true?" Maddie tried not to get hung up on the thought of Khenda discussing her with Harry and focused on what he was asking.

"Yes. That's true."

"Are you ever frightened?"

"For myself?" She thought for a moment before shaking her head. "No. I know it's naïve of me, but in the moment, I'm not thinking about those sorts of things. We usually have others with us who are trained to think of those sorts of things. When we go out like that, I'm trained to do other things, so I do them. That's how it works. Each person does their particular piece. The time is generally limited in the field so..." She noticed how intently he was listening to her speak and it brought a smile to her eyes. "But...am I ever frightened? By what I see? By what the children have experienced? By what that means for them in the long term? By what could possibly happen to them the next day? Yes. I am...at times...horribly frightened."

"Yes..." He nodded slowly, having no words to follow up what she had said; having nothing that
could possibly articulate the understanding he had for what she was saying. A heaviness settled over the room and it was Maddie's turn to break it.

"Would you like some candy?" His face lightened and he smiled to himself. "This very kind Crown Prince of England dropped by with a new bag." He chuckled and then moved his eyes to hers; not even bothering to correct her.

"I suppose I should try a piece of this lauded concoction."

"I suppose you should," she smiled; gesturing towards where the bag still sat on her desk. Reaching into the bag, she retrieved two pieces; handing one to him and working on the wrapper for herself. She couldn't help the small moan that escaped her lips as she bit into the candy; memories flooding her senses. He raised his eyebrows, amused, and took a bite.

"Hmmm," he studied the treat in his hand. "Minty."

"Amazingly so," she smiled. "Thank you for bringing these with you."

"You're welcome."

"This was very slick, by the way."

"Slick?"

"The candy. Remembering the story I told you, going to the trouble to find them..."

"It was really not much trouble," he interjected, finishing off his piece.

"Bringing them all the way to Bental..."

"Well, I was coming this way anyway," he shrugged; giving his best effort at nonchalance; moving to sit in one of her chairs.

"Is that something you do with all of the women you meet?" Her eyes narrowed slightly as she sat across from him. Now that she felt so much more comfortable around him, she was curious. She had never imagined that he would even remember her, but the five crisp ten dollar bills in her pocket said otherwise.

"I hardly ever meet women," he avoided the question.

"That is absolutely untrue. You meet hundreds of women."

"Well, not exactly. I am introduced to hundreds of women. I find that I meet very few. There is a distinction." He shrugged. "And the answer is no. I do not normally deliver childhood treats to the women I meet."

"Hmmm..." She leaned back in her chair; contemplation etched across her face. "And what does your girlfriend think of all of this?"

"Excuse me?" His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"I'm sorry," her forehead scrunched up. "I didn't mean to...I just...here you are, in Bental for a week and you're bringing candy to a woman you barely know, stopping by her office after work hours and..."

"Am I being analyzed right now?" He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees; hands pressed together. "Shouldn't I be allowed to at least play with a toy while we do this?"
"Would you like to pick one out?"

"Did you want me to leave you alone? If I'm making you uncomfortable or..."

"I'm not uncomfortable," Maddie cut in leaning forward, matching his position. "I don't mind that you stop by my office. I certainly don't mind that you bring candy when you do..." He laughed at that, easing just a bit. "I just thought that maybe your girlfriend might have some questions."

"I think maybe you have some questions," he pointed his finger at her with a small smirk.

"Maybe," Maddie shrugged. Maybe she had a lot of questions. Maybe Ella was going to have more. "Do you blame me?"

"No," he let out a deep breath and leaned back, deep into the chair. "No, I don't blame you. I have some questions too." Sitting with the silence, she watched as his mind processed it all. "I'm not here to screw around. I...I didn't come here just on a whim. I am actually working; the meetings...they aren't for show."

"I believe you."

"We're having meaningful discussions in there," he rubbed a hand over his face. "And as much as I hate to admit it, me being here...my name...it brings attention to what's happening here, to the violence, to the humanitarian violations, to the economic and agricultural issues the people are facing..."

"Harry?"

"Hmmm?" He looked up to her.

"You sound like you're trying to justify why you're here."

"Yeah," he sighed and leaned up again. "Maybe I am."

"But why?" She smiled. "Nobody doubts your work here. Not one person. I've heard everything from this end and I've seen the coverage outside of Bendal. Nobody questions your motives or..."

"I do," his voice was small, not at all what she had grown used to. "This is a part of my work that I don't mind at all; coming to Africa. I love it here. The people, the culture...I feel like I can almost...hide. I can runaway here and take a break."

"Is that what you're doing? Running? Taking a break?"

"No," he shook his head. "But it doesn't hurt that I can do that."

"It's okay to get something for yourself out of the work that you do. It's okay to take a break while you're bringing attention to what's happening down here."

"I know," his eyes shifted from the spot on the wall he had been studying as he thought to meet hers. "And then...there's you."

"Me?" Her voice came out in a shaky whisper. "I...I'm sorry I don't know what you..."

"I didn't come here to see you," he flinched as he said the words. "That sounded terrible. I just mean that my trip to Bendal was not planned so that I could see you."

"Never in a million years would I have imagined that it was," she found her voice. "I actually lost
money to Ella betting that you wouldn't remember me."

"You thought I wouldn't remember you?" His nose crinkled at the thought.

"I thought there was a chance."

"You were wrong," his eyes were wide and open, as if he were opening himself up to her.

"I see that now." Their eyes met and held for a breathless moment before he tore away.

"How much did you lose?" They both cracked a smile.

"Fifty dollars—US." She shrugged and looked down at her hands. "But I gained a bag of candy out of the deal. So it all worked out in the end."

"Well there you go..." His grin widened and he took a breath. "What I meant to say earlier was that...while I didn't come to Bendal to see you...it doesn't exactly hurt that you're here."

"Oh?"

"I enjoy talking to you," he waved a hand towards her. "You're funny and smart and not at all intimidated by my title. And the last time we spoke I thought...I thought there was a connection."

"You did?" Damn him, Maddie thought; Damn his soft voice, sweet smile, and his eyes for looking at her in such a way that her mind seemed to have trouble with normal thought processes.

"Did I misread that? Was there not something there?"

"No," she shook her head and let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding and he balked at her answer. "No! I'm sorry. I meant...I don't think you misread that."

"Good," he breathed, his smile widening; making his eyes twinkle. A small knock on the door drew their attention from each other. "Thomas," Harry smiled up at the man who had now become quite familiar to Maddie. "I'm guessing you're here to pull me off to something else."

"I am, Sir." He was older, almost fatherly as he looked at the young Prince with a warm smile.

"Of course," Harry clapped his hands together and rose to his feet. Maddie, holding on to the tiniest bit of her self-control stood. "Thomas, I think it might be time for you to meet Dr. Madeline Forrester." He nodded in her direction. "She is a Child Psychologist from the United States working with Khenda and Collins through Doctors Without Borders. Maddie, this is Thomas Smith, my boss." There was sarcasm in his voice as he introduced the two of them; bringing laughter around the room.

"Dr. Forrester," Thomas held his hand out to her.

"Mr. Smith," she took his hand in hers.

"I do apologize for interrupting, but we're scheduled to be in a dinner meeting across town," he turned empathetic eyes to the Prince.

"Sure," Maddie smiled; she wondered if she knew his schedule just as well as he did, having heard so much about it from her friends.

"Would you..." Harry struggled for a moment a she looked to her with hopeful eyes. "Would you like to join us for dinner?" The surprise in Maddie's eyes was matched in Thomas'.
"I..." Maddie felt her throat go dry. "I'm sorry, I am not sure if that would be...appropriate." And though it was minuscule, she could see Thomas relax at her decline. "Thank you, though. For the offer."

"Of course," Harry nodded. "Another time maybe?" He wanted very much to not take her answer personally.

"Another time," Maddie agreed, her face flushing. "Absolutely."

"Okay then," he clapped his hands together; satisfied. "I'll be seeing you."

"Have a good night," she nodded to him and to Thomas. "It was nice to meet you."

"You as well," Thomas nodded in return before stepping out of her office.

"Good night Doctor," Harry's eyes met hers with a gleam of playfulness.

"Your highness."

"Oh and Maddie..." Harry turned in the doorway and met her eyes. "The answer to your question is...there is no girlfriend. No questions, no wondering what I am doing in Bendal delivering candy to a doctor from the United States. There is no girlfriend."

"Oh...okay then," Maddie swallowed.

"Okay then." And then, with a smug grin and a wave, he disappeared into the hallway.
As Maddie sat at her desk, waiting for the first of her clients, she was startled by the sudden appearance of Khenda in the doorway.

"Okay," her voice called into the room, arms crossed; her eyes watching closely. "You want to tell me what exactly is going on with you and Harry?"

"Excuse me?" Maddie looked up in surprise.

"You heard me." She stepped into the room.

"Nothing!" Maddie exclaimed. "Why? Did Ella tell you something? It was just a bag of candy. It's not that big of a deal."

"Candy?" Khenda's face registered confusion as she sank into a chair opposite of Maddie's desk. "What are you talking about?"

"Wait..." Maddie paused. "What are you talking about?"

"He asked me to get you on the list for the event this evening."

"Whaa..." Maddie was stunned. "He what?"

"My reaction exactly," Khenda pointed at her shocked expression. "Especially since you were on the list before and you asked to be taken off."

"Khenda, I..."

"You know if you wanted on the list, all you had to do was ask. You didn't need to send the Prince," there was something sarcastic about her tone.

"I didn't send the...I had nothing to do with this." Maddie saw a tiny smirk on Khenda's face; she was enjoying this.

"Yes, I know," Khenda smiled. "Now, what's this about candy?"

"I..." Maddie looked to the floor, her mind wrapping around the information her boss had just shared. "When he was here last month I told him I really enjoyed a particular candy and when he showed up this week he...he brought me a bag."

"Ooooh...This is all starting to make sense now." Khenda shook her head, a knowing, smug grin on flashed her face. "He is going to owe me huge for this."

"Khenda..."

"Do you want to go?" She raised her eyebrows. "I'm being serious now. If you don't want to go, if you want to avoid this altogether, say the word. I can handle Harry. He'll understand."

"No I..." Maddie laughed nervously and ran a hand through her hair. "What am I doing? I mean...why would he even want me to...what does that even..." She trailed off, not even knowing how to finish her thoughts at this point. The two women shared a moment; one of them asking silent questions, the other providing silent answers—all with their eyes.
"Collins and I will pick you up at five," Khenda’s reply was matter of fact as she clapped her hands together and stood. In her mind the decision was made. Harry had not wavered once when he asked her to bring Maddie along and though she seemed to be unsure about it all, Maddie clearly had something that drew her to him. And Khenda had known them both long enough, had a deep enough affection for each of them, that she wasn't going to step in and prevent this from going wherever it was meant to go.

"Khenda, I don't know..." Maddie fidgeted, pulling her lower lip in between her teeth.

"Yes you do. I'll see you tonight." And then, with a wink and a grin, Khenda left Maddie in her office.


Maddie's day grew incredibly busy and, by the time it was over and she was forced to go home by her colleagues, she was exhausted. After a semi-hot shower, she very much wanted to slip into her pajamas and get some much needed sleep. Fortunate or not, Ella had the night off and she was waiting, with a touch of giddiness and some wise words, to help Maddie prepare for her evening.

As they picked through the few dresses they had between them (because who really brought fancy clothes when coming on a mission such as this), Ella explained some small protocol details. There would be cameras, there would be dignitaries and, although Maddie was likely to not be at all involved in the official pieces of the evening, Ella did not want her friend to make a fool out of herself should she happen to end up in the background. When Maddie emerged from her bedroom, dressed and made up she felt good; slightly unsure about dressing up and going to dinner when there were so many other things she maybe should be doing. Ella assured her that she was fine; that there were other people working, that this was her time off; that she would have been forced out of the office regardless of what she was doing that night and that she shouldn't feel bad about using that time for her.

"Wow..." Ella breathed as Maddie stepped into her view. It was a rarity to see people so dressed up; it was almost a surreal experience. "Maddie. You look amazing."

"Thank you," Maddie smiled, feeling shy.

"I just...I cannot believe you're going on a date with a Prince."

"That's because I am not going on a date with a Prince."

"What would you call this?"

"I would call this nothing. Ella. A date is when a man comes to your home, picks you up, takes you to dinner, and brings you home."

"Seems like a lame date to me."

"Yes, well...there may be more to it than that. But this..." Maddie looked in the mirror hanging in their hallway and shrugged. "This is not a date. This is an event."

"An event he asked you to attend."

"He didn't ask me. He asked Khenda to put me back on the list. Maybe he wants me to serve appetizers."

"Oh yes," Ella rolled her eyes. "I'm sure that's it." She took a deep breath and sank back into the couch, her eyes getting a far off, dreamy look in them. "Maybe he wants you to serve him..."
"Ella!" Maddie tossed her clutch at her friend with wide eyes.

"A girl can dream," Ella giggled, catching the bag and setting it on the table.

"Why aren't you coming to this thing, by the way?"

"I am going to head in and pick up a shift for Tracy. She had a rough night last night and needs a break."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded, having heard about the rush they had the night before. They were mostly used to the craziness, the upset that came with the jobs they had, but occasionally it was too much. Occasionally it hit harder and they needed a break. "That's sweet of you," she smiled genuinely at her friend.

"She would do it for me," Ella shrugged. And she was right. They were a family here, they looked out for each other. Maddie, feeling sentimental, moved to hug her friend, roommate and peer. Ella hugged her tight and then, bringing humor back to the room, she smacked her backside. "You go out there and have fun." A knock on the door rang out. "And don't embarrass yourself...or me!"

"Yeah, yeah," Maddie laughed, moving to answer the door. On the other side was Khenda and Collins, both dressed in traditional tribal garb reserved for the highest of events. Khenda smiled wide and Collins let out a long slow whistle.

"Look at you, Doc," Collins looked her over approvingly.

"You look amazing," Khenda leaned in to kiss her cheek.

"As do you," Maddie blushed as she turned the attention to them. "You ready for the show tonight?" Both of them would be dancing in the entertainment portion of the evening.

"I am always ready," Collins grinned, his white teeth sparkling along with his confidence. "How about you Doc? You dancing with us tonight?"

"Not on your life," she shook her head with a warning glare. Reaching for her purse, she waved to Ella who grinned and called out.

"You make sure she behaves herself!"

"I promise!" Khenda called out as Maddie stepped through the door; pulling it closed behind her. And they were off.

Maddie was seated at a table close to the front of the room. Though Harry would be dining with local dignitaries, Maddie was close to the action and next to Khenda and Collins and a few others from the facility they all shared. It was strange, she thought, seeing everyone together in this way. Most often they were in their small, makeshift space with no air conditioning and their hair pulled back haphazardly. But on this night, the air was cool, they were in a beautiful room and, if their hair was pulled back it was softly and with intent. She wondered if her colleagues were having the same adjustment issues she was.

Even though she didn't see him, she could tell the very instant he entered the room. There was an audible sigh, all eyes shifted together towards the entryway and, in waves the room rose to their feet. Slowly she turned towards where all eyes were watching and when she saw him, she had to
admit, her knees weakened just slightly. He looked stunning. It wasn't quite a black-tied affair, but he wore an unbelievably well cut blue suit and, even from across the room, his eyes were bright and his smile was charming. As he maneuvered through the tables, he seemed to be scanning the room and, when his eyes found hers, his entire face shone. With the slightest of nods in her direction, something most wouldn't even see, he turned to his table and began greeting his mates for the evening. As the room settled and everyone sat, Maddie could feel Khenda's eyes upon her. Ignoring her friend, she turned her attention to the moments at hand.

A small introductory speech was made while salad was served. As Harry took the podium to address the enchanted crowd, Maddie couldn't help but wonder how often he did events like this. And, if they were during meals, did he ever get a chance to eat? And did that mean that he ate beforehand?

Shaking the random questions from her head, she turned her attention to him and, along with everyone else in the room, she was spellbound. He spoke magnificently. Yes, he had a wonderful voice. Yes, he had great speaking skills. But there was something else; an essence that he simply exuded that have the guests hanging on his words and rising to their feet in applause when he finished. And it only made it better, in Maddie's mind, that the words he said were authentic and she knew, with no real reason for knowing so, that he meant every one of them.

As dinner drew to an end, Collins and Khenda excused themselves in order to prepare for the entertainment portion of the night. The host for the evening encouraged mingling and Maddie knew, because this wasn't her first show, that the dancers preferred to come into the room and move about the people, not to be on a stage as the main focus.

Before long, Maddie found herself seated alone at her table, sipping on a drink and watching the interactions around her. Having always enjoyed people watching at any level, she easily slipped into a place of contentment. She was so focused on an elder couple who sat off to the far back of the room that she failed to see him sit next to her until he cleared his throat and drew her attention to him.

"Harry!" Her eyes flashed wide in surprise. "I'm sorry," she coughed, glancing around to see if anyone other than he caught her gaffe. "I'm sorry, your highness, I did not see you sit down." His eyes sparkled as he smiled at her.

"So I gathered," though his attention stayed focused on her, his eyes moved around the crowd; smiling and nodding as needed. "I'm sorry that this is the first time I've been able to speak to you."

"Please," Maddie turned serious eyes on him. "Think nothing of it. You're...a very busy man and I'm here with my friends. And...I'm a big girl. I am an excellent conversationalist and, I don't know if you've noticed, but there is plenty of champagne." She tapped on her half empty glass.

"I did notice," he nodded and, with a raise of his hand, got two new glasses of champagne for them. "Thank you for coming, Maddie. I know it sounds crazy, but knowing you were out here...I felt a little less nervous."

"You were nervous?" She laughed lightly. "You couldn't tell. Your speech was phenomenal." He smiled, looking down at his drink and then to her.

"Either way, I appreciate you coming." As his eyes held hers, she found it slightly more difficult to breath.

"Yes, well, I had nothing better to do," she shrugged, trying for nonchalance and failing miserably. Deciding to go with the authenticity that he was full of, she smiled warmly and told the truth. "I am happy to be here."
"Good," he grinned wide and, as he opened his mouth to say something more, the music began. It was loud and rhythmic and instantly drew the room to a point of excitement. They all knew what was coming, with the possible exception of the Prince. He looked around, slightly confused as one after another of the dancers came back into the room. "I thought they would make some sort of announcement," his voice was louder as he spoke over the music.

"That's not how it works," Maddie responded; joining in on the clapping that was traveling around the room.

The music grew louder as the dancers continued to file in and, when the drum beats grew silent for the quickest of moments, the crowd rose to their feet and applause rang out. They all knew what was coming. Harry followed suit and clapped along, his eyes smiling along with his mouth. This was exactly what he enjoyed about the area; the spirited, lively people that cared less and less about who he was.

And the show began. The music blared and the dancers moved around. No sooner had Harry been spotted, a few young girls came to him, beckoning him to them. He laughed aloud and spoke to Maddie.

"Ever since I danced in Jamaica during the Jubilee, they have been trying to get me out of my chair."

"So...are you going to?" She watched as he laughed at himself; shaking his head. "Khenda did say that you owed her." He turned to watch her, his eyes moving from her eyes to her lips and back again.

"She's correct. I do owe her," he agreed and took a sip from his drink before sitting it on the table. "I owe her a lot." He watched her for two seconds longer than he probably should have before he turned to the young girls and surrendered; giving the crowd exactly what they were looking for.

Though Maddie's head tossed back in laughter, if she was honest, she would have had to admit that he was quite the dancer. Though his moves were nowhere near Collins' and the troupe, he could hold his own. And the crowd loved it. And, deep down in places where Maddie was honestly afraid to explore, she loved it too.

Later that night after a round of good-byes and well-earned yawns, Collins and Khenda saw Maddie home. And, after she had locked the door behind her, she pulled on her pajamas and, lying awake in her dark room, all she could see was those bright blue eyes full of laughter and enjoyment; those bright blue eyes looking right back at her. She pulled the covers tighter and sighed. Clearly she would be getting little sleep that night. And, somehow, she didn't seem to mind too much.
Doctor Stevenson was leaving. His time in Bendal was coming to a close. And, as was customary, Khenda and Collins were hosting a party to say good-bye. The entire Doctors Without Borders crew had been invited. Maddie and Ella, with levity in their hearts, were excited to cut loose with their coworkers and enjoy an evening full of food and conversation.

"I heard you were chatting up the Prince last night," Ella grinned as she sat in the bar stool next to Maddie while Collins stood at the bar and chopped up some vegetables to snack on. A few people had already arrived and were mingling.

"Please," Maddie snickered.

"It's true," Collins nodded with a knowing smile. "Just before we pulled him out to dance, he was deep in conversation with the Doc."

"I knew it!" Ella and Collins shared a laugh at Maddie's expense.

"Enough," Maddie reached across the bar and refilled her drink. "You are all reading way too much into nothing."

"Mmm Hmm." Collins wasn't deterred. He knew what he had seen the night before.

"How was the Prince today Maddie?" Ella continued to poke.

"I actually have no idea. I haven't seen him all day." She popped a piece of fruit into her mouth. "So there."

"Yeah, well. That's about to change." Collins finished the veggies and placed the tray on the counter with a flourish.

"Wait. What?" Maddie seemed slightly panicked.

"Khenda invited him over tonight. He was in the city all day but..."

"KHENDA!"

"Maybe I wasn't supposed to tell you that." Collins winked at Ella and sat back; waiting to watch it all unfold.

"KHENDA!"

"What?!" Khenda poked her head into the room with confusion. Seeing the look on Maddie's face, she knew instantly what the screaming was about. "Now. Before you start yelling...remember, I am your boss."

"Not here you're not!" Maddie called out.

"Okay now listen...."

"No! This is...a private party. This is for DWB personnel. This is NOT a chance for you all to play matchmaker and..."

"Now come on," Khenda laughed, moving slowly towards her. "We've invited civilians before. I
have known Harry forever and...he's the Prince for goodness sake."

"Khenda..." Even Maddie hated the whine in her voice.

"And so what if I have happened to notice that you have eyes for each other?"

"Not true!" Maddie exclaimed while her three friends laughed at her response.

"Madeline," Khenda sighed. "You are, by most standards, a genius. Why do you insist on keeping your head in the sand about this?"

"And what exactly are you hung up on, Doc?" Collins wrapped an arm loosely around Khenda's shoulders. "He seems like a nice guy. He's smart, funny. He's not...terrible to look at." He shrugged. "Why are you trying so hard to avoid that?"

"What is it you people would like me to do?" Maddie crossed her arms. "He is only here for a few more days! He lives in London and I...on my best days I live here. Otherwise I am in the states! A relationship would never work out. It just wouldn't."

"Hold on..." Ella spoke up. "I think you're getting a little ahead of yourself. I'm not talking about making a relationship work out."

"Oh!" Maddie laughed. "So you're saying I should just have a one night stand with the Prince."

"No," Khenda shook her head. "That is not what I'm saying."

"YES!" Ella clapped her hands together while Collins laughed; thankful he was off the market. "That is exactly what I am saying."

"Lovely," Maddie rolled her eyes at her friend and roommate. "Classy."

"Come on Maddie..." Ella swallowed some of her drink and shrugged. "There's something going on here. And don't try to tell me there's not. You can normally go out with a group, relax, and have a good time. Why is it that you're having such a hard time doing that now? With him? He likes you. Clearly he likes you. And don't even try to tell me that you don't like him. I know better."

"I don't..." Maddie started to protest but gave up. Ella was right; Maddie liked him. Though she had no idea if he felt the same way. "Ugh! This is ridiculous. He's only going to be here for a few more days and we're...friends. I should be able to just....relax. I want to be able to relax. Do you think I am ever going to be able to relax?"

"Well..." Khenda planted a kiss on Collins' cheek and moved towards the door. "Let's find out shall we? I see his car outside."

"Oh God..."

"Don't worry, Doc. You look great," he winked at her while Ella laughed.

"I hate you," she scowled playfully. "I hate you both."

"You love us!" Ella grinned. "Admit it! Admit it!"

"Admit what?" Harry's voice cut in; drawing their attention to him. He was dressed casually with a ball cap and wide smile. Khenda handed him a beer as he reached out to shake hands with Collins.
"Nothing," Maddie shook her head; resigning herself to the night—to his blue eyes and charming wit. "I'm admitting nothing."

Though she did do as she had hoped; she stopped avoiding him. She stopped avoiding it—whatever it was. Which was good because, from the moment he walked in the door, he seemed to be near her. If he wasn't in conversation with her, then he was watching her. If he would take up conversation with any of the other twelve or so people in the room, every so often his eyes would scan the room, find her, offering a smile and a nod.

The night proved to be exactly what they had all needed. There was great food, good wine, and plenty of music and laughter. Everyone felt relaxed and at peace; including Maddie. She was sitting on the small loveseat in the living room, watching Collins talk to a man she didn't recognize, when Harry returned to her side; a refreshed glass in his hand.

"Mmm..." Maddie smiled warmly, taking the glass from him. "Thank you, your highness."

"You're welcome," he laughed; settling next to her.

"So...a day full of meetings?" She settled back, trying not to think about the fact that they were touching in at least three places on their bodies.

"Yes," he breathed. 'Good stuff though."

"Good," she smiled. "How do you keep it all straight? You seem to recognize them right away and you know so much about them... It's impressive, actually."

"Yes, well, don't be too impressed," he shook his head. "You remember Thomas?"

"Yes."

"Well, before we came here, he wrote me a one page briefing memo on just about everyone I would meet while I was here."

"Really?" She giggled slightly; feeling like she was being let in on a secret. He nodded and took another drink. Feeling brave, she asked, "did he write you one on me?"

"No," he grinned. "But he certainly should have. I guess he had no idea how integral you would become to the trip."

"Oh I'm sure," she laughed. And, if it had been anyone else, anyone other than Prince Harry, she would have known exactly what was happening in that moment; a mild, friendly flirtation getting dangerously close to the non-friendly variety. But, because it was him, she seemed to be in denial.

"Well tell me, Doctor," his voice lowered as he leaned closer to her. "If he had written me a briefing memo on you, what might it have said?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie was thankful that night had fallen as the dark helped to mask the deep flush she felt in her face. "How much time do you have?"

"I have all night," he grinned. And that did it. She gave in. Turning her body towards his, she met his eyes and just like that, the conversation began.

And once it started, it flowed like a river. There they sat on the loveseat, with people mingling around them and they talked. The talked about everything; about her experience at University, his in the army, about their homes, about their families, about the roads they had taken to this moment, to Bendal.
They talked about what it was like to be famous, for simply being born into a family. He talked about the army and how much he loved his time spent in the military. He talked about the people he had met, the places he had seen; how he wouldn't trade that for anything—even a chance to avoid all the publicity and scrutiny that came with it. There had been times when it was more annoying, when he understood it less. But he was growing to understand it was a necessary evil that came along with all of the things he loved about his life; the travel, the people, the capability to do some actual good in the world.

They talked about his brother getting married and how that shifted things for him. He explained that it had brought his future into focus; made things more clear all while making him a little sad and lonely. One thing was for sure, he felt less likely to ever settle for anything than absolute perfection in his choice of a wife.

She talked about growing up in rural Colorado where her dad farmed throughout her childhood; about how crazy it had been when she moved to the city for college. They talked about her mother; her lovely, simple mother who had only ever been a stay at home mother. She talked about how nervous she had been when Maddie went away to college; how proud she had been when she graduated. They talked about her father; the connection they had shared, the things he had taught her and how she missed him terribly; even still. And there was this moment, this small moment when she was telling Harry about how her dad used to call her every morning to give her a 'word of the day', when she felt tears come to her eyes and Harry reached out and, thinking absolutely nothing of it, he took her hand in his. And that was right where her hand remained until Gary, a surgeon with them out of Canada, came running back into the house—demanding that everyone come out and watch Collins and a few other dancers out in the yard.

On reflex, the moment Maddie saw Gary, she pulled her hand from Harry's; reality crashing back to her. And, with a slightly awkward smile, she suggested they follow the crowd outside. Though he debated the decision for the briefest of moments, he ultimately agreed.

Standing next to each other at the railing of the deck, they watched—along with everyone else—while a small group of people began to dance and play music. Maddie smiled wide as the air blew through her hair. And Harry, he couldn't help but be captivated by her—despite the music and the dancing which he was growing to adore.

"What's on your mind?" He asked. She glanced at him, her mind seemingly far off.

"...how do I ever leave this?" She gestured out at the crowd. "I'm supposed to go in a month and my mother... It's just her and I now. I mean, my aunt is out there with her but..."

"She misses you."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded. "I should go home. But then there's this..."

"Big decision."

"Huge."

"Listen," Harry moved closer, his voice lowering. "I know this is going to sound...crazy. And it's quite alright if you say no..."

"Do you want a piece of my candy?" Maddie cut in sarcastically. "Because I have to tell you I'm kind of getting low and..."

"No, no," he held up his hands in laughter. "I don't want any more of your candy. I promise."
"Good," she nudged him lightly.

"I was wondering, actually, if maybe you would give me your phone number...so I could, maybe, keep in contact with you. You know...find out what you decide to do." Fighting as hard as she could to keep the overwhelming excitement that rushed over her from showing on her face, Maddie shrugged.

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" He raised an eyebrow and grinned.

"Do you have your phone?" Her voice was low, sultry even; she was done trying to hide from this feeling. He nodded and quickly pulled it from his pocket; handing it over to her. She opened it up, pressed a few buttons and slipped it closed. Holding it out to him, she smiled wide. "Maybe." Harry found himself speechless as he held tight to the phone in his hand.

"Will you excuse me?" Maddie smiled up at him; finding she needed to use the restroom.

"Of course," he nodded and watched as she turned towards the house. As she approached the door, taking two deep breaths, she heard her phone ring in the pocket of her skirt. She hurried to find it, confused.

"Hello?" She asked.

"Hello..." She knew the voice in an instant.

"Harry?" She spun around. He stood, leaning against the railing, grinning from ear to ear. Cocking her head to the side she raised her eyebrows. "Can I help you with something, your highness?"

"No," he shook his head. "I was just checking to make sure you gave me your actual number and not a fake one."

"That happen to you a lot?" She chuckled.

"Never. But I am surely not taking any chances with this one." And with that, he ended the call, sliding his phone back into his pocket. With a deep blush, Maddie turned and continued on into the house.

When she returned from the restroom, they were both pulled in to the yard, into the dancing and the revelry. At the end of the night, though Harry had offered to see her home, Collins had stepped in and insisted. Everyone was tipsy and sleepy and, knowing that it wasn't the best idea, Maddie said her good-byes to Harry in a group and then, with a happy sigh, allowed Collins to take her and Ella home; where she fell asleep with his name on her lips.

Yes, he only had a few more days in Bendal. And yes, she had no idea if or when she would ever see him again. But, in those moments as she lay in her bed with Ella giggling next to her, she didn't seem to care.
Chapter 7

The day that had begun slowly, allowing everyone time to recover from the party the night before, soon slipped into a sort of busy that bordered on chaotic. There was a wave of illness that had spread through one of the communities in the area and the medical staff had been running since early morning. It was days like this that Maddie felt the most useless. Her colleagues were massively busy while she saw a normal round of clients. Yes, she was busy, but they were much more so. At times, Khenda allowed her to help out in small ways; checking people in, asking basic questions, handing out various items.

Maddie was in her office, preparing to meet with a family she had been seeing for almost the entire time she had been in Bendal. It was a mother of two young boys who had lost their father to a violent surge in the area just before Maddie had arrived. Jemima, Geru, and Mante. Jemima was struggling to keep her family together, to put food on the table, and to keep her boys from the world that had taken away their father much too early. As she skimmed through her notes from the last meeting, Ella popped in quickly; a bit to eat in her hand.

"Hey!" She called out to Maddie as she swallowed a bite. "Tonight's Harry's last night in Bendal."

"Is it?" Maddie raised her eyebrows, trying for ignorance.

"Is it?" Ella mocked; her eyes narrowing at her roommate. "Does this act work on the general public? Because I don't buy it." She sighed. "Anyway. Collins said that he and Khenda were planning on taking him out to Perini for some local food and, knowing your love for food, I thought maybe we could join them..." Her smile faded into a smirk. "Unless you had something more intimate planned for the Prince."

"Ella..." Maddie glared playfully.

"Come on! Don't you want a great story to tell your grandchildren?"

"My grandchildren?" Maddie laughed; pushing the folder to the side.

"About the time you shagged the third in line to the throne...on one hot sweaty African night?" Her voice lowered as she drifted into the office.

"Shhh!" Maddie waved her hand. "You act like all I would have to do is suggest it to him and he would..."

"He would," Ella interrupted with a smug smile. "I know he's proper and sweet and, truly, lovely. But he has a wild side. I can tell."

"You can tell?"

"I can tell."

"Of course," Maddie shook her head. "While I hate to kick you out of my office, as I think you could certainly benefit from some Mental Health attention, I do have people on their way to see me, so..." She waved her hand; dismissing her friend.

"Yeah, yeah," Ella moved through the door; Maddie following her. "So? Do you want to go or not? Collins wants to have a firm count." Maddie sighed.

"Yes. I would love to go to Perini with you."
"And the Prince..."

"And the Prince," Maddie laughed. "Now go! I know you are busy down there."

"We are," she nodded and began down the hallway. "The Prince is done with official functions at six. We're meeting at reception desk at half past!"

"See you then!" Maddie called back. And then, as she turned back towards her office, she heard the doors to the building fly open and a loud, piercing scream that would change the course of her day. She spun around and there, standing in the entryway was part of the family she was supposed to be seeing in two minutes. The mother, who had fought and fought to keep her boys safe, was holding, in her arms the bloodied, limp body of her youngest son. Maddie's heart stopped.

Her eyes flew to Ella; meeting her gaze for a split second before her training kicked in. The two women broke into a run; directly for where the mother had fallen to her knees; her son slumping into her lap. There was so much crying, so much blood.

"Oh my God!" Maddie couldn't help it as the words slipped from her mouth.

"Maddie!" Ella, for all of her wild, spirited nature, was a consummate professional. Her hands began moving about, checking for pulses and blood pressure and trying to stabilize the young boy though his mother refused to let him go. "Maddie!" Maddie's eyes snapped to Ella's; her mind snapping back. "Get Howard. Now. Run." Maddie rose to her feet and ran through the hall. There were people scattering towards Ella, towards the scene; but she stayed focused. Ella wanted the Cardiac Surgeon for a reason. When she found him, she reached for his arm and, seeing the look in her eyes, he followed her pace without question.

When they returned to the scene, the doctor went directly to the son, who Ella had managed to extract from the mother. Ella held her hands tightly to the side of his neck and she was covered in blood. Maddie's eyes scanned the small gathering of people and fell on the mother, Jemima who, in the shuffle, had been pushed off to the side. Focusing her mental capacities, swallowing back the sorrow she felt creeping into her throat, her eyes, she took a breath and moved towards her. This was her expertise, this was where her training was needed. Ella and Howard and the others would attend to the boy. Maddie would attend to the mother.

Sitting on the floor next to her, Maddie reached out a hand and, in a soft but commanding voice, "Jemima. It's me. Maddie. Doctor Forrester. Can you...can you look at me?" She turned small, water filled eyes towards Maddie. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"They came. They came and threatened to take me and Mante, he..." Her sobs cut her off. "They shot him. He's just a boy! Just eight and they shot him like a man!"

"Jemima..." Maddie couldn't fight the tears that welled in her eyes. "Where is Geru? Was he there when they came or..."

"I don't know!" Jemima's cries increased as she thought of her oldest son. "I held him back but when I went to Mante to bring him...Geru left...oh God....I don't know what he is going to...." Maddie's eyes flashed wide as a multitude of scenarios flew through her mind—all of them including the little twelve year old boy stepping into something that would only bring more horror to this family.

"Collins!" Maddie's head turned around, looking to tell him of the wayward boy. "Collins!" She called out above the chaos and, within moments he was by her side. "Geru is...he was there when Mante was shot and he took off. She...she doesn't know where he is." The gravity of the situation registered on his face as he nodded to Maddie. Patting her on the shoulder, he hurried away from
the crowd; leaving Maddie to her work and rushing off to his. Maddie turned back to Jemima and did all she could in that moment; hold tight to her hand and stay with her while they awaited news on both of her sons.

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It was a quarter past six when Harry returned to the complex. He had finished up what he considered a great day. He had been in meetings, but they had been productive and during the lunch hour he had been able to eat with groups of young children from the local schools and was treated to a musical show they had put together. Despite his growing sadness at having to leave the next day, he was in a good mood.

He pushed through the main doors and his smile instantly faded. He could see that there had clearly been an upset that day. The faces of those around him were somber. The laughter that he had grown used to hearing had taken leave of the hallways. There was a crew scrubbing at a large spot on the floor that he knew could have only been blood. An uneasiness settled in his stomach as he took steps towards Maddie's office. Standing outside her closed door were a tensed Khenda and Collins; deep in conversation.

"What happened?" Harry's voice, well soft and unassuming, surprised the couple as they looked up to him.

"Your Royal Highness," Khenda addressed him first.

"Sir," Collins nodded his head. Harry shook his head. The easy way they slipped into formality only indicated how shaken up they must have been.

"Something happened here today."

"Yes," Khenda nodded. "Something happens here almost every day."


"She's fine," Collins stepped in to reassure the young man. "She's...she lost a client today."

"Two," Khenda corrected him with teary eyes. "She lost two clients."

"Yes," Collins nodded; his stomach clenching. "She had been working with a family since she arrived; a mother and two sons. Their father died just before Maddie arrived and today..."

"Today the two boys were killed; one right after the other," Khenda finished. Collins reached out to stroke her arm. "It's been a long day for Maddie. For everyone but..."

"Wow..." Harry breathed, scrubbing a hand over his face and into his hair. "Is she..." He nodded towards the door.

"She's in her office but Harry..." Khenda's hand reached out, as if to stop him. But before she could say anything else, the door to Maddie's office opened and their attention shifted to her. She had just changed from her clothes that morning—clothes that were now soaked in blood—into scrubs that Ella had given her. Her hair was pulled back; her eyes blood shot and puffy behind her glasses, were tear free for the moment. She looked from Khenda and Collins to Harry, her breath catching slightly.

"Perini," she pointed at him, her lips turned up the tiniest bit. "We were all supposed to take you to Perini for dinner..." She exhaled.
"Yes," he nodded. "But Khenda told me what happened..." And the depth in his eyes, the genuine concern there cracked the control she had just worked to gain and she looked away from him; her eyes filling with tears—sobs aching in her chest. She tried for a moment to stuff it down but failed, miserably. "Is there anything I can..." He trailed off as she shook her head; surrendering to the emotions.

"Damn it!" She smacked her hand against the door frame as tears spilled from her eyes. There was this moment, this tiny moment, when Harry moved a fraction of an inch—as if to go to her. But, in that second, Maddie shook her head, waving her hand at all of them before she reached for a tissue. "I..." She wiped at her eyes and discarded the tissue. "I'm really sorry, but I'm not going to be able to go out with the group tonight. I am going to go out with Collins to the family and talk to...talk to their mother and..." She looked just at Harry. "I know it's your last night and..."

"Don't worry about it..."

"I have to go..." She took a breath; hoping to compose herself. "We just need to check on the rest of the family. They had an absolutely horrible...." Maddie swallowed. "Everyone else is still headed out—they need a night out. But I just..."

"Think nothing of it," Harry offered a small smile and a wave of his hand. He watched as she pulled on a light sweater and nodded to Collins. Collins kissed Khenda's cheek and then, nodding at Harry, he followed Maddie down the hallway and out of the complex; leaving Harry and Khenda to watch them go.

It was five hours before Maddie returned to her office.

Five hours it took to travel to and from the home and to sit with the family.

Five hours of intense mental work; of intense therapy and techniques designed to immediately intersect the fall out that comes with a trauma such as this.

And when she returned to the complex with Collins to grab a file before heading home, she was more than a little surprised to find Harry waiting for her; right where she had left him outside her office. He was sitting in a chair that, even if it had started out comfortable, certainly couldn't have been at that point. She stopped in her tracks when she saw him; her mouth opening slightly.

"Am I seeing things?" She rubbed at her eyes; tired from the late hour and the emotional turmoil she had experienced that night. "Are you really here?"

"You're not seeing things," he rose to his feet and closed the gap between them. "I'm really here."

"But I...why?"

"I'm not entirely sure..." He exhaled and, for the first time since Jemima had burst through the doors, Maddie's emotions lifted. He glanced away from her in a nervous sort of way; a way that made her stomach flutter slightly. "I went with the group for a while, but I thought maybe you...need somebody to..."

"That is..." She bit her lip; desperately wanting to stop crying. "You really are incredibly sweet, you know?" And the tears returned; her efforts to stop them all in vain.

"Hey..." And then, because he was done being proper and careful, Harry moved; pulling her into his arms. And she went, without thinking and without reservations. She stopped listening to the
voices in her head telling her to be careful, be cautious. And instead, she stepped into his arms; arms that only took half a second before they wrapped around her in a warm, tight, comforting hug; a hug that made her feel safe and protected and taken care of.

She knew it was dangerous; that this was only fueling the feelings she had tried to stuff away. But she did it anyway. She needed this. And if he was willing to give of himself, she was taking. No matter what it meant for later.

They stood in the hallway like that for more time than Harry cared to count. He held her close and she cried. And, with the late hour and the long day, there were very few people around to see; nobody around who would question. When she finally pulled away, she smiled up at him—slightly embarrassed at her breakdown.

"Oh no!" She waved her hand at his shirt, turning to reach for tissue from the reception desk. "Look at your shirt!"

"Don't worry about it," he shook his head.

"But..."

"Hey Doc..." Collins' voice cut into the just seconds before he appeared around the corner. Coming to a sudden stop, he took in the sight. Surprised, and impressed, Collins nodded to Harry. "I'm sorry, I had no idea you were here."

"Yes, I..." Harry stammered, unable to find a valid reason for being there so late at night. Clearing her throat, Maddie stepped completely from his arms. Harry let his arms fall to his side; instantly feeling her absence.

"Sorry," Collins smirked; enjoying the awkwardness that had settled over the two of them. "I was planning on seeing Maddie home, but if you..."

"No, no," Harry spoke up, his proper upbringing taking over. "It's been a long night. You should go home, get some sleep. And...I have an early morning."

"Sure," Collins nodded. "Will we see you before you leave?" He could almost feel Maddie's eyes boring into the back of his head.

"You absolutely will," Harry nodded. Tentatively, he reached a hand out; squeezing her shoulder lightly before he glanced towards his security team outside. "Take care of yourself Maddie. I'll see you in the morning."

"Yes," she sniffed; her eyes met his. "Thank you, for..."

"Of course," he tried his best to remain nonchalant, to brush it off; but he had already given away too much. The only one still unable to see it all for what is worth was Maddie—the only one who should really be seeing. "Well," he clapped his hands together. "Goodnight. Maddie, Collins."

"Goodnight," Maddie smiled.

"Goodnight," Collins nodded. As Harry passed through the doors, Collins turned to watch for Maddie's reaction. "Mmm Hmmm." He saw exactly what he thought he would.

"Shut up," she demanded, not even looking at him. And for the first time that night, she laughed; a muffled sort of snicker. With an arm wrapped protectively around her shoulders, Collins lead her outside. What a day it had been.
Chapter 8

Maddie had no idea what time it was when she was jarred awake. It was still mostly dark outside so she surmised it was some time in the very early morning. She had tossed and turned all night, unable to sleep and now, as she had finally drifted off, somebody was insisting on waking her.

She groaned into her pillow as she again heard the knock that was stirring her from her slumber. Tossing back her quilt, she pulled herself out of bed; begrudgingly going to the door. And when she pulled it open, she truly wished she had taken the time to at least run her hands through her hair.

"Harry?" Her voice cracked.

"Good Morning," he smiled softly, slightly nervous. He, on the other hand, was wide awake ready for the day.

"Harry?" Her eyes squinted as she pulled her robe tighter. "It's...early and I haven't been able to sleep all night. What are you...what are you doing here?"

"I am sorry about the time," he looked down sheepishly, his hand clasped together in front of him; fidgeting. "But I am working on a tight schedule today and I thought... Well, this may be incredibly presumptive of me, but..." He took a breath. "If you could go put on something comfortable, something you can walk in...you're coming with me."

"What?" She laughed. "I'm sorry but...what?" Harry grinned. At least she hadn't slammed the door in his face. Emboldened by that, and his now nearly undeniable feelings, he continued.

"I know you don't have to go to work today. Khenda told me you have the day off and I thought..." He stopped, refocused and gestured for her to go back into her room. "There's something I want to show you, but you need to change first."

"First," Maddie folded her arms across her chest. "You should know that I detest being told what to do."

"Let me rephrase," Harry arched an eyebrow and lowered his voice, knowingly moving into the more persuasive version of himself. "Madeline, there is something I would really like to show you. Today is my last day in Bendal and I would greatly appreciate it if you would please go put on some comfortable clothes and join me in this one, small, request." His eyes sparkled and she knew; he was trouble.

"Niiice," she shook her head slowly. "I'm not entirely sure what to say to that."

"Say nothing," he shrugged. "Change." And, because she did have the day off and she did not want to sit around and wallow; she did as he had requested. Maddie changed quickly, left a note for Ella and then, nodding a hello to his security team, she slipped into the car with Harry.

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Though Maddie had been bold in stepping out with him that early morning, her nerves started to dwindle. As they drove through town, further and further out, she grew increasingly anxious and unsure. The ride was a quiet one; full of small, sidelong glances. And when they finally came to a stop, far out towards the edge of the valley, she turned to him, question in her eyes.

"Your highness?" Her voice was soft as she addressed him.
"Doctor?" He chuckled.

"What are we doing here?"

"We're hiking," he grinned before he stepped out of the car.

"We're what?" Stunned, Maddie turned towards her already opened door and exited. "Thank you," she smiled to the man who closed the door behind her. "Hold on. We're what?"

"We're hiking," he nodded toward the trailhead as he took a backpack the driver had retrieved from the trunk of the car.

"I'm sorry, let me understand this," Maddie watched as he pulled on the bag. "You woke me up early, on my day off, to bring me...hiking."

"Yes," he nodded.

"Harry!" She was surprised at how casually she called to him. "What if I'm not a hiker?"

"You are," he shrugged and began moving towards the trailhead. His security staff stayed near the car; having agreed to stay behind.

"But..."

"You live in Bendal, one of the most...you're a hiker, Maddie. I know these things." His expression was smug, sure; happy. "Besides, I ran it all past Khenda and she..."

"Khenda," Maddie breathed her name, trying to avoid the way her name evoked feelings left over from the night before. "I'm not entirely sure how I feel about all of this; the ambush, the planning."

"Yes, well, you have a good mile and a half in and a mile and a half out to think it over," Harry shrugged and motioned for her to join him. Maddie groaned in protest, but followed. "Don't worry. I have water and food in the pack should you need it."

And they walked. Though Maddie had balked initially at the hike, she had to admit; it was wonderful. The physicality it required, the scenery, the fresh air; all served to clear her mind and ease some tension. There was little conversation as they weaved through the path; gaining more elevation as they walked.

"Did you bring me out here so that I would talk about what happened?" She asked as they made their way through a particular rocky area.

"No," he shook his head, watching as she maneuvered.

"Good. Because I don't want to talk about what happened. I'll take today off because Khenda makes the rules and then tomorrow I'll meet with another psychologist onsite. I'll debrief and..."

"You don't have to talk," he interrupted her softly. "I brought you here to hike. I said nothing about talking."

"Good..." She sighed.

"Good," He echoed and, satisfied that they had both made it through the rocks, kept walking.

Having been on the hike before, Harry knew they were nearing the summit. But just before the summit, they had a particularly steep incline to traverse. He warned Maddie, who smiled and
move ahead of him; confident and sure of her abilities. She really was a hiker.

As they climbed, he would occasionally offer his hand for leverage and she would occasionally point out a potentially easier route—which he would happily take. And, when they conquered that particular slope, looking towards the final stretch, he suggested they stop to re-hydrate. Pulling the pack from his shoulders, he held a bottle of water out to her and then retrieved one for himself.

"So..." He started.

"Uh-uh," she waved a finger. "You said no talking."

"I..."

"No talking."

"I'm really supposed to sit here in silence?"

"You woke me up before sunrise to kidnap me and..."

"Kidnap you?" He laughed.

"And take me hiking," she finished. "Yes. You sit here in silence."

"It's good to see we've passed the point of propriety; it was getting a little strange with you calling me sir and bowing to my every need."

"It would serve you well to watch yourself, your highness," she bantered back; thankful for the playful look in his eye.

"What if I promise not to bring up anything that has anything to do with..."

"Bendal," she finished for him. "We can talk. But it has to have nothing to do with Bendal."

"Fine," he took a breath, going for casual; and decided to lead with a question he was only realizing he should have started with when he first met her. "Is there a boyfriend at home?"

Maddie's eyes gave tell of her surprise.

"No, no," she shook her head; her heart hanging delicately as her mind raced. "There's no boyfriend."

"Good," he refrained from breaking into a goofy grin; controlling his features. Trying to cover, he explained, "I mean...I would hate for somebody at home to know that you spent time with me and think that there was anything untoward about it."

"Oh?" Maddie raised her eyebrows, his explanation bringing her insecurities to the surface for one crucial moment. Forcing her heart to continue normally, she shrugged. "Besides, we're friends, right? What could be untoward about that?" Harry, having flinched at her choice of words, cleared his throat and looked out at the sky.

"Friends," he tried to hide the disappointment by taking a drink from his bottle. "You're right. There's nothing untoward about that."

"No." And she instantly regretted her response; instantly regretted that far off look in his eyes. "No there is not." And, as their eyes moved back to the trail, Maddie was mentally berating herself.

"Come on," Harry rose to his feet, reaching out to put their bottles back in the pack. "Let's keep
Come on," Harry rose to his feet, reaching out to put their bottles back in the pack. "Let's keep going." She nodded and followed; too confused to say much.

Their pace was a little slower as they both contemplated their conversation, as they both contemplated the other. Maddie was almost too caught in her mind to notice when they reached the summit.

Almost.

She rounded a sharp corner with Harry right behind her and she came to a sudden, stunned halt. Her eyes widened as her heart swelled. Harry, with a self-satisfied smile in place, stood next to her; looking out over the sprawling countryside below them. All of the uncertainty about what was happening between them washed away from her as she reached her hand out to grip his arm.

"Oh my...Harry. This is..."

"I know," he smiled, glancing at her hand on his arm. "This is one of my favorite places in all of Bendal."

"I cannot believe I've never been here," she spoke so softly, he almost couldn't hear her.

"I thought..." He stubbed his toe against a small rock; knowing he was treading on dangerous ground. "I don't know. I thought that maybe it might serve you well to wake up this morning and see some of the best that the country has to offer...since yesterday you saw the absolute worst."

And because she couldn't fight it any longer, because the beauty of the moment was colliding with the horror from the night before; Maddie surrendered and began to cry. There she was, standing at the top of a cliff in the highlands of Bendal next to Harry, the Prince of Wales; with tears slipping down her cheeks. He stood very still as she moved away from him then; walking closer to the edge and sitting down. Harry removed the pack from his back and moved to her side. Allowing her some space, he sat down to rest and take in the view.

As she calmed down, Maddie wiped at her eyes and glanced in his direction. "Wow..." She sniffled. "I wasn't quite expecting that."

"I don't know why not," he spoke softly. "It's a very tragic thing to have to witness; death and destruction."

"I'm supposed to be stronger than this. I'm supposed to be the one the others turn to for..."

"We all need to breakdown, Maddie," he shrugged. "I've seen grown, seasoned soldiers do it. I can't imagine they would expect more from a therapist who carries around the burden of hearing everyone else's sadness."

She nodded, unable to find her voice. He was so wise, so together. And then, with a timid smile, he held his closed hand out to her. She looked at it and back to him; confused. And when he lifted his fingers revealing, in his palm, a piece of her favorite minty Christmas tree candy, she almost started crying all over again.

Almost.

Instead she gingerly took it from his hand and opened it. Without even thinking, she tore it in half; offering him a piece. Letting out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, Harry took the piece from her and there, on the high hill in Bendal, they sat in silence; enjoying each other—and a piece of Maddie's childhood.

"I feel so..." She struggled to find the right word. "Up in the air. I have been trying to decide what
happens next. Do I go home? Do I stay longer? Do I try something else entirely?” She chuckled lightly. "I just feel so out of sorts lately. I usually have terrific gut instincts; a solid confidence in my decisions. But something happened and it's really shaken me up. I wish I could figure out..." She sighed and smiled at him. "It's like I figure something out, find an answer and then—in twenty four hours, I'm back at square one again. And after last night...I just don't know what to do."

"It will come to you," he seemed absolutely certain.

"How do you know that?"

"You've your head on straight, Maddie. You're smart and caring and...and you have great instincts. Even if they are throwing you off right now. Just give it some time. It will come to you."

"Yeah...” Maddie agreed cautiously. "I'm sorry, how old are you exactly? You sound like an ancient sage." They both laughed at that.

"Na," he shook his head. "I just have great instincts too. And my instincts tell me you'll figure it out."

"Okay..."

"And once you do, you'll let me know?” He raised his eyebrows, hopeful.

"I will," she whispered.

"Good." Both sets of eyes moved to look out at the view; the sun coming up over the land. Without looking at her, he sighed. "I'm leaving today."

"I know.” She hated the way it made her sad to think of. There was a long moment of silence, a long pause where they both contemplated what to do next.

"I'll see you again...” He turned to look at her, hoping she would hear what he wasn't saying.

"I know.” She turned in time to see him smile wide; shocked at how honest it all felt.

"Please be careful while you're here."

"I am always careful while I'm here."

"I'll be calling you," he patted the phone in his pocket.

"I look forward to it."

"And you...you know how to reach me if you ever need..."

"Candy?” She cut into the heaviness with a moment of humor; bringing a loud laugh from him.

"Yes,” he nodded. "Candy. It's good to see you still have your priorities in order."


"Yes,” he nodded as the moment faded to seriousness. "I really hate to say this, but I think we should..."

"Yes...” As she moved to stand up, he held a hand out to her. Without hesitation, she took it; allowing him to help her to her feet.
Holding onto her hand; contemplation danced across his face before, with a small squeeze, he let it go.

Their return to the trailhead was quiet; thoughtful. They spoke of the things that one speaks of when trying to avoid the elephant in the room. They pointed out plants they had missed on the way up. They cursed the weather and the lack of rain. And, when they emerged from the trail to find not only his car and security team, but another car that Maddie knew was meant for her, they talked about how the drive home always seemed to take less time than the drive there.

But they never talked about "it." Not once did he put voice to his desire to take her to dinner, to walk her home, to listen to her talk for hours. Not once did she burst out with the admission that she didn't want to be his friend, that maybe Ella and Khenda and Collins had all been right, that maybe there was more happening here, that maybe—maybe she wanted a really good story to tell her grandchildren.

They never addressed any of it. It was too late. He was getting in his car and heading directly to the city where he would have one last meeting and then board a plane for home. And she, she was headed back to the fallout from the night before and the preparations for many nights to come. And the thought of "it" was destined to be just that; a fleeting thought.

"Well, doctor," his voice lowered as he moved closer to her.

"Your highness," she smirked, offering the most of a curtsy he had seen from her on the entire trip.

"I guess this is goodbye."

"It would appear so." They stalled for a beat before he gave in.

"Goodbye Maddie," Harry's voice was gruff as he leaned in to press a kiss to her cheek. Maddie couldn't help but think that all she would have to do is turn her head just to the left and they would be kissing.

But she didn't turn.

And he pulled away.

And with one final wave, she was in her car heading back to her small, shared apartment in Bendal.

That afternoon, as Harry took his seat on the charter that would return him to London, he was happy and content knowing he had military obligations to keep his mind busy. He hoped against hope that the space that was now occupied by the young American he had met in Bendal would soon be replaced with tales from the front line. Though he knew, there was a small chance of that.

And, as Maddie crawled back into her welcoming bed, she couldn't help but wonder what had just happened. The day had been so exactly what she had needed; the hike, the tears, the candy. And how had he known that? This Prince who she had barely met...could he really have known her well enough to know what she needed in order to find this peace she now felt? Or were his instincts and abilities to read people really just that good? As she closed her eyes and cuddled close to her pillow, her mind was at ease enough to finally admit that she hoped she would someday have a chance to really find out the answer to those questions. But, until then, she was happy to finally, peacefully, fall asleep.
Chapter 9

If Maddie was honest with herself, she would have to admit that there was a tiny part of her that thought, even though Harry had asked for her phone number, had taken the time to verify it and promised to call, that he would arrive home in London and never call. She had thought that his life would take over and he would simply forget. But she quickly learned she could not have been further from the truth.

And that was not the only thing she learned over the course of the next few months.

They both learned a lot about the other. She learned that he actually stayed up much later than she could even imagine. He laughed and told her it was because he was not nearly as busy as she. She groaned and told him it was probably because she was older. He would point out that they were merely a month apart. And then she would sigh and end the conversation because, as he would learn, she valued her sleep above most other things.

And they became close; becoming much better friends than either of them would have guessed. He was the first one she called, even before her mother, to tell him that she had decided to extend her contract another six months. He congratulated her on the announcement and helped her walk through how exactly she was going to break the news to her mother. Though he offered to make the phone call for her, she declined. Her mother would find no humor in what she would mostly likely assume was a prank phone call.

She was one of the three people outside of the family that knew of the opportunity he had to head back to the frontlines in Afghanistan; flying the Apache helicopter. And she was the one he called in the apex of frustration when they cancelled it a month later. She listened as he yelled, she agreed while he ranted and, when he had calmed down, she sat in silence for two minutes before he sighed and moved the conversation elsewhere.

He told her about the trips he was taking, the events he was attending and he listened endlessly whenever she talked about The Community Garden, the newest endeavor in Bendal. It was a wonderful project they had been working on with the children who lived in the home for parentless children just a short distance away. When the Director of the home had approached her to help out, she had jumped at the opportunity; knowing the confidence and ownership it would give to the kids. But even she hadn't foreseen the enormous amount of pride it would bring about to everyone involved. They had all worked together as a community to build a green house, till the ground and plant the seeds. It had been a fantastic idea; something she would remember forever.

There were moments where they came close to talking about what was happening between them. Maddie would have a long night, watching people lose those closest to them and she would call him, her intentions to live in the moment, to put words to the excitement that would bubble up when she would see his number on her phone.

There were nights when Harry would have a little too much to drink and he would sit at home, turning the phone over and over in his hands; debating his next move with great intensity. Call her and face the wrath that came with waking her or put the phone down and sober up. The phone would go down and the dance would continue.

Harry would continue on with his duties, with his family and Maddie would dismiss the feelings and move forward. Being a friend of Harry's was proving to be much more fulfilling than she would have imagined and, based on his almost daily phone calls, he was enjoying it too. There was no need to mess with a good thing.
Ella had almost exhausted her reservoir of innuendo and jokes. Khenda remained supportive and hopeful that someday the two of them might figure it out. Though his eyes spoke volumes when they met and held Maddie's; as if he knew something he wished she would see. And in London, Harry's brother and sister in law had heard extensive tales from Bendal; every one of them laced with Maddie.

And then, one day, Harry decided it was time to stop dancing. With a glare from his brother and a gentle nudge from his sister in law, he made a few travel plans and placed one very important phone call. Going straight to her voicemail, he took a breath and left a message.

"Maddie, it's Harry. I hate to leave this in a message but...I'm boarding a plane and I wanted to let you know..." His nerves waned slightly as he looked at the floor. "I'm coming back to Bendal. I'm stopping in South Africa first and then I'll be there on Thursday. I'll only be able to stay for a few days." He sucked in a breath. "And this trip...has nothing to do with business or meetings or anything official. This is all about me needing a break and running and...and it has everything to do with seeing you; which I'll be doing soon. Seeing you." And then, before he could take advantage of the delete and re-record option her voicemail gave him, he ended the call; stuffed his phone in his pocket and took another deep breath. "Well...that ought to do it."

After the initial shock wore off, Maddie was inexplicably excited by the voicemail Harry left. She had been in a meeting when he had left it and, seeing his number on her missed calls list, she had tried to call him back. Unable to reach him, she pressed the button for her voicemail. And she listened. She could tell from his inflection that he was smiling and, when she heard him speak the words—she came to a sudden, abrupt stop.

"Oh my God." Her lips pulled into a wide smile. She glanced around quickly looking for somebody, anybody who she could share the news with. Finding nobody, she did the only thing she could think of.

"Ella!" She called out; her feet moving faster than normal as she rushed back to the main complex. "Ella!" She hurried through the doors and down the hall looking for her friend.

"What are you yelling about?" Maddie turned around to find her friend sitting at one of the desks she had passed; taking a well-earned break.

"Come with me," she reached out for Ella's arm and, dragging her friend behind her, she hurried back to her office.

"What the hell is..." Ella laughed as Maddie shut the door behind her. Without a word, Maddie dialed her voicemail and handed Ella her phone.

"Listen." She commanded. Though she looked at Maddie as though she had gone crazy, she took the phone and did as she was told. And then, when her eyes snapped up to meet Maddie's, she started bouncing on her heels.

"He's coming?" Ella shut off the phone and passed it back to Maddie. "He's coming..."

"On Thursday." Maddie nodded.

"He's coming to see you," Ella clapped her hands together. "In two days. He'll be here in two days."

"Oh my God..." Maddie shook her head; her heart racing in her chest at the thought.

The next two days went by painfully slow. Maddie's nerves were an absolute wreck. It was as
though her body knew that she was on the precipice of something big; something monumental. And it made her slightly uneasy. Yes, she had known him for around six months and yes, they had been speaking on the phone for almost four. But knowing that he was going to be there, standing in front of her, brought back all the excitement and jitters she had been able to tamper down since he had left months ago.

But above all, she was elated. And everyone could tell; her colleagues, her friends, the kids she worked with. Everyone. Though his trip was a personal one, there were still arrangements being made. His security team, smaller than during his official trip, were making plans while Khenda and Collins did their best to keep the visit under wraps.

When Thursday finally came, Maddie made it a point to stay busy. She hadn't heard from him at all since the message he left. He could very well have changed his mind, though she knew better. Trying for as much normalcy as possible, Maddie went out on her routine run of home visits on Thursday morning and, when she returned to her office after lunch, she knew instantly.

He was there. Though he wasn't standing in her office, he had been. And the reason she knew that was because there, on the middle of her desk was a brand new bag of chewy, minty Christmas tree candy.

"Oh!" She gasped; her hand flying to her mouth as she stepped closer. Her chest tightened as she looked down at the treats he had brought with him. There was a hand written note next to it. Her fingers lifted the paper from her desk.

M~
My flight was early and I came straight here.
While I was waiting, one of the children wanted to show me the new Community Garden...I couldn't say no.
I'll see you when you return.
~H

Letting the note rest next to the candy, Maddie spun around and, without another thought on the matter, she went directly to the Community Garden, excited that he was going to finally see it. As she neared the garden, she could hear the laughter from inside the fence. She slowed her pace, spying on the interactions inside.

And when she saw him, she sucked in her breath; almost giving herself away. There he was, tanner and taller than she had remembered; sitting in the dirt with a boy in his lap. He was smiling and nodding animatedly while the children gave him quite the tutorial on how to plant a seed. And as Maddie watched, her heart swelled in her chest, her pulse quickened and she finally, finally recognized the surge of feelings that had been building up over the last six months. And she was, quite suddenly, terrified that he might not feel the same way.

"Maddie!" The loud, giggly voice of one of the younger girls called out as she pointed towards the fence. All eyes turned in her direction and, for a split second, he caught her gaze with a wide, warm smile full of relief. As the children rose to their feet and ran, full speed towards her, Harry was forced from his trance. Standing, he brushed the dirt from his pants and followed behind the group of children, now swarming around Maddie; hugging tight to her legs. They were laughing, telling her about the progress in the garden, the events of their day, and how they were teaching Harry how to plant.

"Your highness," she offered him a small curtsy as he shook his head, humor glinting in his eyes.

"Doctor," he nodded wondering if it would ever cease to be humorous when she did that.

Though it took some work, Maddie focused her attention on the children; nodding and smiling,
ooh-ing and ahh-ing. And, when they were satisfied with her response, they ran back to their makeshift playground; high-fiving their new friend Harry as they went.

"I have to tell you," Harry spoke first, his voice making her skin flush. "I love that you're much more of a celebrity here than I am." Her head tossed back; joining him in the light laughter they both needed to break the ice. It felt so strange; having spoken to each other for so many hours over the last few months and yet, feeling so nervous around the other.

"You're really here," she turned to him shyly.

"I am," he took a deep breath and then, surprising her, he leaned in; pressing a lingering kiss to her cheek. "It's good to see you again, Maddie." He was so close and he smelled so wonderful, she couldn't help but sigh. When he pulled back, his cheeks were stretched wide with a smile. And he knew. He owed William and Kate a Thank You. They had been right to push him here. This was exactly where he was supposed to be.

"It's good to see you too Harry," she felt herself relaxing slightly.

"I assume you saw my note?"

"Next to the candy? How could I miss it?" They laughed; relaxing even further. She could feel their friendly nature returning. "Thank you for contributing to my addiction."

"You're very welcome," he laughed; following her lead. Their pace was slow as they walked back towards the complex.

"So..." She took a breath and decided to open up the discussion. "You're on the run?"

"Ha!" He nodded. "Yes. I am on the run."

"Care to tell me what you're running from?"

"Who says I'm running from anything?" His stress on the word caused her heart to jump in her chest.

"Okay," she swallowed. "Care to tell me what you're..."

"Running to?" He finished for her; his voice soft as his eyes searched to meet hers. "I would love to..." He nodded. "Though, I was actually hoping I could speak to you in private."

"Of course," she smiled; hoping he couldn't see the fear that flashed across her face. "Is my office okay?"

"It's perfect," he nodded as he reached out to hold the door to the complex open for her.

"Thank you," she moved past him and, as soon as they stepped inside, they were bombarded. News had traveled fast and a small group had gathered to welcome Harry back to Bendal. And he was thrilled to see them all. He hugged Khenda tight; kissing her cheek hello before he turned her loose. He shook Collins' hand, thanking him for welcoming him back on such short notice. He even kissed Ella's cheek—causing no small amount grinning on her part. Maddie smiled as she watched it all unfold. He seemed so at ease among them; and them with him. She knew, from her many conversations with him, that as a child he had secretly longed to abandon his royal status and live in a faraway jungle. It was one of his fantasies from childhood; one that he knew would never come to fruition. She wondered if this was as close to that fantasy as he was able to realistically get.
"So, tell me," Khenda nudged him. "What does your schedule look like?"

"There is no schedule."

"Really?" She seemed impressed.

"None," he shook his head; exhaling in the relief he felt. "I'm not here on business."

"Wow..." Ella beamed at her friend. "So for the next three days, you're all ours?" A light rumble traveled around the group.

"I am," Harry joked. "For the next three days, I'm all yours."

"Yea!" Ella clapped her hands.

"Oh God," Maddie groaned playfully. "You have no idea what you just signed up for."

"I am not the least bit nervous," he winked at her mischievously.

"Yes well," Khenda watched the interaction between the two of them. "I think that we..." She waved at Ella, Collins, and herself. "Should get back to the hospital."

"Yes," Collins nodded. "We are having our first 'harvest' tonight..."

"From the Community Garden?" Harry's eyebrows rose in interest.

"Yes. There will be a celebration, some food..."

"Dancing," Maddie pointed out with a nudge towards Collins.

"Fantastic," Harry grinned.

"Will you be coming?" Ella looked to Harry who then, in front of everyone, looked to Maddie as if to ask her.

"I..." She glanced around, surprised. "I was planning on it."

"Then yes," Harry clapped his hands together. "Yes, I will be there."

"Great," Khenda smiled as she began to usher Collins and Ella away from the two of them. "We will see you both tonight."

"Yes you will," Maddie met Khenda's eyes with a silent thank you and then, as they slipped down the hall, she turned towards Harry—who was watching her closely. His smile widened. "Shall we?"

"After you," he stepped aside; following her into her office. He stood next to her bookcase, leaning casually against it while she shut the door behind them. He watched her walk across the room to stand in front of her desk.

"Candy?" She waved her hand nervously.

"No, thank you."

"Suit yourself. More for me." She shrugged smugly and he chuckled.

"God Maddie, it's so good to see you," he exhaled; visibly relaxing. Maddie laughed softly.
"A little strange too, no?" She leaned back against her desk.

"Strange?"

"We've spoken to each other so much that it feels like we're...I don't know." She shrugged; struggling for the right words. "I felt like we were close enough that I could hug you. I felt this urge to hug you earlier but then we haven't seen each other in months and it didn't feel like we were really..." She trailed off; rolling her eyes at herself.

"You can hug me," he cut in, his eyes dancing at the thought. "I know it's a little...strange...but you can. Even though we haven't seen each other, I think we're definitely in a place where you can...if you want to..."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, but stayed put. She was waiting for him to take the lead; curious about what he had to say. She watched as a whole host of emotions passed across his face. "Harry, is everything okay?"

"Yes!" He exclaimed, looking up. "Yes...everything is great. I just...I wanted to talk to you about some things."

"Things we couldn't talk about over the phone?" Her head cocked to the side.

"Nah," he shook his head. "Not really." Pushing away from the book shelf, he took a few steps closer to her. Maddie couldn't help but feel slightly panicked at that. They had talked about so much over the phone; his mother's death, his father's infidelity, his top-secret, red-lighted deployment to Afghanistan. Her mind raced trying to figure out what it could possibly be that he couldn't tell her over the phone. Seeing the anxiety on her face, he reached out; his hand resting on her crossed arms. "Don't worry. It's not bad." Maddie looked from his hand to his eyes and raised her eyebrows. "Harry?" He nodded, cleared his throat and clapped his hands together. This was it.

"There are two things you should know about me Maddie." He began to pace slightly in front of her. "First, I am...honest—painfully so at times. I prefer things to be on the table; out in the open. I have been accused of being blunt and I may be. But I really don't want things to be left up to interpretation. I much prefer open, clear communication. Even when it hurts." He took a breath and continued. "If you didn't know that about me before, you should know that now. From here on out, I am an open book. There is not a question you could ask that I won't answer."

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

"Tell me this, why does a round pizza come in a square box?"

"I'm sorry?" The corner of his mouth tugged up at her question.

"OR this one; If the professor on Gilligan's Island can make a radio out of a coconut, why can't he fix a hole in a boat?"

"Maddie..." He laughed.

"I've always been curious." Her lips tugged up in a tiny smirk as he shook his head; amused at her ability to keep things light and airy. "Sorry, I couldn't resist." She smiled sweetly. "Go ahead. You're honest."
"Yes," his pacing ceased as he stepped towards her. "I am honest and..." He held up two fingers; moving on to his second point. "I place a very high value on friendship and loyalty; both in others and in myself. I very rarely allow people to get too close to me."

"That makes sense."

"With...very few exceptions, if somebody is in my life now, they have most likely been in my life for a very long time." His eyes met hers and she knew he was counting her as one of the exceptions and it made her heart race. "And...once I care about you...I care about you forever. It doesn't end just because our relationship does."

"Why are you..." Maddie took a breath. "I'm confused. Why are you telling me these things?" Was he here to end their friendship?

"Because..." He came to a stop in front of her; his eyes locking on her face, watching as he continued. "Because I wanted you to know that I will always consider you a friend, I will always tell you the truth. It's been like that with women in my past; we've remained friends, we've remained loyal. And I want you to know that...no matter how it is you feel about what's going to happen next." He swallowed the lump in his throat and held his eyes on hers. "About what I hope is going to happen next."

"What's going to happen next?" Maddie whispered; the confusion evident on her face.

"Ha!" He laughed; astonished at her naivety in this moment. "You really don't know?" And just in case she didn't, he reached out, with a steady hand to take one of hers into both of his. "Maddie..." She looked down at where their hands were connected, where the heat in the room seemed to be radiating from and, as his thumb absently stroked the back of her hand, it hit her. Her eyes grew wide as she looked up to him.

"Me?" She whispered before clearing her throat. "Are you talking about me?"

"I hope so." His admission was so sweet, so innocent—and it stole her heart completely. Her breath hitched in her throat.

"Harry do you...Are you saying that you...like me?" He chuckled lightly; her inability to believe it only endearing her to him more.

"I think I'm saying more than that, but we can start there."

"Wow..." she shook her head; looking down at their joined hands again in disbelief; waves of the moments they had shared washing over her.

All of the jokes, all of the laughter, all of the late nights and the long talks.

As each moment crashed back into her brain, it became more and more clear what, or more accurately who, he was speaking of. The corners of her mouth turned up cautiously. Her eyes rose to meet his and his smile stretched across his face; his eyes crinkling as he beamed. She wasn't bolting. She shook her head again; slowly.

"Will you...will you please say something?" He raised his eyebrows; hopeful.

"I..." And she wanted to, she wanted to say many things but for whatever reason, her mind was completely stumped. "I am...confused."

"Confused?!" He laughed out loud; inching closer to her. He was finding, as the words poured from him, he couldn't help but want to be closer to her. "I cannot imagine how you could be
"It's just...me?"

"Yes. You," he sighed. "Maddie, you're amazing. You're smart and funny and warm. I mean, just watching you with the kids today... You're laid back and not easily rattled." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "And you're not at all afraid to boss me around." That did it; that cut through the nerves in her stomach. She tossed her head back and laughed and his smile deepened. "You know exactly what you want. You know exactly who you are. And...you have this confidence that is just so real and so damn sexy."

"Harry..." She felt her face flush at his words.

"And you're humble and gracious and...beautiful..." He stopped and cocked his head to the side thoughtfully. "And you know, I am really laying it all out for you, aren't I? So much for suave and in control, no?" He looked down slightly embarrassed at his own ramblings.

She knew that this moment was big; that he was out on this limb all by himself; exposed at such a vulnerable level and more than anything, she wanted him to not be alone on that limb. But her mind was simply failing her.

So she did what she could; her hands turned around in his, so that she was holding onto him as well and squeezed gently. And it was enough. His eyes met hers and they twinkled the bright blue she had grown so fond of. She sighed and relaxed slightly; thankful he was allowing her time to process it all.

"Harry...Can I just ask..."

"Hmm?" He lifted his eyebrows. "Anything."

"I'm an American."

"Yes," he chuckled softly. "Yes, I know."

"I'm a commoner."

"Really now?" He eyed her, disapproving of her choice of words.

"And you..." She looked him over, feeling slightly more herself. "Well, you're a Crown Prince."

"Oh for Heaven's sake!" His voice grew as he rolled his eyes in exasperation; pulling away from her slightly. "I am not a Crown..."

And then, since her mind was failing her, she turned control over to something else entirely. Her hands, intertwined in his, pulled him forward; closing the distance between them and her lips; smiling and warm; captured his—putting an end to his sentence, to the banter; to his entire thought process. It took him only a second to recover from the surprise; only a second and his arms were wrapped around her, holding her body closer to his. Only a second before his lips parted slightly, pulling her deeper into this intoxicating moment.

"Wow..." He breathed; pressing his forehead to hers; catching his breath. "You kissed me..."

"Well," she sighed. "You did tell me it was okay to hug you and, since you seem to have a thing for me..."
"A thing?" He laughed. "It's slightly more than a thing."

"Either way, I figured it was okay to..." Harry nodded his agreement as his lips sought hers again.

"It is more than okay..." His voice was low near her ear; his breath warm against her skin. "It's just, the first time...I usually have to take the lead and..."

"Oh no! Did I ruin the moment for you because..." She pulled back to look at him. "Because I..." He kissed her again. "I didn't mean to step all over your manhood..." She hurried to speak between kisses. "But I've always been a bossy, take charge kind of..."

"Maddie would you please..." While one hand moved up, entangling itself in her hair, the other snaked around her waist and then, with a tad more force, he pulled her face to his. "I adore your bossy, take charge ways..." And, as his lips moved against hers, as her mouth opened under his—deepening the kiss—they both seemed to have lost track of what they had been talking about.

Maddie sighed into him; her arms wrapping around his neck. And Harry, strong and sure, held them both up; fused together in this moment that had been six months in the making.

And totally worth it.
Chapter 10

But for the knock on the door and the arrival of Maddie's patient, she may very well have stood there kissing Harry for the rest of the afternoon. And, from the light in his eyes and the grin on his face, he would not have objected much to that. With a promise to see her later and a small wink, he left her to her job.

As Maddie had to work up until the party that evening, Harry agreed to meet her at her office. He had gone to Khenda and Collins' place, where he would be staying, to settle in. When he returned, Ella was waiting outside of Maddie's closed door.

"She's changing," Ella smiled as she moved to stand. Harry, slightly embarrassed by the formalities that came with his title, waved his hand for her to sit. She did and he joined her; taking a chair across from hers.

"How have you been Ella?"

"Very well, thank you." She smiled as she studied him. "How about you Harry? Can I call you Harry?"

"Of course," he smiled. "I'm doing really well."

"Good," she nodded; watching him carefully. Harry couldn't help but notice the way she was looking at him.

"Everything okay Ella?"

"Mmm Hmm. You know..." She leaned forward in her chair. "I think you're a really great guy."

"Oh-kay." He blinked.

"And I have been pushing Maddie towards...this...since I first saw the two of you interact..."

"Oh?" His smile widened.

"Yes," she took a deep breath; contemplation taking hold of her mind. "I'm not sure if you know but...Maddie is my best friend. I absolutely adore her."

"I do know that," he nodded. "And she feels the same way about you." Ella agreed with a small smile.

"And she...tells me things..." Her voice was soft, quiet; wanting him to know that she was being serious. "Things about you. Well not you, but you and her."

"Ah..." He breathed; seeing where this was headed. "I would imagine that she does." He brought his hands together in front of him; leaning closer to her.

"And I would imagine, given you are who you are, that it probably takes a lot for you to trust somebody."

"I suppose it does," he admitted.

"And you don't know me at all," she shrugged and offered a smile. "I'm basically a stranger to you and yet, I know that this afternoon, Prince Harry of Wales flew to Bendal to kiss an American
"But I just... I want you to know that, even though at times I seem flighty and a little crazy, I am actually trustworthy and... loyal. To Maddie." She looked towards the floor for a moment. "And I thought you should know that anything that I learn about you through girl talk will never go beyond me. I would never betray Maddie's confidence and... I don't know. I just thought that maybe it might help if you knew that. Maddie trusts me. And you trust Maddie and... I just thought you should know. You don't know me. But you can trust me."

"Thank you Ella," his smile was genuine. "That means a lot. Though..." He moved to the edge of his chair and cleared his throat. "I think that you should know that I never doubted that about you. Not once."

"Really?" She was surprised.

"Of course not," he shrugged. "You and Maddie are... like brothers in arms."

"Sorry?" She raised her eyebrows.

"You've been to battle together." She could see the seriousness in his eyes. "You've stood over death together. There's really not a bond quite like that, is there?"

"No," she shook her head solemnly. "No, there's not."

"To trust Maddie is to trust you," he tried for a smile. "Though I appreciate you thinking of it... and me... You're a good friend."

"I really am," Ella grinned, the wilder version of her personality taking over.

"You really are what?" Maddie called out as she emerged from her office. Harry's attention completely diverted as he stood.

"You look fantastic," he grinned; leaning to kiss her cheek.

"Thank you. You would be surprised at what a new skirt can do for a girl."

"See, I was going to say the opposite," he watched her with adoring eyes.

"What a girl can do for a new skirt?" Ella asked, amused by the back and forth between them. "Well played. Hey, can I call you Prince Charming?"

"No," Harry laughed with a firm shake of his head. "You can never call me that."

"Fine..." She sighed dramatically. "Harry will do." Maddie laughed at her friend.

"Thank you," Harry smiled at her. "Shall we?"

"Absolutely," Maddie nodded.

"Ella?" Harry raised his eyebrows at her.

"Let's do this," standing Ella joined the two of them as they made their way outside of the complex and across the street to the Community Garden. As they rounded the main building, they could already hear the music playing, the laughter and conversation. And as soon as their presence was noticed, they were pulled right into the middle of it all.
And the night began. They all joined in on the picking of the foods from the garden. Harry carried a basket while Maddie and Ella added to the load. Once all of the ready items were harvested, Collins lead a group of children in the washing and preparing of a salad of sorts. There was a traditional dance and a blessing before they all enjoyed some of the fruits of their labor. And, as it grew darker, the kids began to disburse; running and playing and laughing. Though the food was put away for later consumption, the party continued; singing and dancing and a little drinking. Maddie joined Daniel, the other Psychologist who shared her office, in making the rounds; talking to the families they worked with. They knew that it was moments like this, moments where they could interact with the community in a neutral, relaxed setting that made their therapeutic moments more impactful. It was difficult for people to open up to somebody, even more so a stranger, even more so a stranger who looked nothing like them who was from another country. So they took advantage of these genuine moments of community to build those relationships; opening those barriers.

Harry, enjoying the complete lack of attention he was receiving, took a drink and slipped off to the side; watching the action unfold. Maddie chatted animatedly with an older couple while Collins worked with three little boys to show them how to complete a series of dance moves.

Khenda, finished with her role in the evening, spotted Harry sitting in solitude and was compelled to join him. She could remember the very day she met him. She was a young teenager and he was a short, scrawny little boy. He had come on a visit with his mother. Khenda had been the fortunate one chosen to escort the Princess and the young Princes around and had developed something of a relationship with them. A relationship that had withstood many, many years and one horrifying death. Choosing a drink for herself, she made her way over.

"Hi there," she grinned at the young man she had known for years; the boy she watched grow from a boy to the man who sat before her.

"Khenda," his face brightened as he rose to his feet. She leaned in to kiss his cheek and they sat together; one chair next to the other.

"You've done amazing work here," Harry waved a hand around the area.

"Thank you," she smiled. "Though I did nothing on my own. It takes a team. You know that."

"Yes," he nodded. "A team with a great leader."

"Well, thank you," she blushed slightly. "You seem happy, Harry."

"I am," he was quick to nod.

"No. I mean...happy." His eyes turned to meet hers for a beat.

"I am." And even he knew the helpless look that flashed across his face when he said it. But it didn't matter, he had no control over that any more.

"Wow," Khenda breathed with a chuckle.

"I know."

"Are you having a good night?" She looked pointedly at Maddie and he nodded. "Sitting back and watching?"

"Yes, I am," he sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I'm just...taking advantage of the time before the whole world knows. I can't sit back and watch once the whole world knows. Everything
changes once the whole world knows.” Khenda nodded her understanding. She had never been able to wrap her mind around all the attention that he and his brother and, before that, his mother had garnered—nor how difficult it would be to live that way.

"Tell me," she took a sip of her drink. "Is the whole world going to know about Maddie?"

"I don't know," he looked down, a soft smile on his face. "I haven't even talked to her about that yet. I haven't asked her...I thought it would be best to let the idea of me sink in...before I broached the idea of all the baggage that comes with me."

"Thoughtful."

"I try." He looked at the satisfied smile on her face. "Now you tell me. Was this your plan all along? When you called in a favor and asked me to come to the opening six months ago? You know her. You know me.” His eyes focused on her intently. "Khenda, did you bring me down here with the intention that I would fall for her?" Steeling her expression, Khenda blinked.

"Have you fallen for her?" Though he remained absolutely silent, Khenda smiled wide. She didn't need an answer, she could see it in his face, in the way his eyes glazed over as he looked to where Maddie sat. When his gaze broke, he shook his head in confusion.

"Oh my God...What am I thinking?" He ran a hand over his face and into his hair. "I've only known her for six months."

"And?" Khenda shrugged.

"And I only just kissed her today..." Khenda fought to control her urge to clap her hands at the thought.

"And?" She raised her eyebrows in challenge.

"And we haven't even gone on a proper date. And...And this is crazy! Khenda, who falls for somebody they hardly know?!"

"You hardly know her?" Khenda barked. "Please. I know she talks to you every day. I know she talks to you about her father dying, about her mother wanting her to come home, about her desire to be here despite all of the evidence stacking up that she maybe should take a break. Hardly know her? Really now?" He knew she was right.

"But..." He stammered. Feeling gutsy, Khenda continued. She hadn't seen him this happy in a long time and she wasn't about to let him toss it aside because of something superficial.

"Are you telling me she hardly knows you?"

"No...she knows me. She..." He gulped; the conversations they had shared ran through his mind. "It's a little scary sometimes just how she knows me." Khenda watched him for a moment; watched him struggle, watched him stall and then, she reached out and placed a warm, comforting hand on his. He looked up to her; a vulnerable look in his eyes.

"Care for some advice? From a slightly older, though devastatingly stunning, sister-type person?"

"Yes," he breathed. "Please."

"Stop overthinking this. Just stop. If you were sixteen and had known her for six months, I would slap you around until you got your head on straight." Harry laughed at that.
"You know that nobody would stand by and just let you slap me around. You would get into a lot of trouble for that." He lifted his drink to his lips but Khenda remained serious.

"But you're not. You're almost thirty. You've...you've been to Sandhurst. You've been to war! You've grown up in this great big fish bowl and you've turned out so well."

"Ah Khenda, you're going to make me blush."

"Your mother would be so proud." She felt a lump in her throat as she brought her up.

"And now you're going to make me cry," his drink lowered; his eyes growing soft, his heart clenching in the way it always did when they talked about his mother.

"You know who you are, Harry. You know what you want, who you want." She sat in silence for a moment. "Go with your heart, Harry. Get out of your head and lead with your heart. How did she say it?" Khenda searched her mind for the famous quote from Diana. "If you find someone you love in your life, then hang on to that love."

"Some days, I hate that you knew her." Harry gulped.

"No you don't." Khenda squeezed his hand in hers.

"No. I don't." He squeezed back. A moment of contented silence settled over them as they thought of her.

"I'm sorry if I made you sad. That was the exact opposite of what I intended to do."

"You didn't," he shook his head, though his eyes remained soft; thinking of his mother, of Maddie, of what Khenda had said. "It's a lot to ask of somebody, Khenda." He nodded to Maddie. "The press, the gossip; it's endless and overwhelming. I can stop this all now and prevent all of that from happening for her. I can leave on Sunday and that could be it. The world doesn't know yet. It's not too late."

"Isn't it?" Her eyes met his and he knew exactly what she was asking. And she knew exactly what his answer was.

"God..." He breathed, feeling slightly uneasy at the realizations he was having that night. "I am in so much trouble."

"She's a big girl, Harry. She's tough and strong. She was a farm girl from rural Colorado. She has plowed fields and weathered devastating storms. She was the first person in her family to go to college. The first person. She made a decision to go, to start a new road for her family and now she has a PhD. She watched her dad battle cancer for ten years before he died and now...she's a rock for her mother. She spent her whole childhood in the same town and now...she's here. In Bendal working with children who need her help the most. She has seen more death and devastation than anyone should and she's still here; smiling and playing and helping these kids."

Khenda smiled as she watched Maddie from a distance. "Do you know what it takes to go through those changes and come out as put together as she is? She's amazing...and she's strong and resilient and if all that she has faced hasn't shaken her, the machine that is the press isn't going to touch her." Harry felt the lump in his throat again and laughed it away. What was with him tonight? He shook his head. This was all so new to him.

"I hope you're right..."

"Right about what?" Collins came from behind to join them.
"Nothing," Khenda smiled up at him and then, in a matter of fact way, "Harry's in love with Maddie."

"Khenda!" Harry's eyes grew wide as he looked to her with shock on his face.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Collins laughed as he kissed Khenda; taking a seat next to her.

"See!" Khenda waved her hand at Collins. "Time doesn't matter, Harry. You feel how you feel. And nobody is going to be that surprised."

"Can we keep this between us please?" Harry's voice lowered as he looked from Khenda to Collins. "It's just this kind of thing that sends women running for the hills."

"The hills?" Collins snickered.

"Not this woman. Not this time," Khenda shook her head. "But yes. My lips are sealed. That particular confession is all yours."

"How very sweet of you," Harry rolled his eyes.

"I try," she shrugged and, though the moment was full of lighthearted ribbing, their eyes met for a moment and they shared a glance full of depth and seriousness. And Khenda knew what a special thing she was witnessing; the beginning of something very, very big.

"Yes, well," Harry finished his drink and rested the glass on the ground. "I'm going to enjoy the party and go see if I can get the good doctor to join me in a dance."

"Ha!" Collins laughed. "Good luck. I've been working on her for over a year!"

"Well, I've been told I have a way with the ladies," Harry joked.

"Oh God help us!" Khenda rolled her eyes and watched as Harry made his way through the crowd of people laughing and dancing.

Harry approached Maddie just as she finished up with the couple she had been chatting with. Moving stealthily to her side, he lowered his voice.

"I need your help with something."

"Oh?" She turned to him, surprise lacing her smile. "What exactly did you need my help with?"

"Well, you see," he reached for her hand; causing her to shiver at his touch. "Collins has challenged me..."

"To a dual?" Maddie raised her eyebrows. "Pistols at dawn?"

"Ha!" He shook his head in amusement. "Worse."

"Worse?" She crinkled her nose. "Sounds serious." She tried to focus on his words and not on how the way he stroked her hand made her skin tingle.

"It is," he nodded. "You see, he said that there was no way I would be able to come over her and convince you to dance with me."

"Okay, look..." She began her protest, but he continued.

"And I told him, he was crazy. That there was no way that Maddie Forrester was scared of
something as simple and easy as dancing..."

"Scared?" She could feel the defiance bubbling up inside of her.

"I told him that was preposterous." He was getting the exact reaction he was looking for.

"Here's the thing..." Maddie took a calming breath. "I actually don't dance."

"You can't dance?"

"No." She hated the way his words made her rebel. "I can dance. I just...don't."

"Hmmm. Why is that exactly?"

"I just...don't."

"Yeah," Harry shook his head. "That's not working for me. I mean...are you really going to let Collins win here?"

"I know what you're doing right now," her eyes narrowed wanting to kiss the smug look right off his face.

"Is it working?" He grinned.

"A little bit, yes," she huffed. "And I hate that it is."

"Come on," he moved closer to her; stepping into her space. "Come dance with me. Show Collins he has no idea what he's talking about."

"Harry..." Her protest was weakening.

"I'll owe you one Maddie...Please..." The way he was looking at her made it impossible for her to refuse him. "Don't let him be right about this. Dance with me..."

"Ohhhhh...." She shook her head but surrendered; allowing him to pull her towards the group. "You're good."

"I am," he agreed with a wink and, as they began to move with the music he looked up to where Collins and Khenda sat. Collins, with an impressed expression, offered Harry a salute before Harry turned his undivided attention back to Maddie.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she shook her head as they danced.

"I can't believe you were so petulant about it," he grinned, moving closer. "You're doing fine."

"Please!" She laughed. "There's a slight chance your opinion is biased."

"There's a great chance," he pulled one of her hands up and over his shoulder, nudging her closer to him.

The heat was intense; outside and between the two of them.

Maddie breathed deep as she gave in to the moment, gave into the feeling. She could feel his hand at her waist as their hips swayed in time with the music, in time with each other. Feeling brave, she moved her other hand up around his shoulder; allowing her fingers to tickle the skin of his neck. His eyes were intense, his body so close. And for the life of her, Maddie could think of nothing else than her intense desire to kiss him.
"Harry..." She breathed; her voice barely audible.

"Hmm?" He lifted his eyebrows, leaning closer to her. But before she could even open her mouth to ask him, her mission was halted. Because a bright flash of lightning lit the sky followed by an enormous clap of thunder and then, for the first time in a long time, the sky opened up and rain began to dump in buckets.

Screams of laughter rang out as the party-goers scattered; disbursing to buildings seeking shelter. Instantly drenched, Maddie looked up at the sky with humor across her face.

"See!" She yelled over the sound of the surprise storm. "This is why I don't dance! Something bad always happens when I do!"

"It's raining!" He laughed. "That's something good! Come on!" He held tight to her hand; pulling her with him in the direction opposite of the crowd. He opened the door to the greenhouse, moving them both inside and shutting the door.

"Wow..." Maddie breathed, looking down at her wet clothes, her hands wandering over her wet hair. "That came fast."

"Yes," Harry chuckled, shaking his head; water flying from his hair. When their eyes met, Maddie sucked in her breath. The wet clothing that clung to him stirred up something deep in the pit of her stomach. Harry smiled sheepishly, trying to cover for the way his pulse quickened as he looked her over.

"Well..." He looked slightly nervous as she approached him. "I think we have a little time alone in here while the rain settles."

"Yes," she nodded, stepping closer. "I believe we do."

"There was..." He took a breath. "There was actually something I wanted to talk to you about. Maybe we could..."

"Maybe..." Maddie took a step closer to him; invading his space. "Or maybe..." Her hands moved to rest on his chest; rising and falling with the calming breaths he was taking. "Maybe we could save the talking for later?" She peered up at him through lowered lashes.

"Why Doctor Forrester, are you coming on to me?" His hands moved around her then; resting on her hips and drawing her into him.

"Mmmmm." She nodded, tilting her head up towards his. "I am your highness. Is it working?"

And in answer, Harry offered a tiny smirk seconds before his head bowed to meet hers; lips seeking hers. And he knew; Khenda was right. It was much, much too late for him to turn back now.
Chapter 11

Maddie wasn't entirely sure what it was that made her blood so damn warm. It could have been a great number of things. Maybe it was because she hadn't really been kissed in a long time and her body had forgotten what this was like. Maybe it was because she had been drinking and was soaking wet. Or maybe it was because Harry had these amazing lips; firm and soft and making an art form out of the dance they were doing with hers.

Her hands were greedy as they traveled up his arms, over his shoulders; planting in the hair at the base of his neck and pressing him closer. She wanted more of this, so much more of this. "Harry...." Her voice came out in a small moan, falling into his mouth and making him groan and she wondered if maybe she was making him just as crazy as he was making her.

This moment between them had started out slow and soft, with Harry asking silent permission for his actions. But when she called out his name like that, when she pressed her hands against him like that—his passion was ignited and he gave in to his instincts. Stepping closer to her, his mouth moved over hers, blazing a path across her cheek towards her jaw.

"I have...wanted to do this since..." His mouth blew warm air under her ear as he spoke. "Since you forced me to unload that truck six months ago."

"Oh?" She sighed at the rush she felt as he nipped and sucked at the soft skin of her neck. "You like to be bossed around huh?" Her voice dropped low and heavy. "I should make note of that."

He nodded in agreement; his eyes dancing as he pulled back just enough to smile at her, to offer her this warm, smug, smirk that took over his lips at the idea of her ordering him around. When she smiled back her promise to do just that, his want surged. His large, strong hands moved to her waist. With very little effort he lifted her up off the ground; placing her on the table she had been leaning against, bringing her up to his eye level. Full of desire, he nodded his head. "You really should."

"Mmmm..." She bit at her bottom lip, moving her legs to make room for him between them. His hands ran up and down her thighs as he leaned in and kissed her again. The heat between them was compounding with every stroke of his fingers, with every pass of his lips. Without putting much conscious thought to it, Maddie reached out and grabbed a fistful of his shirt, pulling him tighter to her.

And he went. With a groan his lips moved back to her neck. With a sigh, Maddie let her head fall back, granting him the access he was requesting. As he kissed and caressed his way from her chin to her collar bones, she felt nothing but warmth. Behind her pressed-closed eyelids, she could see nothing but deep, warm colors.

Harry's hands were hot as they slid up her throat, they were gentle when he cupped her face and tipped her head upright. And when he breathed her name against her lips, her eyes drew open and she smiled. When she caught the look in his eyes and her stomach flipped. There was so much going on in those deep blue eyes; it was almost too much to take in.

Their breathing was labored, their hearts pounding and everything around them seemed to have faded into the backs of their minds. Unable to pull her eyes from his, Maddie's hands released the bunch of shirt she had been holding onto and slipped down his chest, over his flat stomach and, with an absolute purpose in mind, she lifted the hem of his shirt. Sucking in a breath, her hands slipped up underneath; skin meeting skin.
And his mouth returned to hers.

His body had a visceral reaction to her touch; his muscles jumping and flexing under her fingers, a groan escaping his mouth, his lips pressing more urgently to hers.

Maddie's heart skipped at his response, her lips curling up into a smile as they kissed his. Spurred on, her fingers continued their glorious walk up his chest, taking the fabric of his shirt with them.

"Off..." She ordered with a breathless grin.

With a deep, rumbly chuckle, Harry nodded and stepped away from her, more than happy to oblige her, ready and willing to follow her orders. With her bottom lip tucked in between her teeth, Maddie watched him slip his shirt up over his head and hold it out to her—cheeky grin in place. Taking it from him, she sighed and, in the most unceremonious way possible, she tossed it to the ground.

Right next to the last of their resolve. As he moved back to her, they could feel months of phone calls and banter and flirting surging, tangling up between them. His fingers, once soft and gentle, were more insistent as they passed over her body. His hands ran down her sides, over her hips and along her legs that were tucking around him, that were bringing him in and closer to her. When he met the edge of her skirt, he took in a steadying breath, he swept aside the fabric and his fingers met the soft, warm skin of her thighs.

Shivering at his touch, Maddie's body arched out closer to his, longing for more of his touch; more of him. She could feel her mind slipping away from her, could feel her senses taking over and it was the most glorious thing she had felt in a long time. Maybe this was happening too fast, maybe they had only known each other for six months. But she didn't care. She was done trying to stuff her feelings for him into some controlled little box. She felt how she felt. And, in this moment, she felt amazing.

And he did too. Her hands passed over his wide, solid, bare chest as his slid up the slick skin of her legs. With their hands inching higher and higher, their mouths stayed locked together; lips pressing, tongues dancing. Maddie was quite certain she hadn't felt the heat that was radiating between the two of them in a very long time--if ever.

She wanted him; at a gut, instinctual level. Every part of her wanted him. Every inch of her skin was alive with want, itching for his fingers to take hold of her. As his fingers teased higher and higher under her skirt, Maddie's hands flattened out on his chest and gave him the lightest of nudges. Pulling his lips from hers, he watched with dark, heavy eyes as Maddie lifted her own shirt up and over her head.

Harry exhaled; deeply, painfully, at the sight of her there on the table, smiling up at him with bright eyes and a well kissed smile. His fingers pressed tighter against the flesh at her thighs and he pulled her closer to the edge of the table; closer to him. His motives were divided. While one hand continued the quest up her leg, the other moved out from under her skirt to meet his lips as they dipped to tease at the soft pink skin of her chest.

And it was good; no, it was great. Maddie's heart soared, this feeling of abandon and euphoria coursing through her veins. Her pulse quickened at every kiss from his lips, every swipe of his tongue, every soft caress from his strong, firm hands. She wondered if his lips could feel her heart pounding as they kissed across her chest. When the fingers under her skirt swiped higher, when the fingers on her chest slipped just under the strap of her bra, Maddie knew they were moving closer and closer to a decision she had never imagined she would be making this night.

She felt light and dizzy and so incredibly turned on.
Yes, this was unlike her. Yes, this was quick and unexpected. But yes...as he moaned against her stomach, she knew. She was absolutely going to do this.

As Harry kissed his way back up her stomach, through the peaks of her chest, she pulled his face to hers; her lips seeking the return of his. Feeling brave and bold and more certain of herself than ever, her hands moved to his waist; finding the buckle of his belt with ease. It was then, as she tugged him closer, as her fingers tucked into the waist of his jeans, that Harry felt himself pause. Confusing and surprising himself, Harry's hands left the warmth of her body and moved to stop hers.

"Wait..." He was nearly panting as his fingers circled her wrists, halting the progress she was making to unbuckle his belt.

"Sorry?" Maddie breathed; unsure she heard him correctly. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no," he shook his head. Gulping, he leaned to kiss her once, twice, and a third time before pulling back; searching her eyes. His fingers moved to sweep strands of hair from her face. "Nothing's wrong. Nothing's..." He kissed her forehead, fighting to settle the conflicting urges he was having. "Maddie...this..." He glanced down at their half-dressed bodies. "You really want this to happen now?"

"Yes," she breathed; her smile reaching her eyes. God did she ever. He couldn't help the grin that spread across his face at how sure she seemed.

"Here?" He raised his eyebrows; glancing around the small greenhouse with half a smirk on his face.

"Listen, if you don't want to do this..." Maddie began.

"Oh, I want to do this," he assured her quickly; pulling her tight to his body and she could feel him; hot and rigid and so evidently turned on. She leaned in, her lips finding his easily.

"Harry..." She moaned into his mouth as she kissed him. "Please..." Her eyes were hazy and half open as she looked up to him. "If you need me to, I can order you to..." With a crook of her eyebrow and a teasing smile, she leaned her body into his and she kissed him again.

And that was all it took. He tossed aside his reservations—reservations that had only been born out of concern for her—just like she had tossed aside both of their shirts. Wrapping his arms around her, he gathered her closer, gathered her tighter and they began to melt together.

Hot, slick skin. Warm, insistent mouths. Hands that couldn't quite seem to decide where they wanted to explore first. They were colliding and dancing and twisting up in each other and neither of them wanted it to stop.

"God Maddie..." He spoke feverishly against her skin.

"Mmmmm..." She smiled, reveling in the way he made her body feel. As his fingers found purpose and pushed at the thin straps to her bra, Maddie could feel the anticipation electric over her skin. But then, with a stir, she paused; her body sitting suddenly alert. "Wait...wait..."

"I'm sorry," Harry immediately removed his hands from her body, misreading her move as he took half a step back. "We can wait. We can..."

"Shhhhh..." She grinned; placing her fingers over his lips to quiet him. "Do you hear that?" She pointed to the sky and, realizing her intent, he stepped closer and he listened.
"It sounds like..." His forehead creased. "Sirens?"

"Sirens..." Maddie's eyes flashed wide and she pushed at his chest to move him away from her. "Oh my God..." She jumped off the table, pulling on her shirt as he watched her, confused.

"Want to tell me what's happening?" He pulled his shirt over his head and followed her as she moved to the windows where she was trying to peer through the streaks of rain still falling from the sky.

"Something's wrong," she twisted her hair around, securing it up and out of her face with an elastic. "Those sirens are coming from the complex. Somebody has, quite literally, sounded the alarm. Something's wrong."

"Wait..." He watched, confused, as she pulled her shoes on. "Like what? What could be..."

"I don't know. There's been a bit of tension running through the community but...I don't know," she leaned up on her toes to press a kiss to his lips. "I'm going to go find out. I'll be right back."

She moved away from him then, towards the door.

"Whoa. Hold on," He reached out; grabbing her arm. "I'll be right back?" He let out a light laugh, shaking his head at her. "I'm coming with you."

"No," she smiled, pulling her arm easily from his hold. "You're not."

"Excuse me?" His eyebrows shot up.

"I can't tell from here what's going on, Harry. It could be dangerous."

"You're joking, right?" His arms crossed over his chest.

"Not at all." She mimicked his posture.

"You know I've been to Afghanistan..."

"Yes Soldier," she nodded. "I know. But this is different."

"How?!"

"Listen, your security team might have been fine with you venturing in here alone with me, but I seriously doubt they would be fine with..." She sighed, placing her hand on his chest. "I can't do this right now. I have to go find out what is going on. Just...wait here. I'll go check it out and I'll be right back." Spinning on her heels, she moved towards the door.

"Oh yeah, that's definitely how this is going to go," Harry's voice was rich with sarcasm as he ignored everything she had said and followed her through the door. As the rain poured over head, they hurried through the garden, pausing under an overhang from another building. As soon as they stepped into the small bit of dry space, Maddie turned to him.

"Did you not hear a single word I said?!"

"Did you really think I was going to wait in the greenhouse while you ran around out here..." His thoughts were cut off as the doors from the building opened and Ella emerged, surprised to see them.

"Hey!" She had the same business-like expression on her face that Maddie had.

"Hey," Maddie turned her attention away from Harry's defiance for a moment. "What's going on
"Hey," Maddie turned her attention away from Harry's defiance for a moment. "What's going on with the sirens?"

"No idea," Ella shook her head quickly. "I just heard them and am on my way over..." She looked them over and a smile spread over her face as the urgency of the situation faded briefly. "You know...I'm sure it's inappropriate that I noticed...and even more so for me to say something, but—your shirt is on inside out...your royal highness." Maddie's head snapped to look as Harry's face flushed red.

"Yes," he nodded, not even bothering to look down. "Yes of course it is. That's lovely."

"Ahem," Maddie shook her head at the moment. "The sirens."

"Yes," Ella clapped her hands together. "We should get over there. But just so you know...once the sirens stop...we're getting back to this."

"Sounds about right," Harry murmured and then the three of them set out again.

As they rounded the corner and emerged towards the street that separated the complex from the home for the children, things became clearer. There appeared to have been a car accident just up the block. Two cars had smashed into each other and into a building that was now burning. But that couldn't have been the only thing that had happened because, even over the sirens and the pounding rain, they could hear screaming coming from all around.

"Oh my God..." Ella called out and pointed. Harry and Maddie both looked to where she was pointing and saw, in multiple windows along the side of the complex, bullet holes with shattered glass.

A look passed between them; a look that spoke to the gravity of the situation.

And they broke into a run. As they neared the gate, they saw Collins running towards the complex from another direction.

"Collins!" Maddie called out to him. "What the hell happened?"

"I don't know!" He tried to yell over the rain. "Everyone moved inside when it started raining and then there was this loud crash and shots and..." As Collins told the story, Harry, out of the corner of his eye, thought he saw something move. He turned his head, squinting as he tried to focus in on it. And when he did, he saw a child balled up on the ground. Acting on instinct, he hurried towards her, the group following behind him. When he reached her, he knelt down next to her and could see more clearly. She had either fallen or had been pushed during the riot. Her leg was badly damaged with lots of blood and what he was almost certain was bone. She cried out that she couldn't move and, without thinking, Harry scooped her up into his arms.

"Let's get her inside," Collins waved for them to follow him. As they moved through the gates, Harry's security team came running towards them. A mixture of relief and grave concern on their faces as they insisted he come with them.

"No," he refused. "This is ridiculous..."

"Sir..."

"I am not going anywhere right now," Harry shook his head at the man. "Not when all of this is going on."

"But sir..."
"No."

"Harry," Collins' voice was authoritative as he addressed Harry, wanting to end this stand off before it even started. His mind was already working through all that needed to happen in this moment and he was in no mood to argue. "I'm sorry but...it will be easier for us to do our jobs if you let these guys do theirs." Harry met his eyes and opened his mouth to protest but, seeing the seriousness there, he decided against it.

"Fine," he nodded; surrendering. "Fine. Just let me take her inside and then I'll go wherever you'd like." Though Maddie could tell that it pained him to do so, he didn't want to hinder whatever it was that Collins was going to orchestrate in this situation. His team agreed quickly and they all continued on; the little girl still safely enveloped in Harry's arms.

Once they pushed through the doors, Maddie's heart leapt. Most of the staff was already running around, busy with other casualties of the chaos.

"Over there!" Ella yelled out, pointing towards a cot off to the side. They moved as a group and as Harry worked to lay the girl carefully on the cot, Ella's hands were pulling on gloves, already working.

"Maddie..." He started.

"You have to go," she glanced up at him as she reached for the little girl's hand. "That was the deal. You have to go now."

"Come with me?" He already knew the answer, but he had to ask.

"What?" Her eyes flashed to his for a second. "No. I can't go. They need me to..." A loud crash rang out over all of the noise in the room. All eyes turned towards the entrance as a man with wild eyes and a bloodied nose burst through the doors screaming at the top of his lungs. He looked around the room before his gaze focused on the little girl on the table between Maddie and Harry. Maddie, being closest to him, felt her heart thud. Something was off; she could tell.

She couldn't have been more right.

By the time any of them saw the gun, it was too late. He had pulled it from his pocket, aimed and fired. Maddie, acting only on instinct, turned her body to face him; her mind thinking only of the people who stood behind her.

The very next second, one of the men protecting Harry pulled his weapon and dropped the guy where he stood.

Though it was one second too late.

Maddie's eyes met Harry's and she blinked; the pain she now felt pulsing from her shoulder almost blinding her. She had been shot in the shoulder. Of this she was absolutely sure. Looking at the source of the pain, she suddenly felt woozy; the amount of blood oozing from her shoulder making her sick.

"Maddie..." Harry's hands flew out to catch her as her knees buckled underneath her. "Khenda!" He cried out for help.

"COLLINS!" Ella moved away from the little girl, towards her best friend. Her best friend who felt weak and dizzy and in so much pain.

Maddie blinked once. She could hear people hurrying around her. She could hear Khenda
screaming out directions to the other staff. She could hear Ella shouting for somebody to hand her new gloves. She could hear Harry saying her name.

Maddie blinked twice. Something was happening to her senses. Maybe it was shock. She had never been in shock before. Her eyes were hazy. Her hearing dulled. And she had the strangest taste in her mouth; like copper pennies.

Maddie blinked a third time; a heavy-lidded third time. And her world went black.
Chapter 12

When Maddie awoke the first time, it took a moment for the confusion to fade. Blinking away the blurriness in her eyes, she looked around the room. She was in a hospital room—not a makeshift hospital room she had become accustomed to—but something with four walls, a door, guest chairs...

And Harry. Her eyes welled up and she breathed in relief at the sight of him.

He had pulled a chair over next to her bed, his head situated towards her feet so he could see her. He was reclined back and, with a blanket draped clumsily over him, was fast asleep.

Smiling despite the dull ache she felt in her shoulder, Maddie looked around again; taking inventory of her surroundings. There was a security guard stationed outside her door—no doubt due to Harry's presence. It was still dark outside, still night time though she couldn't tell for sure if was still the same day or very early the next morning. Her shoulder was wrapped up in bandages, held close to her in a sling. She had an IV in her other arm and there was a tube pushing oxygen into her nose.

And her throat was unbelievably dry. Swallowing, she reached for the cup of ice and water she could see on the stand next to her. The movement brought about a stabbing pain from her shoulder. She hissed through her teeth as she grabbed the cup and laid back against the bed. Harry, having heard her slight movements through his weak attempt at sleeping, stirred and opened his eyes. Seeing she was awake brought a wide smile to his face. He blinked and sat forward; his blanket falling to the side.

"Maddie..." He breathed, his hand folded around hers. Relief washed over his face as he moved to stand; kissing her softly and carefully.

"Where am I?" She asked as he moved to sit back down; pulling his chair closer to the head of the bed, keeping her hand in his.

"South Africa," he answered. "You had surgery after you were airlifted here. You've been out for a few hours."

"Are you..." She squeezed his fingers. "Are you okay?" She looked him over.

"Me?" His eyes flashed wide. "Yes, Maddie. I'm fine. You..."

"And everyone else?" She cut him off, her mind reeling back to what had happened to land her here. "Is everyone else okay?"

"Yes," he nodded. Though he wanted to focus all of his attentions on her, he could understand her need for more information. "There was a bit of a scuffle. Collins broke his arm. He's actually here in the hospital...somewhere..." Harry had no idea where, he hadn't left this room. "Khenda is with him and she's fine. Ella is here. They had an extra room down the hall, she went there to get some sleep. She put in a hell of a night but she's okay." His eyes grew dark as he remembered the details. "My security team took out the shooter right after he..." His eyes traveled to her shoulder; growing teary as he took it in.

"I'm fine..." Her voice was warm, soft; reassuring.

"But..." He croaked.
"It was just my shoulder," she winced as she thought of it. Seeing this, Harry reached for the clicker laying next to her good hand.

"Here," he slipped into her hand. "Use this. It will help." Nodding, she pressed the button.

"My mother..."

"I called her," he hurried to ease her concern. "I hope that's okay. I didn't want her to worry. She wanted to come..."

"She's not coming here, is she?!" Maddie grew slightly panicked.

"No," he shook his head. "She doesn't have a passport Maddie. I told her I would keep her updated and I would have you call when you could."

"Okay," she breathed; not wanting her only remaining parent anywhere near some of the things she had seen. Maddie relaxed slightly. "My mother taking a call from Prince Harry of Wales," she grinned slightly. "I wish I could have heard that conversation."

"Yes, well," Harry smiled. "She didn't seem all that surprised to hear that I knew you." Maddie blushed slightly.

"I may have spoken of you once or twice," she shrugged then; a simple action that made her cry out in excruciating pain. He moved to his feet at once; cringing at her pain.

"Don't do that," his fingers brushed at the hair on her forehead. "Just sit back and relax. The medicine will kick in soon..." Her eyes grew heavy as he continued to stroke her hair. She blinked heavily and smiled up at him.

"You snore, you know?"

"Oh?" He smiled down at her adoringly.

"Mmm Hmm..." She sighed then, her eyes closing completely. And then, with much warmer images in her mind, the medicine took over and she went to sleep.

The second time Maddie woke up, she woke to a warm, unassuming smile from a young nurse. It was still night and Harry was in the same chair, in the same clothes; though clearly more relaxed. The nurse moved around her, checking the numbers on the machines before she reached for her arm; needing to check her blood pressure, pulse, etc.

Maddie smiled at her and asked what she knew about her condition. In hushed tones, the nurse explained a great deal to her. She explained how the bullet had entered her shoulder, barely nicking a bone as it did. She explained that the bullet had never exited and how the surgeon had to remove it. Yes, there would be an extensive recovery time; one to two weeks in the hospital, three months in the sling with physical therapy. With luck and hard work, she could be healed completely in three to six months. She was lucky, the nurse informed her. They were all very lucky.

Maddie nodded and thanked her before pressing the button again. This time, the medicine took over with great ease and Maddie drifted back to sleep.
The third time she awoke, it was finally morning. The sun had finally risen, giving the horrible night before cause to leave. Squinting at the light, Maddie could see that Harry was gone, but the sound of movement next to her told her she was not alone.

"Good morning," an accented voice, slightly different from Harry's came from the other side of her bed. Turning slowly, she settled on the source of the voice; recognizing him instantly. Maddie took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I promised my brother I would stay with you till he returned from a phone call..." He rose to his feet, offered her a smile and moved closer. "I'm William; Harry's brother."

"Yes, I..." She nodded as her dry throat caused her voice to crack. "I'm sorry. I'm..."

"Maddie," his smile widened slightly, reaching out to shake her good hand. "Yes. I know. I've heard a great deal about you. Here, let me..." He moved towards her nightstand and gestured towards the cup of ice and water. "Can I get you some water?" She cleared her throat and nodded. Without hesitation, he brought the cup to her, bringing the straw to her lips.

"Thank you," she smiled; her voice returning. "It's nice to meet you."

"You as well," William sat the cup back on the stand and returned to his chair. "Is there anything I can get for you?"

"No," she shook her head. "Thank you though."

"I think maybe it is I who should be thanking you," he looked down at his hands and then back up to her.

"Whatever for?"

"Well, by all accounts of the night, you just may have saved my brother's life." Maddie exhaled at the absurdity of the thought.

"I hardly..."

"You did," he insisted. "Had you not moved when you did, the bullet would have hit him...only not in the shoulder." He met her eyes. "Intentional or not...you saved him."

"No." Maddie shook her head. "That's...That is crazy."

"Well," Harry stepped into the room with a smirk; the door closing behind him. "It's good to see you still have that defiant streak in you," he crossed his arms and looked to her. "Did I really just hear you call the future King of England crazy?"

Maddie's eye went wide with panic. "I...I'm sorry. I..."

"Stop," William shook his head at his brother. "He's joking."

"I'm not," Harry grinned at her. Maddie was happy to see that the fear in his eyes had faded; giving way to this witty, happy look she was used to. Even if it was at her expense.

"Don't you think she's been through enough?" William turned to her then. "There's no need for formalities here, I assure you." The two brothers shared a smile that was born of mutual respect and a lifetime of brotherly ribbing before Harry turned his focus back to her.

"How are you feeling this morning?" He moved to her side, reaching for her hand.
"Better," she smiled as he brought her hand to his lips for a kiss. "You were on the phone?"

"My commander," he sighed with a quick glance at William. "I am due to report back on Sunday." Ah yes, she thought, he had only been coming to Bendal for a few days before going back for more training.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes," he nodded. "He had heard what had happened and was checking to make sure I was okay and on schedule to return as planned."

"And you are...right?"

"Yes," Harry smiled. "Due in no small part to you."

"Oh are you going to start in with that too?" She rolled her eyes.

"See!" Harry glanced at his brother. "What did I tell you?"

"What did you tell him?" Maddie's eyes narrowed at Harry and William laughed at the exchange. Before Harry could open his mouth to save himself, the doors to the room opened and Ella burst through, her eyes moving directly to Maddie.

"You're awake!" She exclaimed, her eyes instantly filling with tears. "God Maddie I've been so damn..." She did a double take and stopped in her tracks. "Your Royal Highness..." Harry chuckled as Ella curtsied slightly to William.

"Ah..." Harry exhaled. "This is great. Ella, this is my brother William. Will, this is Ella, she's a nurse who worked with Maddie in Bendal and Maddie's best friend."

"Nice to meet you," William rose to shake her hand.

"The pleasure is all mine," Ella smiled sweetly and then moved to hug Maddie; being mindful of her shoulder. Under her breath, she muttered, "just gets stranger and stranger around here every day."

"You're telling me," Maddie smiled, kissing Ella's cheek. "So..." She looked from Ella to Harry and back again. "I'm awake and, surprisingly not completely dazed. Who wants to fill me in?"

Ella and Harry looked at each other, sadness clouding their eyes as they remembered the horrible experience they had shared.

"I'll go?" Ella raised her eyebrows at Harry who nodded. She moved to sit at the foot of Maddie's bed and, in a quiet voice, she began to catch Maddie up to what they knew. "Apparently the irritations that had been rumbling in the outskirts had escalated to some fighting in the surrounding neighborhoods during the day and, as the day grew on, the fighting spilled over into the area around the Community Center. Right after the rain started, a few cars slammed into one of the buildings. They sort of...exploded and the building caught on fire—though the rain certainly helped with that." Ella swallowed and continued. "The two rivaling sides were blaming the other for the accident and the arguments escalated. And the shooting began. People were running for safety and...most of the injuries from that night were from the mob trying to flee. Though...there were some bullet injuries," her eyes rested on Maddie's shoulder. "Thankfully, the only fatalities were the drivers of the cars and...and the guy who shot you." Ella had to press her lips into a thin, tight line to keep from crying.

"Hey..." Maddie reassured her with a smile.
"There were a few other doctors who were injured; there was quite the scuffle after you were shot. Each side didn't like that we were treating the other side. But after you were hit, double-oh-seven out there," Ella waved towards Harry's security team. "Took out the shooter. This guy calls in the cavalry..."

"Not exactly the cavalry," Harry offered with a smile.

"And they airlifted you, Collins, and a few others out."

"And the complex? I know there were shattered windows...anything else?"

"There were minor damages to the garden when everyone ran, but nothing that can't be fixed."

"Is that all?" Maddie took a deep breath; feeling better now that she knew the extent of the fallout.

"I think so..." Ella looked to Harry who nodded.

"Okay," Maddie sighed. "Okay. And Collins?"

"Just down the hall," Ella smiled. "He's doing great though. Cussing his new cast."

"Of course," Maddie chuckled. "So what happens next?"

"I'm sorry?" Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Well," she fought her urge to shrug. "You're leaving on Sunday, right?"

"Yes," Harry nodded, saddened at the thought. "My father offered to call and do what he could to postpone that but..."

"That's not really who you are," Maddie finished his sentence.

"No," he smiled up at her; thankful for her understanding. "Though I could, if you wanted me to." William's eyes went wide at what his brother was offering.

"Of course not," she shook her head. "You're leaving on Sunday. The nurse last night told me that I could be here for two weeks..." She looked to Ella. "What about you? Collins? What happens in Bendal?"

"I don't know," Ella's eyes were sad even as she offered a smile. "The incident brought a lot of international attention and..." Maddie noticed Harry look away; feelings of guilt evident on his face. Surely, had he not been there when it all happened, it wouldn't have made such a hit in the news. "And they have to go in and assess the damages, the security threats. Once they okay our re-entry, we can go back and repair the damages and, hopefully, get back to what we were doing before."

"Good," Maddie nodded.

"But Maddie," Ella reached her hand out, resting on her friend's leg. "You were shot. You have a long recovery ahead of you. I doubt they are going to let you..."

"Let me?"

"Let you go back any time soon." Maddie's head sank deeper into the pillow as tears threatened at her eyes. She knew Ella was right. There were protocols and procedures in place; to prevent burnout, to watch for PTSD. She knew it and she understood it. But it didn't mean she liked it. She blinked at her tears, wishing them away.
"I'm so sorry, Maddie," Harry's voice was soft as his fingers stroked her arm.

"It's fine," she shook her head, though the one tear that slipped from her eyes defied her statement. "It will be fine." She took the tissue Ella held out to her. "What can I do, you know?"

"You can heal," Harry shrugged. "You can make sure you take the time you need to heal."

"Yeah," she sniffed and took a deep breath. "Yes I can."

"And...you can have this..." He held his hand out to her, full of her favorite candy. "I smuggled them in for you. But don't tell that nurse. I'm afraid of her." The candy had the intended effect. Maddie grinned wide as she reached for one of them. His eyes twinkled in delight as she opened it and took a bite.

"Thank you," she breathed; feeling slight, slightly better.

"For the candy?" Harry's face scrunched up. "You saved my life, it's really the least I could do."

"Oh God," Maddie rolled her eyes. "You're never going to let that go are you?"

"Never." He assured her.

And so it began.

Eventually they disbursed. William returned to England that afternoon, after making sure his brother was safe and protected; after wishing Maddie a speedy recovery. Khenda visited during lunch time and had only reiterated what Ella had told her. They would know more in a day or two, but as of that second; everything was suspended.

And Harry, feeling terrible about all of it, remained by her side until the absolute last minute possible. At which time, he told her he would be unreachable for ten days. He told her if she needed anything to call his brother; he had programmed his number into her phone. Maddie felt slightly uneasy at having such access, but she agreed; as it was the only thing that would get him to back off. He kissed her, softly and carefully, promised to see her as soon as he was finished. And then, after privately imploring Khenda to watch after her, he left the hospital to board his plane home.

As he flew away, he accepted the truth that had been inside him all along. His heart was completely surrendered; it was all hers. Now all he had to do was figure out how this complicated situation could begin to play out. With him in England going through training he was likely to never use and her in a hospital in South Africa recovering, neither of them had any idea what their future held; except they both knew, without a doubt, that it had to include the other—even if they weren't ready to admit that out loud.
Chapter 13

The next ten days of Maddie's life were the most draining she had experienced since her father's death; physically, mentally and emotionally. The immediate days after her surgery had been full of pain and adjustment and, after Harry left, her focus turned to recovery. Physical Therapy began as soon as her treating doctor gave the green light. Maddie had never been more thankful for the friendship she had developed with Ella. The young nurse never left her side. She was there to make her laugh; providing light conversation and amusing tales. She was there to make her work; taunting her as the Physical Therapist pushed her to do more.

As the days continued, her mood would rise and fall. Some days were great, her PT would go well, the pain would be mild and her outlook was good. Then the very next she would wake in pain, with an achy body and a dulled motivation, PT would be frustrating, and her optimism would fade. It was such a roller coaster of emotions. None was as much as the day Khenda came into her room to update her on the situation in Bendal.

The proper authorities had gone in to inspect the area and had eventually deemed it "safe" enough to return. Doctors Without Borders would be allowed back in. However, DWB had some guidelines for how the staff would be allowed back and who would be allowed to go back in. Most of the personnel had been evacuated to South Africa after the incident. A large portion of the old team would be heading back to help with reparations and then a new crew would take over while the old team were sent on a recovery break. Ella, Khenda and Collins would be going to help repair the complex and then Ella would head out. Khenda and Collins would be staying in Bendal, but only because they had their own personal residence. Khenda informed Maddie that they were in the process of bringing everyone who would be headed back to Bendal to one central location before they went back.

And then, with very sad eyes, Khenda told Maddie that, though she was being released from the hospital, she would not be allowed to go with the rebuild team. Her injuries were too extensive, her recovery time too intense. They would be in and out before Maddie would be recovered enough to help and at that point, the new crew would be in place and she would be sent off.

And Maddie hated it. In two days’ time, she would be released from the hospital and be attending a reception for everyone heading into Bendal the next day, but she wouldn’t be a part of the group. She felt rejected and let down and more frustrated with herself and her situation than she probably ever had been before in her life.

She hated being told no, hated that there was nothing she could do about it. She hated everything about it. But how she felt didn’t matter. This was just how it was. Rules were put into place for a reason and she had no choice but to suck it up and deal with it.

Khenda wasn't full of only bad news. With a knowing smile, she sat on the edge of Maddie's bed and with a lowered voice told her that she had received communication from London informing her of an unexpected royal guest. It seemed Harry was anxious to attend the send-off for the workers returning to rebuild. He would be flying in immediately following the conclusion of his training and would be going to the reception where he would address the group the night before they embark on their efforts.

Harry was coming.

Processing it all felt like a whirlwind, a true roller coaster of emotions. She would be released from the hospital, but would not be going back to Bendal. That alone was devastating. And the thought of sitting through a reception that would serve as a reunion and motivator for the expedition...the
expedition she would not be on, made her incredibly sad. But Harry would be there and that, as crazy as it sounded, managed to leave Maddie on a slight upslope.

It had been so long since she had heard his voice, since she had taken in his laugh. She had expected as much, she had known that she wouldn't hear from him during his training. He had told her before he left that he would be virtually unreachable while at training. She had, however, received one phone call from William. He was warm and friendly and had heard she was being released and wanted to check in on her. She had smiled, assured him she was fine, and then thanked him for his concern.

Maddie was released the day before the reception, the day before Harry was set to arrive. DWB had been kind enough to set her up with a room at the hotel where everyone was gathering before they went back to work. So she moved into the room, hung up her dress for the evening and, after arranging her toiletries in the bathroom, after flipping mindlessly through a magazine on the desk, she sank down onto the bed with a sigh.

And her mind drifted to him.

Things had been so good, so close between them when he had been there last. The night in the greenhouse when they had almost, the days following the shooting when he had stayed at her side; bringing her water, making her laugh. She had been so sure, so confident about him, about her; about them. But, as time had passed, as so many things in her life had been shaken up, her insecurities had gotten the best of her and she was slightly unsure how things would go when he arrived. Khenda told her she was being ridiculous; that his affections were not that easily swayed. And Ella reminded her that she had been standing next to Harry the night Maddie had been hurt, she had seen his reactions, the look in his eyes, and there was absolutely no doubt in her mind how he felt about her.

"Just wait and see," Ella assured her.

And she did. She waited. With pent up frustrations and a shaky self-confidence, she waited.

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When the morning of the reception arrived, Maddie was already starting the day out with a deficit. She hadn't slept well the night before and when she woke up, she was achy and sleepy and moody. Right away she had an uneasy feeling about the day. She had woken early, taken another pill and tried to sleep more. Instead, she drifted for an hour and woke feeling more groggy than she had before.

She attended her PT session with Ella along for provocation. It was rough and left her sore but she continued to push. When the day gave way to the night, Maddie dressed for the event and, with no small amount of butterflies in her stomach, she joined her friends in the grand reception hall to begin the evening. She knew she should be happy, she was happy. But there were too many things churning in her stomach, too many mashed up feelings to see clearly. She was exhausted and her body ached and all of those things did nothing to help the anxiety she felt about her impending reunion with Harry. A very large part of her wanted nothing more than to go back up to her room, curl up in her bed and spend the night in the dark—away from all of it.

But that wasn't her fate for the night and, despite it all, the party began. There were cocktails and appetizers; music and laughter. They were all so excited that; excited to be together, to see their colleagues. The room was practically buzzing with life. They were excited that they were being allowed back to Bendal, back to their work. Those from the old shift were excited to go back to restore their home to what it had been. And those from the new shift were excited to get to work, to step foot on the red sands of Bendal.
Naturally, everyone was over the moon to see those among them who had been injured up and about, alive and healing. Maddie in her sling and Collins in his cast were quite the pair; trading tales about the best ways to navigate around menial tasks with their respective limitations. And, despite her initial sullen mood, Maddie found the energy in the room to be contagious. She was surprised to catch herself laughing and enjoying the conversations about the place she had loved so much, surprised at how much she enjoyed watching the seasoned vets bringing the new people up to speed.

Of course, there was a steady hum of gossip about the Prince; the Prince who was coming straight from training to be there for this night. The Prince who had been there the night it had all come crashing down. They felt a sort of brotherhood with him and they were all honored that he thought enough of them to come to the event. Every time somebody mentioned him, which was often, Maddie's stomach would flip over; battling between a deep desire to run far away to hide and an innate need to run straight into his arms.

She was sitting at a table laughing with Collins and Ella when he arrived. She could tell the very second he stepped through the doors as an audible reaction rippled through the room. Before she could think about it, her eyes darted reflexively towards the center of the excitement.

And there he was.

Her heart thudded, her lungs paused, and all of the feelings that had been building before he left came flooding back to her. Maddie's cheeks flushed as she looked him over. He must have slept and changed on the airplane because he was wearing a suit and tie and looked more rested and put together than she did.

As he walked through the doors and into the room, she could see he had a small group of people with him; one of which was clearly a reporter out of England, taking notes as he moved. Maddie smirked as she watched; knowing he must be loving that particular tag-a-long. But, since he was now publicly involved in what had happened, what was happening, the public was too. He immediately went into work mode, shaking hands and greeting people. As he worked, the buzz in the room began to dissipate; people settling back to what they were doing as he made the rounds.

"Hey Doc," Collins smiled at her; a knowing look in his eye.

"Collins?" Maddie smiled back.

"Want to go over and say hello?" Collins nodded his head towards where Harry stood in a small group. Though Maddie recognized the teasing look in Collins eyes, she really only thought for a second before she left her chair.

But as she closed the distance between them, her stomach was in knots. With every step she took towards him, it twisted up more and more and she felt a slight panic begin to creep in. It had been so long since they spoke, it had been so crazy when he left. What did she even say? What did she do? She glanced nervously at the reporter standing at his side, at the other people surrounding him, at those who were watching. At the last minute, she decided to do what Ella had suggested.

She would follow his lead.

If somebody had been paying close attention to Harry's face in that moment, they would have noticed the instant he saw her. His entire face lit up, his smile stretched all the way to his eyes and he made a small move, as if to go to her.

They also would have seen the very moment he caught himself; the very moment his surroundings came back to him. With a side glance at the reporter with him, he quickly schooled his reaction;
putting a warm smile on his face and planting his feet firmly on the ground.

If somebody had been able to read his mind, they would have known just how confused he was about what to do next. They would have been able to see the battle going on inside his struggling mind.

He and Maddie, they weren't 'among friends' in this room. This wasn't Khenda's living room or Maddie's office in Bendal. This was a reception hall full of people taking pictures, a reporter taking notes. Harry battled internally about how this moment was going to unfold, knowing that depending on which side won, this could be a moment that was calm and insignificant. Or it could be blown wildly out of proportion.

Because he hadn't been able to talk to her first, because they really hadn't ever had a chance to talk about what it all meant, he decided to go with the safer route. He decided to hold his ground, to maintain his composure—at least until he had a chance to talk to her.

As she approached the group, he tried desperately to meet her eyes, tried to convey his thoughts, but he couldn't catch her gaze.

Maddie was too busy to catch the look on his face, too busy searching the room for a source of support, for some divine guidance for this moment. She was too busy taking deep breaths and mentally preparing herself for this moment.

This moment that would ultimately be full of misunderstanding. This moment that would leave them both more confused than they had been before.

Before Harry could catch her eyes, before Maddie would read his mood, she was finally there. Standing in front of him. And all of the awkwardness that could have materialized did. Everyone seemed to stall, to pause and nobody seemed to know what to do next. Finally it was Collins, never afraid of taking the lead, who stepped up first.

"Your royal highness," Collins bowed his head slightly to Harry; the presence of the reporter taking precedence over any lack of formality Collins had grown accustomed to.

"Collins, it's wonderful to see you," Harry extended his hand to greet him. Turning to the reporter, he explained. "Collins was the gentleman in charge of logistics at the complex. And this," he turned a controlled smile to Maddie. "This is Doctor Forrester. She was a Child Psychologist I met in Bendal." Trying to fight his urge to pull her to him, Harry avoided meeting her eyes. "Doctor."

"Your highness," she brought a smile to her face and dipped in a small curtsy; confused and unnerved by the coldness she thought she read in his demeanor.

"This is Harold," Harry explained. "He is a reporter with a local London paper. He's here covering the event for the people back home." Harry stayed focused, hoping beyond hope that they couldn't hear the way his heart sped up at her presence.

"Good to meet you both," Harold nodded his hellos.

"Ah look!" Harry exclaimed, catching Khenda out of the corner of his eye. Thankful for a reason to step away from Maddie before he did anything that would bring all of the attention to her, he moved to lead the reporter towards Khenda. "Let me introduce you to the site Director. She's fantastic and, I'm sure, will be able to answer some more questions for you. It was good to see you both." And then, with a small, curt nod to Collins and Maddie, he let his eyes meet Collins' for a split second before leading the man away from them.

"Oh..." Maddie stood, rooted to her spot, as sadness washed over her. She watched as he walked
away from her without so much as a passing glance and her stomach lurched. What the hell had just happened? She looked to Collins with wide, teary eyes. Struggling to maintain control over her tired mind, Maddie swallowed the lump in her throat. "Well that was..."

"Don't do it," Collins was quick to shake his head; knowing exactly where her mind was headed. "You don't know what that was about. He was with a reporter. He just walked from military training to a plane into this event. All eyes are on him. Don't assume that had anything to do with how he feels about..."

"Shh..." Maddie waved her hand; taking a breath. "I'm sorry. I don't want to...I don't want to talk about it right now." And she didn't. She knew she was being irrational. She knew that her mind and her heart weren't at 100%. She knew she had been through a lot and that she was tired and emotional and that, under normal circumstances, this would roll off her back.

But these weren't normal circumstances and, as much as she hated it, his dismissal hurt.

"Come on Doc..." Collins wrapped his good arm around her good shoulder; steering her back to their table. "You know that he..."

"Collins," her voice was still quiet but more direct. She was cracking on the inside; deflating. "Please. I can't talk about this without crying. And I know that it's crazy and that it's irrational. And I really don't want to be that girl."

"You're not that girl. You've been through a lot and you're tired. But he..."

"Collins," her glare met his eyes and, in interest of self-preservation, he backed down.

"Fine," Collins nodded, not wanting to push.

"Fine," Maddie took a breath and let it out slowly. "Fine."

Before anything else could be said on the matter, the event began. Maddie was ever thankful for the distraction, thankful that she would be able to focus on something other than her unexplainable emotional reaction. She knew better than this! Had that bullet that hit her shoulder also impacted her brain?! She hated that she felt this way, so uneasy, so unsure. And she hated that there seemed to be nothing she could do to shake it.

Sipping her water, she forced herself to focus on the event. Setting her glass on the table, she turned her eyes to the stage just in time to see him. Taking the stage with the command and grace he had fine-tuned over the years, he looked out at the crowd and began. Maddie sat, glued to her seat, as Harry gave quite an emotional speech about what he had seen during his visits to Bendal; the very worst and the very best. He talked about the hard work they had all put in or were about to put in. He talked about a very deep, personal connection he had developed to the region and he wished them all the best of luck with their endeavors. He was saddened that he would not be able to join in the efforts, but he was quite sure that his involvement would only hinder their progress and he wanted, more than anything, for them to be able to get back to the work they adored. As he finished, the room rose to their feet with applause and Maddie, with a lump in her throat, couldn't help but think that there was a part of him that was talking to her, about her. This deep connection that she had thought they shared. His words had spoken to her in a deep, profound way and she knew he had felt it too.

And just like that, she had never felt more confused.

It had been a roller coaster of two weeks. Everything seemed to be up in the air; her relationship with Harry was no exception. He had stayed in her room for three days straight, followed by ten
days of silence, then her excitement to see him being tampered down by his cold, calculating response to seeing her. And then there was this speech, this speech that brought up all of the bonds they had shared. She was having a hard time figuring out which way was up.

Maybe it was good that she was being forced to take a break. Maybe her mind needed a rest.

Maddie's eyes scanned out over the room, finally finding him talking to one of the new doctors who would be leaving the next day. As if he felt her gaze, his eyes rose to meet hers and, from across the room, he managed to tug at her heart. Glancing down at her hands, Maddie took a deep breath. The stress of it all was becoming difficult. She had only been released from the hospital the day before. She was still on pain medication and this up and down of emotions when it came to him was exhausting. When her eyes rose to look at him again, he was already gone; being pulled in another direction. And something inside of her surrendered a little. If this wasn't going to happen, she wasn't going to fight. She had very little fight left in her as it was.

With a sigh, Maddie decided it was time to retire. She was tired and in pain and wouldn't have been able to stay up and party with the newcomers. It was their night to celebrate. But it was time for her to go to bed. Saying her goodnights to Khenda, Collins, and Ella, she managed to speak to a few other colleagues before she slipped quietly out the side door and to her room.

Taking her time, she walked slowly through the large, opulent main lobby. She stopped at the small shop to purchase a ginger ale and some crackers. She needed to take her medicine and her stomach was in such knots. Taking the stairs instead of the elevator, she felt that she had a chance to wind down before trying to sleep.

She quickly opened the door to her room and moved inside. It took her some time to put her pajamas on and just as she moved to step into the bathroom to wash her face and get ready for bed, she heard a knock at her door. Though her mind wondered who it might be, something in her heart already knew.

"Maddie, it's me. Harry..." And her heart leapt into her throat. This wasn't going to be as easy as she had hoped.
"Maddie..." His knuckles were soft on the door as she stood on the other side, debating if she was going to open it or not.

You're being ridiculous, she told herself. If this was it, if he was there to tell her they were done, she wanted to get it over with. Taking a deep breath, she forced her insecurities to quiet down and she swung open the door. He smiled wide at the sight of her.

"Look at you..." His eyes scanned her, unbelievably happy to see her. "You have jammies." The look on his face, the tone of his voice—it took all she had not to cave, her mind hazy from the meds, tired from the day.

"What can I do for you sir?" Her cold response gave him pause. The way she tacked on the sir at the end made his eyes narrow in confusion.

What was this? Maybe she had changed her mind about him. Maybe during her recovery she had come to her senses and decided this wasn't for her; that he wasn't for her. Maybe she had decided that the baggage that came with him—simply wasn't for her. Though it broke his heart, he understood.

"Sir? I'm sorry, can I come in?" Though she knew that she should probably shut the door in his face if she had any hope of remaining strong, she really didn't want to have this particular conversation in the hallway. Nodding, she stood aside and allowed him to enter. She noticed that he had lost his suit coat and loosened his tie; and he was carrying a backpack with him. Shutting the door behind him, she took a deep breath and steeled her nerves before turning to face him.

And it was a good thing because the soft look on his face was disarming. He smiled wide and his eyes twinkled.

"Maddie..." He breathed moving to take a step towards her. Seeing the stone look in her eyes halted his movements; keeping him from going directly to her.

"What can I do for you?" She raised her eyebrows, barely hanging on to the tiny bit of control she had over herself. Still not understanding her need to do so. Maybe it was the pain pills she had taken, maybe it was her intense desire to just let her mind rest. Maybe her stubborn, defiant streak was making a comeback in the strangest place possible.

"What can you..." His lips curled down into a frown. "Okay. What is happening right now?"

"You tell me," Maddie countered; he truly was the only one that could clear things up at this point.

"Me?" He pointed at his chest. "I don't know. When Khenda told me you left, I...I thought maybe you were sick or...Maddie, today I left right from training and flew here to see you..." He trailed off.

"Why?" She arched her eyebrows. "Why would you come all of this way if you were just going to brush me off? You could have ended things over the..."

"Ended things?!" His face registered utter shock. "Brush you off? Maddie that's absurd. That's..."

"Absurd?" Maddie laughed bitterly.

"Yes! Why would I brush you off, Maddie I..."
"I don't know. I haven't quite..."

"...Maddie, I'm in love with you..." The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them; surprising the both of them.

"...figured it out yet...wait." Her entire thought process came to a screeching halt. "Wait. What?"

"I..." He exhaled. He hadn't wanted it to come out this soon. He really hadn't wanted it to come out like that, but it was too late. There she was, watching him with wide eyes; waiting for him to continue, waiting for him to explain. "I know that it sounds...irrational but I am."

"Wh...wh...?" Maddie stammered, her mind had been swirling around in confusion all day, gaining speed and momentum in her spiral. But his words had drawn her to a complete and sudden stop.

"I knew it before I left you ten days ago but I just...I don't know. I was nervous and confused...I haven't felt like this before, so soon and so...much. And I didn't want to be misreading my feelings after what had happened that night but..." He shook his head with a wide smile. "The whole time I was away, all I could think of was...coming here and telling you. Maddie, I..."

"Wait..." Maddie's mind was on overdrive as she cut him off. "When I came to say hello, you just...you looked right through me. You barely even said..." She shook her head, hoping it would help clear the muck she was sorting through.

"You mean tonight?" He pointed towards the door.

"Yes tonight!"

"But I was standing with a reporter and..." Harry finally began to understand her demeanor, her reaction to him. Realization washed over his face, a small smile peeking through. "Oh Maddie...I didn't know if you wanted the world to know that I..." He moved closer to her then. "I didn't know if you wanted the reporter to know the scope of my feelings for you. I hadn't had the chance to talk to you before we walked through that door and...I erred on the side of caution. I had no idea it would make you feel..."

"Oh..." An embarrassed flush rising to her cheek as it all began to dawn on her. "You mean that...oh God..." Her good hand moved to her throat and she lowered into one of the chairs in the room as she thought over all the terrible thoughts she had been having; about the doubts she had allowed to work their way into her mind. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't be," he shook his head with a grin. "Don't be embarrassed."

"Oh I think I'm past the point of no return on that one. What is with me when it comes to you?" She felt tears spring to her eyes; partly embarrassment, partly emotional exhaustion. "I was just so happy to see you and then...and then I just...And I didn't know if I could come over to you or..."

"Hey..." His voice was low and calm as he sat in the seat across from her. "If it makes a difference, I can see why you thought that. Just...if you had questions about what was happening, you only needed to ask me. I would have told you."

"And you were just trying to be sweet and protective and..." She relaxed, moving closer to him. "Harry I am so...sorry."

"Don't be," he shook his head dismissively. Oddly enough, he was used to this strange stage in a relationship; where protocol and appropriateness was a discussion. He had it in every one of his
relationships, though the women he had dated had only had it with him. "Don't be sorry. Don't be embarrassed." He brought her hand to his lips for a kiss, relieved they had found the source of the problem.

"It's too late..." She smiled weakly, her shoulder aching. His attention moved immediately to the way she grimaced.

"How are you?" He nodded to the source of her pain, her hand still sandwiched between his.

"I'm okay," she sighed. "The doctor said my progress is faster than most."

"Not surprised to hear that," he grinned.

"Yes, well, I have to wear this for at least a few more weeks. Then I'll see a doctor and we'll go from there."

"Sure," Harry nodded. "Khenda told me that you're not going with them to Bendal."

"No," her lips turned down in a frown. "I have to keep my arm stable. I can't do anything with it. I can't push or pull or lift anything more than two pounds. I'm afraid I would be more of a liability than an asset at this point."

"I'm sorry to hear that," his words were genuine. "I know you wanted to go back."

"I really did," she sighed. "And I will. Just...not now."

"So then..." Harry took a deep breath. "What now?"

"Hmmm..." Her mind drifted in thought. "Tomorrow evening I'm heading to the states. I'm going to spend a week with my mother; let her see that I'm okay."

"I'm sure she's thrilled."

"She is," Maddie nodded with a smile. "And then I'm going to go spend some time with Ella in Dublin."

"Dublin?" His ears perked up. "How long are you going to be there?"

"I don't know," her smile widened. "I have three months mandatory furlough to get well and decide what I want to do next; three months before they will discuss the possibility of me going back to Bendal or...somewhere else. So I figured, I might as well do some traveling; take a long holiday."

"Might as well," he agreed; his body warming at the possibilities. "Is there any chance that, sometime during those three months of travel, you might be willing to consider a stopover in London?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie tried to pretend to give it some thought, tried for a serious expression but failed miserably. Her eyes danced at the thought. "Well, I have always wanted to see Big Ben."

"Who hasn't?" He chuckled.

"And take a trip to Stonehenge."

"Sure..."

"And I have heard that London has some of the best pubs in the world..."
"I would agree with that statement," Harry grinned. "And you could probably use a good drink."

"I really could. Also..." She felt her heart swell with feeling as her confusion and embarrassment faded, leaving her mind clear to focus on his quick and hasty admission. "Also there's this guy...I'm not sure if you've heard of him...Harry of Wales?" She cleared her throat and met his eyes. "Well, I have it on pretty good authority that he's...in love with me."

"Ah...you heard that, did you?" He blushed; slightly nervous.

"I did," she grinned. "So...you know. A stopover in London could be a distinct possibility."

"Excellent," Harry breathed. But, before he could relax completely, there was one more thing he needed to handle. His smile faded slightly as he dropped her hand and moved from the chair.

"Where are you going?"

"Well, before we move on to anything else, I do think it would be helpful for us to have that talk I tried to have with you the night you assaulted me in the greenhouse."

"Assaulted?"

"Don't pretend like you don't remember," he turned to wink at her as he opened the backpack he had brought with him.

As he began to remove what appeared to be magazines and newspapers from the bag, his face grew more and more serious. Laying them out on the desk in the room, he pulled the final one out and stepped back. Curious, Maddie moved to his side, looking down at them. On the desk lay approximately twenty periodicals; all containing salacious headlines about various members of his family; including himself, his brother, and both of his parents.

"Harry..." Her good hand reached out to touch his arm. "What is all of this?"

"This," he scowled down at the collection. "This is what happens when the world finds out."

"Finds out about what?" Maddie's eyes scanned the headlines, the disgust mounting inside.

"You." His voice was strong, stoic as he turned to watch her. "We haven't talked yet about where this is going or where you want it to go. You know how I feel about you and...and I want you to come to London. I want to take you out on an honest to God date; you know...where I pick you up and we eat dinner and have beer and I worry about rather you'll call me or not..." Maddie laughed at the picture he was painting. "But before you make a decision about that, a decision about me, you need to know what you would be walking into."

"Harry..." She shook her head, but he continued.

"We have to talk about it Maddie. This is a very real part of what comes along with me. They are relentless. And ruthless. And always there. There is...very little thought or tact involved. Very little concern for the truth or what is right or the damage it might cause. They will watch and watch and the one moment out of a hundred that you slip up, it's on the front page of every single daily." Maddie opened her mouth, wanting to offer words of comfort, but he wasn't quite done. "I do my best to ignore them and you know what? I've been mostly successful at it. It used to bother me when I was younger but now, I don't care. They can write whatever they want about me. I can take it. But I have been dealing with this my entire life. They...they have questioned my paternity; questioned my father's honor and integrity and his ability to raise us." Harry swallowed, his eyes growing dark. "They presumed the worst possible things about my mother. They said she was
crazy and unstable and...and I don't even want to get into their role in her...” He took a deep breath, trying for calm.

"Harry..." Her hand reached out to him then.

"I cannot even tell you how many times Chelsy cried because of what was yelled at her from across the street or because she was scared by the ten huge men shoving cameras in her face. They called my cousin, my wonderful, beautiful cousin fat and ugly. And at the time in her life when calling her that would only serve to drive her deeper into...” His face was red, his jaw hard and set.

"Hey..."

"And then there's Kate." He sighed. "They tear her apart; her clothes, her hair, her makeup, her degree, her family. Kate who...all she is trying to do is love my brother. She is just trying to love my brother and do you know how hard that is? Loving one of us?" His eyes met hers. "This makes it damn near impossible!" He turned from her then, trying to calm the anger that boiled inside as he thought over all of it.

"Are you...are you trying to scare me?" Her question brought him back to the moment, back to her. "Is that what this is? You're trying to scare me off?" He turned to face her. "So I'll end things first?"

"No," he shook his head; softening. "No. I'm not trying to scare you."

"Because if you don't want to do this... If you don't want to be with me then you just have to tell me. I'll walk away. I won't throw a tantrum or run to a reporter or..."

Harry, with a great sense of purpose, moved directly to her then; pulling her flush to him. Mindful of her arm, he cradled her body close to his and, without another word, he kissed her; the deep, warm, intoxicating kiss she had been expecting when she first saw him. And when he pulled away from her, she was nearly breathless.

"Wow..." She breathed; it was so much better than she had remembered.

"That. I have been wanting to do that for..." He pressed a kiss to her lips, her forehead. "That is what I wanted to do when I saw you, the second I saw you."

"But..."

"But I do that and..." He swallowed and waved his hand at the collection of newspapers and magazines. "All of this begins."
Chapter 15

His hands were slow as they traveled over her shoulder to her arm; rubbing up and down in a soothing fashion. "I just...tonight, with the reporter, I couldn't throw you into all of that without at least talking to you first. If I could, I would keep you away from it forever. Though I'm not entirely sure how that would be possible given how very much I enjoy this..." He wrapped his arms around her protectively; nuzzling his nose to hers.

"Me too," she moved slightly; capturing his lips with hers. Sighing, she settled even closer to him. "Harry?"

"Hmmm?" He lifted his eyebrows; the casual smile on his face warming the room.

"I can take it." His eyes blinked at her words, at the certainty he saw in her smile.

"You don't have to decide right now," he shook his head. "You can have as much time as you like..."

"I don't need time." She laughed as she brushed it off. "I am tired of waiting and wondering and overthinking things. And I'm not afraid of them; of this." She glanced over at the magazines lined up. "They can question my paternity. They can assume the worst about me. They can call me names. They can make me cry. They can pick apart my clothes and my hair and my education and my citizenship and..." She pulled from him slightly, wanting him to really see that she meant it. "And I don't care because, really...I know that you really only started kissing me but it's been months since I've realized...it's really not that difficult."

"What's not that difficult?" He blinked.

"Loving you..." She seemed suddenly shy as she confessed; all of her confusion had left her heart and she was absolutely clear. She was done being wishy washy and unsure. She was done trying to let her head talk her heart out of this particular emotion. She felt how she felt and if he could admit it, so could she. "If anything I would say it's damn near impossible not to."

"Careful..." He warned, sucking in a shaky breath. "There's no turning back once you throw that out there. I'm not joking around here. You can say no and walk away and...I'll understand. And I won't be angry and I will always, always care about you." His eyes grew sad at the thought, but he forced a smile.

"I don't think you're hearing what I'm saying to you," Maddie sighed and moved to the table. With her good arm, she stuffed the magazines back into the bag before dropping it onto the floor. With a satisfied grin, she turned to look at him. "I hope you meant what you said earlier, about loving me...because, scandalous headlines or not, I'm not going anywhere."

"No?" He felt a tug at his heart.

"Not a chance."

"And to think...when I walked in here, you had every intention of throwing me out," he eyed her playfully. "What changed your mind?"

"Well," she shrugged. "You are the Crown Prince and all..."

"Ha!" He laughed; tugging on her chin with his fingertips; the reunion of their lips seconds behind him.
"Wait," she pulled back. "Aren't you supposed to be at the party?"

"No," he shook his head. "I made my speech, did the rounds. I'm a free man."

"But... What happened to your reporter, how did you lose him?"

"I had a little help," Maddie raised her eyes in question, to which he answered, "Ella."

"Ella..." She grinned as she thought of her best friend. "She's wonderful."

"She is," he nodded. "Though, if you wanted to go back down and let everyone in on our little secret, we could certainly make an announcement. I'm sure Harold would appreciate the exclusive."

"Ha!" Maddie tossed her head back in laughter. "I am sure he would. But no, not tonight."

"Your call." Harry shrugged his shoulders, easily dismissing it.

"Is that what you're going to do?" She grew curious. "Make an announcement?"

"No," he laughed with a shake of his head. "It's much easier than that."

"Do tell."

"I just stop trying to hide it. I go about my life, acting as I normally would. I'd take you to dinner. I'd hold your hand." His eyes shifted a shade darker. "I'd kiss you in public."

"Oooohhh..." Maddie slid in closer to him.

"They would figure it out," his mouth frowned only slightly. "Sooner rather than later."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, thinking it over, studying his expression. "And when does that happen?"

"That is completely up to you," he nodded in her direction. "They already follow me around. You get to control this part."

"Wow..." Maddie sighed, leaning back against the desk. "What a strange decision..."

"I know," he agreed; did he ever. "Can I make a suggestion?"

"Of course."

"Warn your family first. Your photo will eventually end up in a magazine or on TV and it seems to go over easier when people know it's coming. Don't get me wrong..." He ran a hand through his hair. "I meant what I said—we can leak it now if you want."

"No," Maddie smiled. "I'll go to the states, speak to my mother and then, when I see you in London..." She waved her hand, her smile increasing. "They can figure it out."

"Deal," he grinned; clapping his hands together.

"Besides," she shrugged with her good arm; a move that had taken her days to master. "I kind of like the idea of having you all to myself for the night."

"I do too."
"Do I?" She let her head tip to the side, let her voice drop soft and sweet. "Get to have you all to myself tonight?" With her bottom lip between her teeth, she lifted her eyebrows.

Chuckling at her expression, his heart warming at her smile, Harry nodded. "I'm all yours."

"Finally!" She exhaled sharply, relief flushing her face as Harry laughed. "Sorry, it's been a long time."

"Ten days," he pointed out, watching her closely as she pushed away from the desk and took a step towards him. "I know."

"And you have said some of the most wonderful things to me tonight..."

"Well..." He ran a hand over the back of his neck, suddenly feeling just a little bit nervous.

"And what I really want to do is..." She stood in front of him, her eyes lifting and locking with his—the look in them darker and not nearly as sweet as they were only moments before. "Finish what we started in that greenhouse."

"...you mean without the sirens..." His eyes were full of something between youthful adoration and an intense, heavy desire.

"Yes," she nodded, her fingers stretching, resting on his chest. "And the rain..."

"Come here," he nodded for her to come closer, his eyes flashing to her lips.

"But there's this sling and..."

"Come here," his voice dropped an octave as he pulled her to him; his fingers sweeping over her skin as he cupped her head in his hands.

"And my pain pills are..." His mouth closed over hers then.

This was it, she thought. This tingling sensation that ran through her veins when he touched her. This warm heat that traveled over her skin when he kissed her. This was worth all of the ups and downs she had been through just that day. This was the feeling she had been searching for; this overwhelming feeling of happiness. She was content, serene; blissful.

Sighing into his mouth, she leaned her body closer to his. Harry, spurred on by the way her tongue teased between his lips, moved to wrap his arms around her; wanting there to be no small distance between them. The move jostled her arm slightly, bringing out an involuntary gasp.

"Whoa..." Harry pulled back slightly; his lips pink from the kissing. "Maybe we shouldn't..."

"No, it's okay," Maddie shook her head with a slight flinch, moving her lips back to his.

"Maddie..." He smiled against her lips.

"Harry..." She hated how her voice had a whiny tone to it. "I want to do this."

"I do too," he chuckled. "But I am not going to do something that's going to cause you to flinch like that. I really don't want to hurt you."

"It's fine," she huffed, frustrated with her body. "I took a pain pill right before you got here. I promise, I won't feel anything!"

"Ouch," he smirked as laughter danced across his eyes.
"I meant..." She narrowed hers; blushing slightly. "I meant that it wouldn't hurt my shoulder...not that I..."

"Maddie..." He whispered his protest between kisses to her jawline. "You are recovering from a gunshot wound. Surely you're not supposed to be..."

"I'm not supposed to lift anything, or put weight on it, or raise my hand above my head. And, while those do pose some interesting challenges...I thought you might be up for it. But if you're not..."

"Shhh..." He grinned against her neck; pulling her tighter to him. His lips continued their quest past the soft skin where her shoulder met her neck. She sucked in her breath as he planted warm kisses there, as he stirred up wonderful memories from their moment in the greenhouse. "I promise...if you wait until the doctor gives you clearance...until I see you in London in less than a month...I promise I will be more than happy to make up for any and all of the lovely things I want to do to you right now."

"Oh..." Maddie moaned, her head rocking back slightly.

"But I am not about to cause you..." His head moved away from her body as the journey his lips were on ended at her shoulder. "Any more pain." With a light kiss to her still bandaged shoulder, he took a full step away from her. Yes, his pulse was racing. Yes, his desire was boiling. And he wanted her, God how he wanted her. But he could wait; even if it took all of the strength he had to resist the way she was looking at him in that moment—a sexy little pout on her lips.

"But...I was really hoping to spend the night with you."

"You still can."

"I can?" She smiled, her pulse slowing down. "You would stay here with me tonight?"

"Yes," he breathed, relieved that she had given up on her quest to take him down. "I would love to stay here with you tonight."

"Okay," she sighed.

"Though, I don't have cute jammies like you do."

"It's okay," Maddie smiled up at him. "We have a very loose dress code around here."

"Fantastic!" He clapped his hands together.

Maddie excused herself then; going to the bathroom to wash her face, brush her teeth, give her reflection a much needed knowing look. And when she returned to the room, Harry was laying back on her bed, his head propped up on two pillows; having dressed down to just a t-shirt and boxers. Maddie's breath sucked in.

"You okay?" He lifted his eyebrows to her, catching the look on her face.

Sighing, Maddie nodded. "I was just thinking that it's too bad my mother didn't raise a more...chaste daughter." As Harry laughed, Maddie shook her head. This waiting was going to be more difficult than it should be.

"Come on, love." He smiled lazily up at her, waving at her to join him. "Time to enjoy some markedly innocent snuggling." With a slight laugh and a steadying breath, she did just that.
Her arm held tightly to her in her stabilizing sling, she moved to his side, nestling up to him as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Just as naturally, Harry's arm moved around her; squeezing gently as he pulled the blankets up around them. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head; inhaling her shampoo and relaxed into her bed. As they both reveled in this new level of comfort between them, Maddie could not contain her wandering thoughts. Her mind alternated between her future with him and her past before him; reconciling the two of them as she faced this new fork in the road.

"Harry..."

"Hmmm?" His eyelids were growing heavy.

"You know," she moved to look up at him. "I've smoked pot before."

"Oh-kay," his eyes opened with a laugh.

"More than once."

"Maddie..." His laughter rumbled in his chest.

"And I went through this period when I was twenty two when I drank and partied...a lot," he opened his mouth to speak, but she hurried ahead of him. "And I've had sex...with more than one man."

"Madeline!" His eyes flashed wide in amusement.

"Not at the same time!" She clarified unnecessarily. "Just...I'm not some innocent virginal girl and..."

"I never imagined that you were," he watched her with tender eyes. "Maddie, why are you telling me these things?"

"I want you to know what you're walking into. I don't want anything that I've done to be bad for you and..."

"Are you kidding me?" He laughed. "You think your past boyfriends and partying days are going to make me want to not be with you? They have stories about my drug use, pictures of me punching reporters and...dressed as a Nazi, for God's sake."

"Ah yes," Maddie relaxed slightly; feeling better. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"It is a long story." He shook his head and settled back into the pillow; kissing her forehead. "One I'll tell you sometime over one of the many beers we are going to share..."

"I can't wait."

"I bet," he laughed. "And I don't need to know those stories about you right now. We can learn them as we go. But tonight...can we just...it's been a long day..."

"A long week," she interjected.

"Can we just sleep?"

"Mmm..." Maddie nodded before turning her mouth up to kiss his. "Maybe a little of this first?"

"Yes..." He grinned, turning to bring his mouth to hers. "Absolutely."
That night, as Maddie drifted off to sleep snuggled close to Harry’s side, thoroughly kissed and satisfied, she finally felt as though her roller coaster ride was coming to a stop.

She never would have imagined that it was, in fact, just beginning. Though this time, she knew for sure, she wouldn’t be on it alone.
Maddie found that, that night with Harry, she had slept better than she had since before the shooting. And Harry found that, that morning when he woke, leaving her side was growing increasingly more difficult.

But they both had plans; plans that involved planes and other countries, other people. Plans that had nothing to do with the other—no matter how much they wished they did. She offered to call for some coffee and he offered to help her take a shower with her sling.

Both politely, and regretfully, refused.

His plane was leaving earlier than hers; within hours in fact. So he kissed her; again and again before prying himself from her arms. Then, with his bag full of irrelevant magazines, disheveled hair, a rumpled shirt, and a giddy look in his eyes, Harry left her room to head back to England—but only after he secured a promise he would see her in a month.

Maddie, rolling her eyes at the wide, goofy grin on her face that she could not seem to remove, hurried through her morning routine—as much as she could hurry with her arm in the shape it was in—and went to meet with her friends before they all left South Africa for their varied destinations.

Collins rose to his feet as she approached their breakfast table and was the first to notice a drastic change in her demeanor from the night before. Khenda watched her contemplatively and Ella, having assisted Harry in occupying the reporter, made no bones about it. With a smug smile, she looked to her best friend and asked,

"Sleep well last night Doctor?"

The flush that came to Maddie's cheeks was bright red and the smile that flew to her face was indescribable. Then, in a small, quiet voice, she let them in on the night before; on the promises that had been made, on where she was headed and with whom. And she wasn't quite sure which one of them was happier about the news; herself included. Of course they would keep it quiet, of course she could trust them. They were the three most important friends in her life and, in a show of solidarity, Collins rose his glass to salute her. As the four of them drank to Bendal, to what had occurred, to what was about to occur, they sat in a warm, happy hope for the future.

And then, one by one, they passed hugs around the group; warm, tight hugs that spoke of a loyal love and adoration they had developed. They kissed cheeks and foreheads and promised to meet again. And then they would load up their one bag—the one worn bag that spoke of a well-seasoned traveler, they said their good-byes and they departed.

All knowing they would meet again.

As Maddie flew over the vast continent of Africa, across the depths of the Atlantic, she felt torn between her worlds. Her life at home, her life in Bendal, and that wonderful unknown life that lie ahead. She hoped that she wouldn't soon be forced to choose between them, that somehow she would manage to have them all at the same time.

And when she landed, finally, in the dry, chilly air of Colorado, she embraced her mother; her mother who couldn't stop crying. She let her mother fuss over her and then, together; hand in hand, they made their way to Maddie's first home. And she settled into that life—at least for the moment.
Maddie spoke with Harry nearly every night that she spent apart from him. They would trade off during whose night they would call. Sometimes she would lay awake in her bed, trying to keep her eyes open while waiting for his call. And then there were nights when she would swallow the nervousness in her chest and call him; knowing she would be waking him. But neither of them ever complained; the end result was just too sweet. Their knowledge about each other continued to flourish. Their attraction solidified as they grew closer. And it was these talks that helped propel them forward. Just as they had months before.

They talked about everything. They spent hours talking about those small, mundane things that they never managed to cover during the hot nights in Bendal.

Maddie's middle name was Jae, named after her father Jay. Harry embarrassingly admitted that he had a total of four names; Henry Charles Albert David. Each one had been carefully, meticulously selected for him; drawing from a long line of history.

He liked them all but...no, she could not call him Albie—no matter what she tried to bargain with.

"What about all four?" She had dared. "Can I call you by all four?"

"Only if I'm in a whole host of trouble," he had resigned.

"Fair enough."

They had discussed topics of greater importance; though none were as significant as the night Harry made a small request of her during her time in London.

"I'm sorry, what did you just say?" She sat up in her bed; her eyes wide awake.

"I said that my father would love to meet you when you are here," Harry repeated, trying to force the amusement from his voice.

"Your father?" Maddie swallowed, trying to wet her now dry throat. "Prince Charles."

"Yes," Harry chuckled. "And my step-mother Camilla. My brother and his wife have offered to host a dinner at their place so that you can meet them and Kate."

"Oh wow..." Maddie took a deep breath.

"Madeline," Harry's voice was low, soothing; comforting. "Don't overthink it. Try not to think of it as meeting the next King of England..."

"Well that doesn't help!"

"Think of it as my father... He's just my father. He has heard me speak of you for months. He knows what happened in Bendal, he's heard of you from William. And now he knows that you're going to be here in London. He...he wants to meet you; see what all the fuss is about."

"The fuss?" Maddie sighed. "Can I just say...this makes me more nervous than when I had to tell my mother that she may soon see photos of me in some of the gossip magazines..."

"Ah yes," Harry smiled and continued. "But you told me that went incredibly well."

"It did."

"Then there's no reason to believe that this will be any different." Harry shrugged. "Maddie, he's going to adore you. Please let me tell him you'll meet him."
"Well I have to agree to it now," Maddie allowed a small smile to grace her face. "It would be incredibly awkward to refuse a dinner request such as this, right?"

"I suppose it would," he agreed.

"Okay," she breathed. "You may set that up. I will...I will meet your family."

"Excellent," Maddie could hear the grin on his face. "You know, if it will make it seem more equal, I would be happy to meet your mother."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "She doesn't have a passport. You would have to fly to Colorado to meet her."

"Say the word," Harry shrugged and it quickly became one of those moments when Maddie was reminded just how much her life was changing.

"Wow..." She took a breath. "You know, maybe we should do London first."

And so they would.

In the end, Maddie had ended up spending two weeks at home with her mother. She slept in her childhood bed, had coffee and muffins every morning on the deck and brewed sun tea while they caught up with each other.

And the catching up proved to be helpful for both of them. For example, her mother had decided to start taking classes at the local community college. She had started with some easy ones; computer literacy and the like. And now that she had a hang of it, she was hoping to extend her studies to something more challenging—maybe nursing. She was feeling more independent, more confident; and she had made some great new friends. This was a relief to Maddie—who often worried about her mom alone in their big house.

And then Maddie told her mother about Harry. She had been nervous about telling her mother about the young Prince she would be flying to see and the imminent media attention. But, much to Maddie's surprise, her mother was very calm and seemed open to the idea. She only wanted her daughter happy—and if he made her happy and that happiness outweighed the drudge of the media and gossip. Then it was worth it. Plus, he had been so wonderful to keep in contact with her after Maddie had been injured. For that she would be forever thankful.

Maddie had visited with her grandmother, a sassy old lady who censored her opinion for nobody but whom Maddie adored uncontrollably. She spent time with her only uncle; a financial broker who lived in Denver and her three cousins, all adult men with careers and families of their own. It was these visits that always made Maddie consider moving back to Colorado. Since her father had died, this was the first time that they had all been together when there was nothing but smiles; no tears and heartache. And of course, her cousins were amazed with the horror and wildness that their little cousin, the one they had always looked after, had been shot in South Africa. They had always been incredibly protective of her and now she was quite the superhero in their eyes.

Not one member of her family balked at the idea that she might be going on dates with the red headed Prince. They made jokes; about curtsying and high tea—jokes that Maddie was scared to admit were closer to her fears than they realized. But ultimately, they weren't terribly surprised that Maddie had caught his eye and they promised to keep their lips sealed should anyone come to them for some dirt on her. And he seemed like a decent guy—from what they knew of him. One cousin, a former pilot in the Air Force, particularly liked that Harry was a military man. And his wife particularly liked the blue of Harry's eyes. But all agreed that they hadn't seen Maddie smile like that about any of the men in her past.
Either way, they were all on board. Not one member of her family wanted Maddie to see one more moment of distress and upset. She had been through enough with her father's sickness and deserved some happiness.

While at home Maddie had worked diligently in Physical Therapy; pushing herself more and more every day. By the time she was packing to leave for Dublin to see Ella, she could spend an extended amount of time without the sling before it started hurting again.

And when it was time for her to leave, she kissed her mother, hugged her extra-long, and finally—after three trips back to her arms—walked through security towards the terminal. Though she was excited for the trip; excited to reconnect with Ella and revive her spirit in a completely different way than the two weeks at home had, she found she had missed home, missed her mother more than she had ever really let on.

But she continued on. She settled into her seat and let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Soon she would be with her best friend; laughing over beer. She couldn't wait.
Chapter 17

Seeing Ella brought on a feeling of "coming home" that Maddie hadn't expected to feel at all. But seeing her friend waiting for her with excited eyes, brought tears to her eyes and an overwhelming warmth to her heart. She ran straight into her arms and held on tight. And then, Ella asked the magical question that would set the tone for Maddie's visit.

"Coffee or a pint?" She raised her eyebrows in anticipation while Maddie debated for only a moment.

"A pint."

And so it began. Dropping her bags at Ella’s flat, the two girls headed out on the town. Ella toured Maddie through some of her favorite old haunts; running into person after person who had known her for some time in her life. Maddie jumped feet first into the revelry; enjoying the amazing drinks that were continuously offered up to her and watching as Ella was reunited with people who adored her almost as much as Maddie did.

If Maddie's time at home with her mother had provided peaceful, quiet time to rest, Maddie's time 'at home' with Ella was the fun, wild abandon that both ladies needed to purge their minds of the tragedies they had witnessed; allowing them to just be friends, not comrades. Though they spoke of Bendal and their friends and colleagues who were there; it was with tipsy fondness and love.

The two ever constants? Intense Physical Therapy for her arm and talking to Harry. Regardless of what she was doing; having coffee and cake in the café, touring any one of the historical landmarks, or enjoying a tall one at a club with Ella; Maddie spoke with Harry every night. And, as their time together grew closer, they both grew more and more impatient for the impending reunion.

"Come to London!" He demanded one night while out drinking with his mates.

"No!" Maddie laughed at him as Ella eyed her from across the booth. "I'll be in London soon enough. Tonight I'm with Ella."

"But I can hardly stand that you're so close to me and yet, tonight, I'm sleeping alone here and you're sleeping alone there."

"I'm not sleeping alone. I'm sleeping with Ella." She took a long drink from her glass.

"Ohhh..." His response was somewhere between a groan and laugh. "Don't say things like that to me Maddie."

"I miss you Harry," her voice lowered.

"Definitely don't say things like that..."

"I cannot wait to kiss you again," she could feel her skin tingle at the thought.

"That's it! I'm on my way!"

"No!" She laughed.

"Yes! Dublin is incredibly close! I can be there in like...two hours by air and..."
"You don't know where I am in Dublin. I barely know where I am in Dublin," she looked around the bar with a smile.

"I'll bring my friends. They'll help me find you."

"You're talking crazy."

"I am crazy..." He paused, catching his breath. "Maddie..." His voice was lower, more serious.

"Harry?"

"Come to London..."

"I will. Soon. I promise."

"Please hear the sincerity in my voice when I tell you...I cannot wait to see you."

"Hmmmmm..." She grinned and winked at her best friend who returned to the booth. "Well, until then, I'm going to get pissed and sleep with Ella."

"I am never going to make it through this week."

"See you soon your highness..."

"Not soon enough Doctor..." And then he was gone, leaving Maddie grinning like a fool in a booth in Dublin. Sighing, she met her best friends' eyes.

"Ella...I love him."

"I know," she answered without blinking.

"No. I love him."

"I know."

"I know."

"Hmmmm..." Maddie took another drink. "I miss him."

"I know you do darling," Ella patted her hand. "You want to go to London tonight? It's only two hours by air. I'm sure he would be thrilled to send a car to the airport for you."

"Don't tempt me!" Maddie laughed but settled further into her seat. "But no...I'm here with you. And this is where I want to be right now. It's just sometimes his voice and...ugh...the way he talks and..."

"You want to jump him."

"Ella!"

"Maddie! Don't feign innocence with me." She let the laughter die down for a moment before she leaned in closer to her friend. "Okay, I have to ask...and I know that it's crass, but I just can't..."

"What is it?"

"How is he?"

"I'm sorry?"
"Harry...how is he? I have been dying to know because while he seems incredibly sweet and affectionate, I also have to believe that he has this wild streak and I have seen the man play polo and..."

"Ella!"

"What?!

"I...I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't..." Ella sat back in her seat; eyes wide with astonishment. "You mean, you haven't..."

"We haven't." Maddie looked away nervously.

"Why not?!"

"We've come close but...ugh..." Maddie groaned as her body reacted to the memories of their time together. "We were in the greenhouse when the sirens went off and..." Maddie waved at her shoulder; still propped up by the sling. "And after that he...he didn't want to hurt my arm. So we're waiting..."

"Wow."

"I know."

"So..." Ella nodded towards her arm. "When does that thing come off?"

"According to schedule...a week after I arrive in London."

"That's going to be a long week."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "It really, really is."

Maddie's time in Dublin went by much too fast and, as the day grew closer to her trip to London, Maddie became slightly nervous; her mind giving her insecurities one last go round before the big day. Thankfully, Ella was there to stomp them down. One night, after a night out, the girls took a bottle of wine up to Ella's rooftop terrace and, laying under the stars, Ella listened as Maddie confessed.

"I'm a little...scared."

"Scared?" Ella's voice was soft; tired. "Scared of what?"

Maddie gulped before she could answer. "Harry."

"Why?" Ella leaned up on her elbows to look over at her friend. "Has he done something to you?"

"No, no!" Maddie was quick to shake her head. "I just...in two days I'm going to be in London with him—in his normal life, in normal surroundings and..."

"Are you worried he won't like you anymore?" Ella rolled her eyes at the thought.

"No," Maddie smiled nervously. "I'm worried that he will."
"I...I guess I don't understand what you're saying."

"It's an entirely new world to me. His family, his friends...his... God, Ella. It's not like in Bendal when it was easy to forget that he had this enormous role, you know? He would unload trucks and get his pants dirty playing with children and..." Maddie took a deep breath. "And in two days...he lives in a castle and has a staff and...there are all of these people around him who might disapprove of me and then what? I just...I'm nervous. What if I don't measure up and..."

"Stop it right now," Ella cut in; angrier than even she thought she should be. "Just, stop it. You think Harry invites you to London, to meet his family if he didn't...God. He's not stupid, Maddie. And he's not new to this. He's lived with this his entire life. You are well educated and charitable. You are sweet and kind and you carry yourself well—even after you've been shot, even after you've been out at the pubs with me for a week—you carry yourself better than most. And he is quite smitten with you." Ella took a calming breath. "You're just nervous. And, while I get that, you need to pull it together. What the hell happened to the strong, independent woman that I saw go out into the rural areas of Bendal, facing down big men with guns so that she could check on her clients. The Royal Family?! They are a walk in the park after that."

"Wow..." Maddie's face went blank as a small smile cracked at her lips; her mind snapping back to reality almost immediately.

"Pull it together Forrester. I mean it," Ella's eyes narrowed, though the same smile played at her lips.

"I suppose I needed that."

"I suppose so." Ella relaxed as Maddie smiled wider. "What happened to you?"

"I don't know," Maddie laughed; laying back down to look up at the sky. "I fell in love with a Prince."

"A sexy Prince."

"A very sexy Prince," Maddie agreed with a smirk.

"You feeling better?"

"Yes," Maddie sighed. "How did you know I needed that?"

"I just know," Ella shrugged.

"I love you Ella."

"Oh baby, I love you too," Ella reached her hand out to hold Maddie's. "And I promise...through all of what is about to come your way, I'll be here...to kick you in the ass if you need it."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "I am sure I will."

"Me too."

"Thank you..." Maddie turned her head to smile at her best friend.

"You're welcome," Ella turned her head and winked. "Two days?"

"Two days," Maddie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "God, I can't wait to see him."

And, now that her best friend had dismissed the last remaining shred of anxiety she held, the next
two days couldn't go by fast enough.
The next two days of Maddie's stay in Dublin went by painstakingly slow. Thankfully she was with Ella who provided nonstop entertainment and a crash course in Royal Family preparedness. She armed Maddie with protocol highpoints; when to curtsy and how, the appropriate way to address various members of Harry's family, and a few tips on appropriate attire at a variety of functions.

"How do you even know this?" Maddie had asked about midway through.

"I don't want to talk about it," Ella had dismissed the conversation while avoiding Maddie's eyes.

And they continued on. Maddie found herself torn; she wanted to stay with Ella—not wanting the time with her to come to an end, yet she wanted to run headstrong to Harry. Having waited for so long, having worked so hard to heal her arm, her body and her soul—she was ready. Ready to see him, ready to be with him; ready to move forward into wherever this journey took her.

So, when Harry suggested she bring Ella with, she nearly jumped for joy and hurriedly handed the phone to Ella so that Harry could do the asking. It was more appropriate for him to make the request and, Maddie was sure that if it were him instead of her, Ella would find it nearly impossible to refuse. She was right. Though Ella glared at her friend, she accepted Harry's invitation and began to pack her things. She would travel with Maddie to London, though she wouldn't stay long—certainly not after Maddie was released from wearing the sling—she had promised with a wink.

The flight to London was a short one. It was later in the night and there was relatively little turbulence and no upsets. Maddie had spoken to Harry just before they boarded the flight and he had told her there would be a car waiting for her and Ella when they arrived and that, finally, he would see her soon.

The plane landed safely and Maddie and Ella gathered their items and began the walk from the plane to the terminal; Maddie's excitement growing with every step.

They were half way down the jet way when it happened. Two girls, teenagers Maddie assumed, let out a loud squeal and came running back down the tunnel to another girl who was seemingly a friend of theirs.

"OHMYGOD!" One of them flailed her hands.

"Sara! You're not going to believe who's out there!" Though both girls were trying to keep their voices down, trying to remain inconspicuous, their excitement was clear.

"Who?!" People continued to file around them as they moved off to the side, fluffing their hair. The first girl pulled the friend close to her and, with wild, crazy eyes she said,

"Prince Harry."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Nooooooo."

It was then that Maddie turned to Ella, eyes wide as she forgot about the three girls and focused
only on what was waiting for her at the end of the jet way.

"Wow. I wonder what Prince Harry is doing here?" Ella grinned sarcastically at her best friend.

"Oh God..." Maddie took a breath. "How do I look?"

"You?" Ella laughed. "How do I look?"

"Hey!" Maddie snapped her fingers at her friend. "I'm serious. You heard those...girls. He is standing out there and this could...oh wow, Ella. This could be it."

"It?" Ella bit her tongue as she tried not to laugh.

"When the whole world finds out," Maddie took a deep breath and Ella decided to let her jokes fall to the side. She reached out to smooth a wayward hair down, glanced at Maddie's face and turned her around to check for anything that might be tucked into the wrong place. And with a sincere smile she assured her friend,

"You look amazing."

"Thank you," Maddie smiled gratefully. And then, passing the three girls who continued to primp, she held her head high and continued towards the terminal; Ella standing proud by her side.

When they emerged, her eyes quickly scanned the busy airport; finding him instantly. He was standing off to the side; dressed casually and holding a small bouquet of flowers in his hand. And when he saw her, he stood taller, smiled wider and Maddie instantly felt silly for any of the doubts and anxiety she had felt as this moment had grown closer.

Though there were a few people who clearly recognized him, glancing his direction inconspicuously or nudging their travel mates and nodding towards him, Maddie didn't care. With a deep breath, she smiled and walked right up to him.

"Your highness," she smirked.

"Don't you dare curtsy to me right now," he smirked back, his eyes dancing as he spoke.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, I was told that it was often customary when a lady flies in, for her boyfriend to pick her up at the airport. Was I misinformed?"

"Her boyfriend?" Maddie's eyebrows shot up.

"But you're not the Crown Prince," she glanced at the flowers in his hand, trying to ignore the onlookers.

"No I'm not," his grin widened. Noticing her moment of pause, he offered one last 'out'. Standing tall, he lowered his voice. "You sure you're ready for this?"

"A little late for that don't you think?" Her eyes were wide and...ready.

"Nah, I could hand these off to Ella, kiss her hello and we could leave you at the airport a free woman." He flashed Ella a suggestive smile.

"Ooooh. Let's go with that plan," Ella grinned; her heart soaring for her best friend.
"Watch it," Maddie warned them both and then, taking a breath, she stepped into his personal space; taking the flowers in her hand and placed a soft kiss to his lips. "And I am sure."

"Welcome to London," his voice was low against her ear as he hugged her close; his heart beating in his chest. He had waited so long for this moment.

"Thank you," she whispered back; inhaling his scent before pulling away.

"Ella," Harry turned to kiss her; first one cheek and then the other. "It's wonderful to see you."

"You too," she nodded. "Thank you for inviting me along."

"The more the merrier," he shrugged. In truth, he thought that having Ella there might ease some of the nervousness he thought might come along with what was about to happen. Of course, he enjoyed spending time with her as well; they had certainly bonded during those late nights next to Maddie's bed. But he genuinely thought it might be easier for Maddie to take in this version of his life that was new to her with Ella by her side. "Right this way," he nodded and pointed towards the exit of the terminal and towards baggage claim.

As they made their way through the airport, talking about the flight, about their travels, Maddie watched him closely; noticing tiny details she hadn't necessarily noticed before.

For instance, he was such a gentleman; it was almost an innate manner about him. He immediately took Maddie's carryon bag from her, despite the lovely purple shade. He stood to the side, allowing the two ladies to walk through doorways first; his hand often finding its way to the small of Maddie's back to lead in her in the right direction. He was attentive to Ella, making it a point to not make her feel like a third wheel. Once they reached their luggage, he loaded the cart and insisted on pushing it to the car that was waiting outside where the driver took over. He waited while Maddie and Ella situated themselves in the car, before climbing in behind them.

And he was sweet. He was unassuming; not once thinking he deserved precedence over anyone else. He didn't cut in front of people or expect special privileges. If it weren't for the security officer with him, Maddie wasn't sure if people would ever think he was the Prince. And, for those people who did a double take, thinking they might recognize him, he offered a small smile and a nod.

As the car pulled away from the curb, Maddie took a deep breath. This was it; the beginning. Though there was certainly not a mob of people and there was zero sign of the paparazzi, she was sure there were at least a few cellphone photos. Maddie smiled at Ella as Harry reached for her hand, his relief at finally having her there was evident to anyone who could see the look on his face. Sighing, she settled back into the seat, into him; ready for whatever happened next.
Chapter 19

Since Maddie and Ella's flight was later in the night, Harry wanted to get them back to his home as soon as he could, giving them time to unpack, to relax; to catch some sleep. Feeling slightly nervous, Maddie held tight to his hand as they entered the grounds at Kensington Palace. She was thankful for the dark the night provided; making it all seem less massive somehow. The realities of who Harry actually was had become more and more real as her time in London had drawn closer and now that she was here, driving through the ornate gates of the palace, it was settling.

If Harry noticed, he wasn't letting on. After he helped his driver unload their bags into the house, he told him goodnight and closed the door to the outside world. As all three of them relaxed slightly, Harry clapped his hands and offered a tour, showing them around his home, to their rooms. Ella smiled wide when she stepped into the recently redone guest suite; complete with modern amenities and a traditional feel. Harry smiled as Ella yawned, looking longingly at the large bed. She was sleepier than she thought.

"I am just down the hall to the right if you need anything," he offered.

"Sure," Ella glanced between the two of them. "And I'll just be in here—sleeping soundly—with ear plugs."

"Good to know," Harry smirked as Maddie blushed. After a round of hugs and good nights, Maddie allowed Harry to lead her down the hallway.

"And this..." He swung open a door. "This is your room."

"Oh..." Maddie breathed as she stepped into the opulent room.

"Oh?" Harry arched an eyebrow; catching a slight disappointment.

"Sorry," she smiled sheepishly. "It's lovely. I don't think I've ever stayed in something so...ornate." Harry laughed. "I guess I just thought, I don't know. I thought I would be staying with you."

"Oh thank God," Harry breathed, pulling her from the room.

"What is happening right now?" Maddie asked as he led her across the hall, confused.

"It would have been terribly inappropriate of me to just assume that you wanted to stay with me."

"And accurate," Maddie interrupted with a grin. "It would have been terribly accurate."

"Here we are," he reached out to push the door open; his hand on the small of her back, ushering her inside.

"Your room," Maddie smiled as she walking into the enormous room. Her eyes traveled around it; taking in all of the things that were so, entirely him. The colors of the fabric, the build of the furniture; it seemed so Harry that she instantly felt welcome.

"And yours," he stuffed his hands into his pockets somewhat nervously. "For as long as you would like."

"Thank you," she called out to him as she continued her mental inventory of the room; the books on the shelves, the prints on the wall, the hardwood floor and the thick, massive rug, the way it smelled just like him—only homier. Her eyes rested on his bed; large and comfortable and
inviting. She looked to one of the pillows where she saw, propped up against it, a bag of her favorite candy. "And what do we have here?" She reached for the bag.

"I know it's a little silly, but I couldn't resist," he explained with a shrug. Harry stood in his doorway and watched as she tossed the bag of candy onto the bed and turned to face him.

He was gorgeous; tall and fit and the way he was watching her move about his room made her skin flush. It as surreal. After all of the phone conversations, the flirty texts, the warm tension—she was finally here in his home. They could give this a chance, a normal chance. A light laugh rippled through her as she fought the need to roll her eyes at herself. She was standing in Kensington Palace, in the bedroom of a Prince.

There was nothing normal about any of this.

Except for the way he was looking at her. Except for the light in his eyes and the curve of his smile. Except for the way she was drawn to him. All of that felt incredibly normal, the same as it had in the desert of Bendal. It was natural and easy and she wanted so much more of it. Her head tipped the side and her cheeks tinted pink and she moved right over to him.

Without so much as a word, she leaned up on her toes and pressed her lips to his.

His response was automatic, innate. His arms were warm as they moved around her, tight as they drew her to him. His lips were gentle against hers as he kissed her back once, twice, and on the third time, the gentleness began to slip giving way to hot and insistent.

Maddie felt her knees give just a little as her lips parted below his. Her fingers twisted up in his shirt and pulled him more tightly to her, not wanting to have any distance between them. She pressed her body closer and closer still; closing in on fractions of inches; her hands traveling over his taught muscles.

For the life of him, Harry could not seem to remember any one of his four names. He was mesmerized. Instantly pulled in. Hooked. And when Maddie moaned into his mouth, he almost fell right over. His hands moved from her waist, planting themselves in her thick, blonde hair. With a collective breath, the kiss deepened.

Since they had first planned this trip, Maddie had been thinking about what this moment would feel like, what it would be like to be here. In every scenario she had imagined it would take her a good minute or two to move past the fact that she was standing in his home, in his room, kissing him—before she would be able to enjoy it. But, when it actually happened, when his lips touched hers, all thoughts had simply shattered and fell from her mind, making way for this. This amazing feeling of euphoria and excitement and comfort that she was now experiencing wrapped in his arms.

Harry, as had proven tradition, was the first to slow them down. With no small effort, he pulled his mouth from hers but made no attempt to extricate her from his arms. She groaned as he pulled away, to which he smiled the biggest, goofiest grin she had ever seen on his face. He leaned in one more time to place another soft kiss on her pouty, swollen, pink lips.

And before he could even open his mouth to remind her of the reasons he was pulling away from her, she rushed ahead; determination set in her eyes.

"There's something I want to show you ..." With great purpose, she moved around him; shutting the door and pulling him further into the room with her. Pushing him back so that he was sitting on the edge of his bed, she took a deep breath and, with her good arm, moved her sling up and over her head.
"Wait. What are you..." His eyes grew wide in alarm; his hands moving to stop her. But, with one well-placed finger to his lips, she shushed and halted him all at once.

"The shooting was almost two months ago," her voice was steady as she laid the sling on a dresser. "I have been in Physical Therapy for six weeks." Her good hand moved to massage her un-bandaged shoulder; bringing heat and relieving the tension there. She was very careful with her reactions, making sure that any hint of a grimace stayed away from her features.

"Maddie, what are you doing?" He asked; his eyes following her every movement.

"I just want to show you the progress I've made," she smiled sweetly and then, with a deep breath, she extended her "bad" arm out in front of her; holding it shoulder height as her fingers extended out towards him.

With her eyes on his, she moved it up and over her head, out to her side. Her movements were fluid and easy and normal. With a satisfied smile, she let it relax to her side and she moved closer to him.

"We're still working on strength building..." Both of her hands moved to his cheeks, her fingers stroking as she moved to stand between his legs. His hands went immediately to the backs of her thighs, grazing up under her skirt, his eyes looking up at her in awe. "But my arm is okay. I can lift things over two pounds. I can brush my teeth. I can wash my hair—mostly. And...and I can do this..." Maddie took in a slightly shaky breath and in one, slightly stunted movement, she pulled her shirt up and over her head. Though her good arm did most of the work, there was no pain in her bad arm. And then she was standing there in nothing but a white lacy bra and her skirt. Harry swallowed as he looked up to her.

"Maddie..." He breathed; his heart rate quickening. His eyes focused instantly on the rough pink skin of her scar; the constant reminder of that night, of what had happened.

"Harry," her hands moved to hold his face as she dipped hers to kiss him again; pulling his attention back to her and not to their past. "You know I caught what you said at the airport; about me being your girlfriend..." Harry chuckled as his hands moved from her thighs, up over her waist to the soft, warm exposed skin of her sides. She was standing so close to him that she could feel his breath on her stomach.

"Are you mounting a protest right now?" His voice was low and rough and it brought chills to her skin—which were instantly warmed by strokes of his fingers.

"Not about that," she shook her head, bringing her bottom lip in between her teeth; her hands running over his strong shoulders.

"Maddie..." He shook his head as his fingers moved up to the exposed skin of her shoulder; tracing lightly along the lines of her scar. "I don't know..."

"What don't you know?" She laughed lightly, leaning in closer to him. "I know I want this. I know that I want you...that I've wanted you since that night in Bendal. Don't you want this?"

"Of course I want this," he confessed, his restraint slipping away from him as her fingers tickled the back of his neck. Leaning in, his lips grazed over the soft skin of her stomach. She let out a small gasp at the contact, pulling him closer; continuing on her quest.

"And when you left me at the hospital, you told me to go home and heal and I have! I have been working so hard, twice as hard as I needed to just so that when I came here I could finally...have you." His eyes grew darker as she spoke; lifting to meet hers.
"But, I don't want to..."

"If you're going to say that you don't want to hurt me, than stop. You won't hurt me Harry," she tugged his face up so that he could see her eyes. "You can't hurt me. But if... if you really don't want to do this, if you're just not ready, I will stop pressuring you and..." Her teasing surrender was silenced when Harry moved to stand.

With serious eyes, his hands reached out to her, tugging her close and all the evidence she needed of how much he wanted this was pressing against her hip. Electricity ran through her veins as he kissed her, as he leaned her body into his. "Harry..." She groaned into his mouth.

"You have to promise me something," his voice was low as he bent to kiss her scar, this spot that had been the source of so much worry, so much anxiety.

"Anything," she breathed, her hands in his hair, pressing him to her.

"If there is any pain in this shoulder, any at all, you'll tell me." He licked and sucked and kissed. And Maddie nearly lifted her hands in the air in victory.

"Absolutely," she nodded; a flush running through her as this moment, this much anticipated moment seemed to be coming to fruition. Victory had never felt so sweet.

"Maddie. I just..." He took a deep breath, hoping to control all of the feelings he was having, wanting to explain to her that it had taken everything he had in him to resist her up until that point; that his protests were only about not diminishing all of the progress she had made. But, before he could tell her any of that, she reached out and, in a move that impressed him, pushed him back so that he was sitting on the bed, stepping into the space between his legs.

And then she gave him the look that he would, for many, many years, find impossible to resist; her eyes wide and pleading, her head tilted slightly to the side, her bottom lip sticking out slightly further than her top. If he hadn't wanted to take her in his arms right then and there, he may have been amused.

But when she ran the tip of her finger over his lips, when she looked to him with half-open eyes and smiled a breathy, "Please?"—humor and laughter faded and there was nothing but a deep, heavy want.

"Oh God help me," he shook his head, pulling her into his arms in surrender. He was doomed; blissfully doomed.

Feeling brave, feeling bold, Maddie leaned in. Her hand slipped around his neck and her lips pressed to his; soft, easy, familiar. As she moved back slightly, his hand reached out to her good arm, holding her close. His lips sought hers this time; with more pressure, more desire. When her lips parted and slipped between his, he paused pulling back; his eyes open wide.

She watched the look that flashed in Harry's eyes and her breath stopped in her lungs. Before she could offer up a comment any further, he was pulling her back to him in a crushing kiss. He was giving in to her and it made her feel like she was floating there in his room. She moaned as he moved, stretching his neck so that he could kiss her properly. His hand moved into her hair, holding her lips to his; his tongue darting into her mouth.

"Maddie..." He groaned into her mouth, tugging her down to him. He held her face to his as his lips moved across her cheek to her jaw. "Come here..." He sat further back on the bed, pulling her with him.
"Mmmm..." She smiled as she moved; her knees settling on either side of him as she settled into his lap.

"I do want this. I have wanted this since you first kissed me in Bendal..." Harry's voice was gruff with heavy honesty. "And we have waited and ...." He groaned; wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her tighter into his lap. She was so soft and warm. "God...you feel so amazing." A current ran through her veins; the electricity awakening every nerve ending in her body.

"Harry..." She sighed but Harry was quick to silence her with his lips; his hand moving up over her hip, along her waist. His fingers traced over her chest, causing her to stir in his lap. Maddie made tiny gasps for air, not wanting to pull her mouth away for any small amount of time. In the brief, flitting moments of thought that drifted through her head, she wondered if she had ever really felt this way; so aroused and turned on and yet so safe and at ease all at the same time.

She had been nervous, wondering if it were really possible, to feel the strong, magnetic pull without abandoning the calm reassurance she felt whenever she was with him. When Harry's lips left hers, when they bent to blaze a trail of heat and desire down her neck to the soft spot just above her collarbone, that she felt an amazing tug in her heart. This wasn’t just sex for her and she had this feeling in her gut, this wild, hot feeling that made her believe it wasn’t just sex for him either.

Pulling his face back up to hers, her lips took control of his. The heat, the need, the desire—all of it was there, building and boiling and though she felt on the verge of bursting, when she moved in this time it was slower. It was purposeful and it was full of all of the emotions she was juggling. Her lips and tongue moved slowly and deliberately and Harry must have sensed the change. His eyes opened to meet hers in this heavy moment and his body tightened around hers.

She heard him groan when her hands moved down his back. She heard his breath catch when her hands found their way to the skin under his un-tucked shirt. She felt his muscles flex under her hands as he moved. Emboldened by his lips, his hands, the way his skin felt against hers, Maddie took control. She pulled at the fabric under her fingers, sliding his shirt up and over his arms; exposing his soft tan skin.

"Oh...Harry...I..." She muttered, biting at her bottom lip as she shook her head. Looking down at his disheveled hair, his tan, taught chest; she felt tingly and warm.

And she wanted him. She wanted him.

A soft, breath of a moan pushed from her mouth. And when he heard her, he knew instantly that he had made the right decision. He had to be with her and he could barely remember why he had been putting this off in the first place. He had to connect with her and share this emotional and physical build up that had been boiling between them. There was simply no denying it any longer.

"God, Maddie..." His voice was gruff as he pulled her tighter to him. His lips found hers in that easy, familiar way one found home. He buried his hands in her hair and he kissed her again. There was something different about this kiss. She could tell. There was something more to the way his hands were holding her. There was something more to the way his lips were caressing hers. There was something more to his quick breathing and his warm body. It was intense and powerful and it made her face blush and her legs weak.

He kissed down her collar bone until he reached the small strap of her bra. He pushed it aside and moved his lips lower to kiss the soft pink skin of her chest. He heard her gasp as his tongue dipped below the lace that covered her breast seconds before his handiwork tossed the garment to the floor. He heard her moan as his hands pushed up under her skirt, allowing him access to her flesh. His hands began their journey higher, kneading and massaging, becoming familiar with her skin,
She groaned in disappointment when he moved away from her and sighed in happy fulfillment when he moved them both so that she was lying back against his pillows. With a swiftness she had yet to see, he pulled her skirt over her long, lean legs; allowing it to flutter to the ground next to his bed. After quickly sheddind what was left of his own clothes, he moved to lay over her, gently nudging her legs further apart. He moved to settle himself there, his lips joining his hands on their effort to render her delirious. He was gorgeous, sexy in a way that should be illegal. And he was naked and turned on and looking her over with fire in his eyes. She pressed her eyes closed, fighting for control of her pounding heart as he kissed his way down her stomach.

"Oh God..." She sighed as she felt his warm breath on the outside of her panties. Her heartbeat skipped as he ran his hands over her long legs; pulling her last shred of clothing off as he went. When Maddie’s hands plunged into his hair and tugged, Harry groaned at the conflict, at the great need that was building inside of him.

But when she pulled, he went. Moving up over her body, he rested one hand beside her head on the pillow and brought the other to her cheek as his eyes met hers. Their breathing was ragged and their eyes were intense as they spoke silent words between the two of them. It was dark and intense and heavy.

"Maddie...I..." He fought to control his breathing, his concern for her shoulder flashing across his face. "Are you..."

"Shh..." She brought his hand to her lips and kissed his palm. Her eyes stayed focused on his as she reached out and began pulling him closer. Her legs moved up around him as her hands slid down his chest, to his waist. "I need you..." She pulled him closer then, an adorable smile playing across her lips. "I...I love you," She bit her lower lip and looked innocently into his eyes—a look she managed to master just this day. "Harry...please..."

For one, silent moment, their eyes connected and neither of them could move. For one, silent moment, she thought that he might be on the verge of tears. For that one, silent moment, he swore that he could hear her heart beating out of her chest.

"Harry..." she whispered and brought a hand to his cheek. When he heard her voice and felt her hand, that moment came crashing to a halt and his senses came flooding back. He could hear the need in her voice. He could see the want in her eyes. With great skill and grace, he bent to kiss her lips and reached into the nightstand for protection.

When he returned to her, he settled above her, returning right to this heated moment between them. When her hips arched up towards him, he groaned. His fingers circled around her ankle, lifting her leg higher around his hip. When he kissed her, he could taste the salt on her skin, her could feel her desire beating in her pulse and the look in her eyes—nearly took every clear thought he had ever had.

And when he entered her, Maddie’s mind slipped off to that far off place his had drifted to. She had no choice but to let go of everything else but this.

She forgot that they were in a palace in London. She forgot that this was supposed to be a man she would never have access too. She forgot that they were supposed to be careful. Hell, she was surprised she didn't forget to breathe.

And it all felt so amazing that she let herself forget. She wrapped her arms around his neck and sank into the warm, comforting embrace he was offering to her.
Very slowly and with great control, Harry began to move above her; the feel of her around him making his vision hazy.

"God....Maddie..." He breathed against her ear, her neck, running his hand down through the peaks of her chest, over the flat plane of her stomach; settling at the place where they were connected. The slightest of touch drew a gasp from Maddie and a smirk from Harry. Maddie's head lifted up off the pillow so that she could really kiss him, her hair pooling behind her.

Together they moved, they sighed, they moaned, they groaned. And Maddie, in love with the sight of him above her, with the way he felt, the way he moved; she kept her arm relaxed and still for as long as he could. But when her breathing drew quick and her skin began to flush, she knew she was close and she couldn't help it any longer. Her arms moved tighter around his neck, her hands pressing into the skin of his shoulders; urging him closer and closer still. She wanted all of him. As much as he could give her, she would take.

Sensing she was close, Harry brought both hands to her hot skin. Moving up her legs, over her hips, to grip her waist; pressing her closer to him. And when her head tipped back and her moans turned to cries, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tighter to him.

And as she went, she found her hands grabbing for him, finding his hand and holding tight as her orgasm shuddered through her; rocking her from head to toe. She cried out between gasps for air; cried out for him, cried out for God. Burying his face in her neck, he licked and sucked and fought to wait for her. And he did, though barely.

As they rode out the final waves of a shared orgasm, Harry's kisses grew softer, slower; bringing them both slowly down from their high. She relaxed her hold on him and he moved slightly so that his weight was not resting fully on her. As Harry kissed across her neck, her chest, moving up to meet her lips; watching as she steadied her breathing, her skin flushed pink, her eyelids fluttered. He kissed the inside of her wrists, up to her elbow, landing a warm, firm kiss to the scar on her shoulder and she came back to Earth, back to him.

Harry moved only to clean himself before returning to her side; his hands working to adjust the blankets underneath and around them.

When she finally opened her eyes, he was looking down at her, propped up on one elbow, his head resting on his hand. There was the tiniest of moments when she felt a little embarrassed, a little exposed. But when their eyes met and locked, those feelings faded and were quickly replaced with ones of love and desire. Tired, she cuddled close to him, moving her legs under his blankets and laying her head on his chest; nuzzling the spot in his neck that she had, just that night, discovered held the ability to render him speechless.

"I'm sorry," he whispered in a soft voice.

"For what?" She laughed, surprised at this admission.

"Making us wait to do that..." They both chuckled at that.

"It was well worth it...if that makes any difference," she sighed into his neck.

"Mmmm...." He agreed, sleepy and blissfully happy.

He wrapped his arms around her then; pulling her closer, holding her tighter. He wrapped his blankets up and around them and, with one hand, he stroked her hair. He kissed her forehead and the sleepiness began to take hold of both of them.
Chapter 20

The very next morning, Harry was jolted awake by the sound of his door slamming shut. Sitting bolt upright, he looked first to the bed beside him; searching for her. His eyes moved quickly from his empty bed to the door that had slammed. There she stood; dressed in a pair of his boxers and a t-shirt. Her one arm was back in her sling, her other arm up; covering her face.

"Maddie?"

"Oh my God..." She groaned. "I am so embarrassed."

"What?" He smiled. "Why would you be embarrassed? Where were you?"

"Ugh..." She sighed heavily, letting her hand fall from her face as she moved back to the bed. "I woke up early and I didn't want to wake you..."

"And?" He reached for her hand as she neared him.

"And I went downstairs to make coffee and maybe some breakfast..."

"Oh?" He chuckled, knowing what was coming.

"And there are people here."

"Yes," he nodded. "Well, there are a couple of people on staff here and you're bound to run into them."

"Dressed like this!" She waved her hand over her attire and Harry laughed loudly. "Stop laughing!"

"Don't worry," he pulled her hand to his lips for a kiss. "There can really only be two people here right now and both of them have been here for a very long time and they are incredibly discreet. Maddie..."

"In your boxers!" She nudged his shoulder. "I am wearing your boxers!"

"Yes you are..." His voice went low as his eyes scanned over her. Pulling her to him for a kiss, he felt her tension relax in his arms. "You know, one of those people you ran into, Bernard, he can actually bring us breakfast here, in my room."

"I don't know that I could face him now," she groaned, crawling back into his bed beside him.

"Ha!" Harry laughed, reaching for the phone beside his bed. Maddie snuggled back into his bed, back into her pillow as Harry called Bernard, politely requesting a tray with coffee and a light breakfast to be delivered to his room and Ella's room as well. "Don't worry," he assured her after disconnecting the phone call. You are certainly not the first woman in underwear they have encountered."

"Oh really?" Her eyebrows arched.

"Not here!" He shook his head quickly. "They have been employed by my family for a long time, is all I meant."

"Oh I'm sure that's..." A knock at the door called for both of their attentions. "That was fast."
"It was probably ready before you went running around half naked," he winked at her as he rose from his bed; pulling sweatpants on as he went.

"Hey!" She threw a pillow towards him. Narrowly dodging it, he laughed and pulled open the door.

"Bernard, won't you come in," Harry stepped aside as the older gentleman brought a wheeled tray into the room; complete with two place settings, coffee and a variety of breakfast items. Maddie quickly jumped to her feet, pulling on a robe Harry had laid in a chair next to her side of the bed. "Bernard, this is Doctor Madeline Forrester. She is one of the guests I told you we were expecting. Maddie, this is Bernard. He's in charge of the Household."

"It's great to meet you Bernard," Maddie, swallowing her pride, extended her hand to shake his.

"A pleasure, Ma'am," he smiled; something in his eyes telling her she need not be worried about their previous encounter.

"When Thomas arrives, will you be sure to let him know that our guests are here?" Harry asked.

"Of course, Sir."

"Thank you," Harry smiled with a nod as Bernard moved towards the door.

"Thank you for breakfast Bernard," Maddie called out. He turned, offering her a smile and a nod and then, quite discreetly, he left them alone; off to deliver Ella's cart.

"See," Harry smiled, pouring coffee into the two cups. "That wasn't too bad, was it?"

"No," she smiled, reaching for a pastry. "I suppose that it wasn't."

"And you already know Thomas and most of my security staff."

"Yes," she agreed, taking a cup of coffee from him and climbing back into his bed. "Do you have other staff members? Like...a cook and a housekeeper and the like?"

"Kind of," he shrugged, joining her in bed. "There is a housekeeper that comes around once a week to do big things; take care of whatever Bernard sees fit. I am responsible for the day to day stuff."

"You do your own laundry?"

"Mostly," he smirked at her surprise. "I don't mess with some of the dressier, dry clean stuff and I never touch the celebratory uniforms...but I can do a load of jeans, no problem."

"Good to know," she smiled. "And a cook?"

"The same. It would be silly for me to have a cook just for myself, but for large events or special dinners, there is one under the employ of my family who can come in."

"So, it's just Bernard who is in charge of your home."

"Yes."

"And then there is Thomas, who is in charge of your professional duties." Harry nodded. "And then your security team."

"A few assistants in the office, but basically you've got it."
"Wow..." Maddie sipped her coffee. "It really is quite something."

"My thoughts exactly," Harry smiled; eyeing her teasingly.

"Why your highness," Maddie batted her eyes. "Are you coming onto me?"

"Oh no," he shook his head even as he moved to kiss her; long, unhurried kisses that spoke of his want to stay in bed with her all day. Though his words spoke otherwise. "I have to be in to work and you..." He moved to kiss her shoulder gently. "You have an appointment with a doctor."

"Boo..." Maddie protested; frowning as he stepped out of bed. She had known he had prior commitments that he would be following through with while she was visiting. And though she completely supported that, she already missed his presence.

"Sorry," he leaned to kiss her again. "I need to get a shower and get ready."

"I know..." She sighed. "I think maybe I'll take my coffee down to Ella's room, see how she's doing."

"Perfect," he drank from his cup and then with one last kiss, he stepped into his bathroom. Maddie finished off her pastry and then, pulling her robe tight, she refilled her cup and headed to Ella's room; checking the hallway carefully before stepping out.

Taking a deep breath, she knocked lightly at the door and was immediately greeted with a bright and chipper Ella; wrapped up in a large fluffy robe, drinking from her cup of coffee.

"You know..." Ella sighed as she looked at the pastry in her hand. "I've lived in some of the poorest places on the planet and I've been fine...happy in fact..."

"Sure," Maddie nodded.

"But I could really, really get used to this," her eyes met Maddie's and she smiled. "Come on in."

"You slept well?" Maddie asked, following her friend into the room and shutting the door behind her.

"Oh God, you have no idea!" Ella moved to sit on the bed; Maddie right next to her. "How about you? How did you and the Prince sleep?"

"Good," Maddie brought her coffee to her mouth; trying to avert her eyes. "We slept fine."

"Good..." Ella shrugged and then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught something on Maddie's face; a slight flush, a gulp. Ella's eyes grew wide, her mouth dropping open. "Oh my God....Madeline Forrester. Did you sleep with him last night?"

"What?" Maddie tried for surprise but she had never really been a good liar, or an actress.

"Oh my God!" Ella sat her cup down on the bedside stand. "You did! I thought your arm was...I thought he...Maddie!"

"Shhhhh!" She hushed her friend. "I am not going to discuss this with you."

"Fine," Ella shook her head; smug in her knowledge. "Fine. You don't have to admit it to me. I know. I can tell. But you can keep this to yourself. I mean...I've only stood by you during this crazy ass last year but who am I?"
"Ella." Maddie's eyes were stern, but her lips curled up in a smile.

"I just...I want to live vicariously through you for just one moment. You don't even have to say yes or no. Just tell me...how was it?"

"Ella!"

"Just once."

"Fine. Just this once...just today and then, I will forever be mum on the topic."

"Fair enough," Ella's eyes twinkled as she held her breath. Maddie raised her eyes to meet Ella's and then with enough sparkle there to light up the room, she smiled wide and admitted.

"Amazing."

"Oh I knew it!" Ella jumped back on the bed as both women began to laugh. A swift knock on the door rang out. "Come in!" She called out.

"Is everyone decent in there?" Harry's soft voice called out.

"I don't know that I would go that far," Ella grinned. "But we are all dressed. Come on in."

Harry stepped through the door, looking impeccable in a deep blue suit. Maddie could feel the heat rise to her cheeks as she took him in.

"I am headed out and wanted to remind you both that we have plans this evening..."

"With your friends, right?" Maddie recalled.

"Yes," he smiled at her. "Bishop is just returning from a trip to Spain and they are all anxious to meet you. That's fine, right?"

"I can't wait," Maddie nodded excitedly.

"Great, well," he clapped his hands together. "Good luck at the doctor and, Ella, good luck at the shopping."

"Thank you," she laughed.

"Now, avert your eyes," he nodded to Ella who rolled them instead. Leaning in to kiss Maddie, he held onto her for a beat longer than would be deemed appropriate in front of anyone else. "I'll see you this afternoon."

"Yes you will," she nodded; her grin never fading as he kissed her once more before leaving the room.

"Seriously though," Ella sighed, leaning back against the pillows. "I could get used to this."

"Me too," Maddie sighed; talking about something else entirely.
Maddie made it to her appointment with time to spare and, after a solid work out of her arm, received fantastic news.

The sling was ready to come off. Permanently.

While she would need to continue to do the exercises from Physical Therapy and continue to come in on an as-need basis, she was done. She could resume normal functions and, as long as she continued to do her stretches, she should be able to have full range of motion in no time. After reminding her to see a doctor should she experience any setbacks or pain, the doctor bid her good-bye and good luck.

To say that Maddie was ecstatic was a massive understatement. She was exhilarated; on a high. And she couldn't wait to tell everyone. As the car took her back to Harry, nothing could possibly bring her down; except what she encountered as she hurried into his home. With a wide smile and a breezy voice, she called out,

"Henry Charles Albert David! I hope you're well rested and hydrated because you are in a whole host of..." She heard a movement behind her and spun around towards it. And her blood ran cold. There in front of her, looking more handsome and regal than he did in the media, was Harry's father; His Royal Highness Prince Charles. Maddie's heart stopped. "Oh. My." Her voice croaked as Harry stepped out into the room, just over his father's shoulder. "God." She breathed. Trying not to laugh, Harry waved his hand.

"You must be Madeline?" When he spoke, his voice was just as luxurious as he looked

"Yes," Maddie snapped out of her momentary catatonic state and moved forward; a warm smile spreading across her face. "I'm sorry. Your Royal Highness..." Harry moved out from behind his father then.

"Father, this is Doctor Madeline Forrester," the pride was evident in his voice. "Maddie, this is my father, Charles."

"It is an absolute pleasure to meet you," she held her hand out as she dipped down to curtsy to him; silently thanking Ella and all of her obsessive ways.

"Oh I do believe the pleasure is mine," Charles smiled warmly, her hand held in both of his. And, as she moved to stand, he pulled a completely stunned Maddie into a hug. As her arms moved to hug him back, her eyes flashed over his shoulder to Harry who was beaming at the scene. Charles pulled back, but moved to hold one of her hands. "William told me all about what happened in Bendal and..." Oh so it was back to that, Maddie thought; glancing to Harry who shrugged with a smirk. "I hear you're recovering well?"

"Yes, thank you Sir," she smiled. "I actually just today was told that I can discontinue the use of my sling and resume normal function of my arm."

"Really?" Harry perked up.

"Well that's wonderful dear," Charles patted her hand. "Oh! Let me go to the garden and tell Camilla you're back. She was anxious to meet you as well." With a smile and a nod to Harry, he excused himself.

As soon as he was out of ear shot, Maddie let out a breath as Harry hurried to her side.
"Well rested and hydrated?" Harry's voice was low; full of laughter.

"Oh my God!" Maddie shook her head in disbelief. "Are all of my most embarrassing life moments happening today?"

"Well, at least you're dressed for this one," Harry smirked, his arms moving to pull her closer to him.

"And you!" She smacked his arm. "You didn't think to tell me they would be here when I returned?!"

"I didn't know!" He laughed. "They had something come up last minute and they can't make it to William and Kate's tomorrow for dinner. They didn't want to wait to meet you..." He moved closer to her then, looking down at her sling-free arm. "Are you really done with the sling?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"That's...wow..." Harry's lips dipped to kiss hers just as she pushed him away.

"None of that! Your father is just..."

"Doctor Forrester," his voice called out as he returned to the room.

"Maddie," she called out reflexively; her eyes flashing wide. "I'm sorry Sir, but I prefer to be called Maddie, if it's alright with you."

"Of course," he nodded; his eyes twinkling as he turned to his wife. "Camilla, this is Doctor Madeline Forrester, or Maddie as she prefers. Maddie, my wife; Camilla." For the briefest of moments, Maddie's eyes met Harry's and she took a breath and smiled. As she stepped forward, curtsying and nodding, Maddie could not quite believe the company she was currently keeping.

Harry, his hand resting on the small of Maddie's back, suggested they move into the study; which they promptly did. Bernard served tea and Maddie held their attention as she answered their questions with ease and humor. And, by the time they rose to leave, she had won them both over—Charles with her wit and wisdom and Camilla with the way she looked at Harry and he, in turn at her. Neither of them able to recall a time in which they had seen Harry so happy, so content.

Pressing kisses to Harry and Maddie's cheeks, they bid them both good-bye. Harry gave one final wave and shut the door behind them before he turned to her with wide eyes.

"You are amazing!"

"Please," she shook her head; the nervousness she had felt easing from her body.

"Are you kidding?" He pulled her into his arms. "My father adores you! Did you see the way he was hanging on your words?"

"He was just being polite."

"No! He doesn't really do that; not in private. And he invited you to Highgrove for the weekend—which, by the way,, you don't have to do..."

"What?" Maddie laughed. "He promised to show me around the gardens. They sound lovely."

"They are lovely," he nodded, holding her even closer.
"Can we please go?"

"Yes," he was quick to agree. She grinned and wrapped her arms, both of them around his neck. Taking notice, he rubbed his hands up her sides, over her shoulders and down her arms.

"Your arm..."

"Has been cleared for all normal activities. Yes."

"Mmm," his head tilted to kiss her.

"So..." Maddie kissed him back. "Do we have some time before we need to meet your friends?"

"We do," he nodded.

"Good," Maddie sighed as she tugged on his tie; pulling his lips to hers.

And then, unable to think of anything else but his lips on hers, he cupped her face in his hand, lifting it towards him, lowering his face to kiss her. Maddie, emboldened by the moment, tightened her arms around his neck and surrendered to the kiss. Her mouth opened under his and she moaned slightly, pressing her body into his.

He moved then, walking her backwards, his hand held out to meet the wall, cushioning her as he leaned into her, pressing her up against it.

"Oh!" Maddie gasped. "Where is this coming from?"

"The arm is good to go..." He explained, moving his lips to the crook of her neck; sucking, licking, and kissing his way down to her collar. "You have no idea what you're in for."

"Oh..." Her breath shuddered. "I can't wait."

"Fortunately, you don't have to," his breath was hot against her neck as his hand slid down to the hem of her blouse; slipping up underneath. Maddie's laughter rang out into his home as her hands moved to pull at the knot on his tie.

"Harry..." Maddie gasped, hearing the familiar jiggle that could only mean one thing. "The door..."

"The door?" He pulled back to look at her; confusion etched across his forehead. He took a step away from her then, just in time for the front door to swing open; nearly running into them both.

"Oh!" Ella stopped in shock as she nearly walked right into Harry; her bags jostling in her hands. As she looked between the two of them, her surprise turned into a smirk. "Ooooh...what do we have here?" Maddie blushed, but Harry remained cool and collected.

"Welcome back Ella," he smiled, moving to take her bags from her. "Here, let me..."

"You sure?" She looked at Maddie's slightly swollen lips. "Cause I can head right back out...give you some time..."

"That's not necessary," Harry shook his head with a grin before he turned to head up the stairs with her things.

"Of course not," Maddie took a deep breath and smoothed down her shirt. "Besides, we need to get dressed to head out anyway." Shrugging, she moved to link her arm through Ella's as they both began towards the stairs.
"Ah yes!" Ella's mind bounced back. "Oh! I bought this amazing new pair of shoes. I think I'll wear them tonight... Wait." She turned to look at Maddie; eyes and smile wide. "The sling." She pointed.

"Gone."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Oh God! That's great news!" Ella pulled Maddie into her arms; hugging her tightly. "Oh Maddie..." And to even Ella's surprise, she grew teary—all of the memories of why there was a need for the sling came crashing back to her.

"Hey..." Maddie's voice was soothing. "What's this?"

"Nothing," Ella sniffed. "I just...I remember the night it all started."

"Yeah, me too." Maddie hugged her again; allowing them a moment to let the emotions settle. "Oh, hey! Do you want to hear how I made a fool out of myself in front of The Prince of Wales?"

"Harry?" Ella seemed confused.

"Oh no," Maddie shook her head with a chuckle. "His father, THE Prince of Wales."

"Oh God yes," Ella practically jumped at the idea.

Arm in arm the two women hurried up the stairs; full of tales and laughter, to prepare for a night out on the town with Harry and his friends.
Chapter 22

As the car pulled to a stop in front of the pub, Maddie was admittedly nervous. Though Harry had met them at the airport the night before, this was truly a public place—in the daytime. Though she had long ago committed to whatever came along with being with him, the thought that this might be it seemed to be hanging over her head. And the unknown when and how left her slightly unsettled and more nervous than she would ever admit out loud.

While she had dressed earlier, she found herself wondering if Harry and his family were constantly checking themselves in the mirror before they walked out the door; looking for tops that were too low-cut, hems that were too high—bound to reveal too much. She had never really been that girl; checking herself out constantly. She had solid, classic tastes and made sure to buy clothes that fit her well. And, after she was dressed for the day, she very rarely gave herself another glance. Yet, as she had prepared to leave that night, she found herself checking. And she sincerely hoped it was not a new part of her daily routine. But, Ella had turned her around and nodded her approval and Harry had smiled wide before leaning to kiss her; so she felt ready.

Harry was the first to emerge from the car, waiting for her to step out, followed by Ella. Shutting the door behind them, he immediately reached for Maddie’s hand. The excitement was rich in the air; almost celebratory. And the smiles on their faces, the lightness in their steps were evidence of that. Ella’s eyes twinkled as she looked up and down the street; at the people, the music, the laughter. She had missed this. Her time in Bendal had been wonderful, but she had missed this part of living in the city; the liveliness.

Maddie watched Harry as he moved to open the door for them; his head held high, smile in place. Glancing around, she noticed that there was no mob, no throngs of people running to see him. Maybe, just maybe, he was going to be incognito tonight. As they stepped into the pub, they were greeted with the most wonderful sense of welcome-ness. The lights were lower and the music was great. There were groups of people around the bar watching the TV with interest. There were booths and tables full of crowds of people enjoying drinks and food. And nobody was watching them as they moved through the crowd.

Pausing for a moment, Harry scanned the room for his friends. Spotting them, he squeezed her hand in his and led the two of them to an inconspicuous table in the back of the bar where three men and three women sat pouring beer and chatting. When they noticed Harry coming their way, they slowly began rising to their feet.

A chorus of hellos were spoken as Harry dropped her hand and moved to offer hugs and place kisses on cheeks. He then turned back to Maddie with an adoring smile.

"Everyone, this is Maddie and her best friend Ella," he winked at Maddie as he spoke. "And this menacing crowd is Penelope, Anna, Kiki, Leo, Sean and Bishop—whose actual name is Ian." He introduced one after another. They each smiled warmly and moved to greet both Maddie and Ella.

"It's so very nice to meet all of you," Maddie smiled her hellos as they all moved to situate themselves around the table. It wasn’t lost on Maddie that the group naturally shifted so that Harry was sitting in the least visible spot at the table. They seemed to reflexively protect him. Harry pulled a chair out for her and Ella right next to him. For the most part, they seemed very open and inviting. Anna seemed to be more on the shy type, but Kiki and Penelope were bright and chipper. Penelope immediately commented on Ella’s new shoes; becoming an instant soul mate to Ella. Kiki seemed to be involved with Sean, though Maddie wasn’t entirely sure on that one.

"So, what are we drinking?” Harry looked around the table.
"I was just heading up," Bishop stayed standing. "What can I get you ladies?" Bishop nodded to the two of them. Maddie and Ella locked eyes and, in unison, replied,

"Castle Lager."

"Really?" Bishop double checked as Harry crinkled his nose.

"They must be feeling sentimental tonight."

"A little," Ella admitted, leaning to kiss Maddie's shoulder.

"Got it," Bishop smiled and raised his eyebrows to Harry. "You?"

"I'll take the same." With a nod, Bishop moved away from the table, taking Leo with him for assistance.

"We've heard quite a lot about you, Maddie," Sean offered with a smug look in Harry's direction.

"Yes," Kiki smiled warmly at her. "It's great to finally put a face with all of the accolades."

"Oh really?" Maddie turned to Harry with raised eyebrows.

"Yes, I talk about you." He shrugged with a total lack of shame or embarrassment. The girls at the table chuckled. They had heard so much about her during the last six months, they felt like they knew her.

"She talks about you too," Ella nudged her. "For the last two weeks it's been Harry this and Harry that and...."

"Ella!" Maddie turned to her friend with mock betrayal written across her face.

"What?" She grinned as Bishop and Leo returned with drinks.

"Thank you," Maddie smiled up at Bishop as she took the drink from him.

"Harry this and Harry that?" Harry wrapped his arm around the back of her chair smugly.

"Fine," she sighed dramatically. "I do tend to go on and on about how wonderful you are..."

"Wonderful?" Bishop laughed. "First time out Maddie?" A rumble of laughter circled the table.

"Hardly!" She exclaimed.

"Hardly?" Harry grinned, his eyes narrowing in on her.

"I mean..." Maddie blushed slightly and then, with a guilty shrug, she turned to her best friend and tried to cover. "Ella. Save me."

"Okay..." Ella thought for a moment; taking a long pull from her bottle. "Who wants to hear about the time Maddie made Harry unload an entire truck full of food?"

"Me!" The hands shot up as they leaned in. Harry had been over it and over it, but for some reason, they found great humor in this woman ordering him around. Maddie met Harry's eyes for a brief moment before settling into her chair; ready to be the butt of many jokes.

As the laughter began, the stories tumbled out. They ordered drinks and appetizers, swapped
memories. They were having a good time in the corner of the pub. Especially when they all watched as Maddie took Bishop to town at the dartboard.

When Bishop held his hands up in resignation and hung his head on his way to the bar, Maddie decided to take a moment to rest. Ella had long since hit the dance floor with Penelope, Leo and the no-longer shy Anna. Harry had moved to the booth and was catching up with Sean and Kiki while watching her school Bishop with utter adoration.

It had been an eye-opening evening for him. He had always thought she was beautiful, smart and funny. But that afternoon with his father and step-mother and this night with his friends, she had been charming and down to earth and he was so incredibly proud that she was there with him.

Of course, the fact that she had beat the crap out of Bishop's skills and ego while making Anna laugh, well, that only made her that much more attractive.

"Taking a break?" He asked as she slid into the booth next to him.

"It's hard work, killing Bishop," she shrugged.

"I see that," Harry laughed, moving closer to her.

"Come on Sean...you owe me..." Kiki pulled Sean towards the dance floor with a knowing look at Harry.

"Your friends are great, you know," Maddie took a drink from her beer.

"Yeah I know," he looked back around the bar. "They think you're pretty great too, or at least they did until you took all of Bishop's money." They both laughed.

"We're going to play again. He'll have the chance to earn his money back."

"I'm not too worried about him. I'm glad you're having fun, though"

"I am having a great time. A really, really great time," she smiled up at him; suddenly struggling with the desperate need to kiss him.

"Honestly, Maddie, they are quite taken by your charms."

"Oh?" She raised her eyebrows.

"I am too," his voice was barely above a whisper. "Quite taken by your charms."

"Oh," she tilted her head to the side, closer to his.

"So..." he moved so close that she could feel his breath on her neck. "How about you tell me about these multiple men you've loved."

"Ha!" She laughed out loud, her mind going back to their night together in southern Africa, to her earlier blunder. "Who said I loved them?"

"Oh!" He laughed along with her. "Touche."

"What is it you want to know?" Her beer infused grin was wide as she leaned into him; his arm draped around the back of the booth around her shoulders.

"No details," he shook his head. "How important were they? Are they? I just want to know what I'm up against here..."
"You're up against nothing," she let her hand rest on his thigh under the table. "You're up against nothing..." His eyes met hers and she raised her eyebrows slightly. "There were two. One was my first love; the big boyfriend. We went to prom together and the movies on the weekends and he was sweet and kind and...sweet. But not for me."

"And number two?" He leaned to kiss behind her ear; causing her to giggle slightly.

"Number two was a big mistake," she sighed. "A great big, wonderful, make-it-all-over-again, mistake. He was never my boyfriend, nor would I ever want him to be. He was..." Her eyes drifted off for a moment before she pulled her attention back to Harry. "I'm not even sure I remember his name—or if I even had his actual name. I was being young and wild and trying to get over Number One. It was everything that a wonderful mistake should be...and then it was over." She took a sip from her bottle; watching his reaction carefully. He was contemplative for a moment and then turned a smile to her.

"I think I'm more worried about number two than I am about number one." 

"You should be," she winked and then, seeing his eyes fall slightly, she nudged him. "Stop it. Stop...whatever it is that's going through your head..." She waved her finger around in the air. "They were both, relatively speaking, insignificant parts of my life. Number One was the safe choice. Number Two was the opposite, the anti-safe choice. Neither of them came close to Number Three. He was...phenomenal. Made me feel things I had never felt before. He...he changed the game really."

"Hold on..." Harry held up a hand. "I thought you said there were two..."

"I'm talking about you," she rolled her eyes before her voice dropped and she leaned into him seductively, bravely; her lips kissing under his ear, along his jaw towards his mouth. She was buzzed when she spoke, but she meant the words just the same. "You've made me feel things I never even imagined possible. As far as I'm concerned...the count started over with you..." And when her lips finally met his, he was hungry for her. Forgetting completely where it was he was sitting, Harry moved so that he could kiss her; his head tilting over hers. Neither of them even noticed as Bishop came hurrying over to them; a mission in his heart.

"Alright, Maddie, let's go...I'm ready to take my money back." He called out before he realized the situation at hand. But it was too late. They had already separated and turned to face him. Maddie looked slightly embarrassed, while Harry fixed his gaze on his friend.

"I'll be right there Bishop, thank you," Maddie smiled sweetly.

"Yes, Bishop, thank you," Harry's voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"Great, I'll just...I'll meet you..." he said looking apologetically at Harry and nodded towards the dart board. Maddie smiled sheepishly at Harry, shrugged, and moved to slip out from the booth.

"Hey, not so fast," Harry called out. She turned to look at him. Before she knew it, he had pulled her back to him, his lips meeting hers in a heated exchange. After what seemed not nearly long enough, she pulled back with a radiant glow on her face.

"Wow," she breathed.

"Yes," he nodded in agreement.

"I think that I should get back," she motioned towards the dartboard. "Bishop has money that he wants to give me."
"Okay," he grinned and offered a small wave. "Good luck." And then Harry watched as she walked away from him towards one of his best friends. It was a great night.

Hours later, the group was beginning to fade. They were walking down a mostly abandoned street after closing down the third bar they had visited that night. They had managed to enmesh Maddie and Ella into their lively group. Bishop, now broke, had grown quite fond of the two new additions; his eyes eventually settling on Ella, who couldn't help but flirt with Harry's lifelong friend. Anna had come out of her shell and was quite the conversationalist with Maddie. Leo and Sean were incredibly intoxicated, challenging each other to at least three duals as the night wore on. And Kiki had enjoyed watching the interaction between Harry and Maddie. Having always been the most protective in the group, she was significantly more relaxed about this woman who seemed to have stolen the Prince's heart. She laughed as Bishop seemed to just be catching up with the conversation.

"So, when you were working on your PhD..." Penelope was in the middle of asking Maddie questions when Bishop perked up.

"Hold on!" He called out, his arm draped around Ella's shoulders. "You're actually a doctor?! It's not just...it's not just something the two of you play?" Laughter burst from all of them.

"Ha!" Maddie's cheeks hurt from how much she had been smiling. "No. I really am a doctor, a psychologist."

"My God she has a brain inside that beautiful head of hers. Listen...if you get tired of the palace, you give me a call," he offered her a wink.

"What are you doing?" Harry whacked his shoulder. "Step it down, Bishop. She is not going to call you..."

"She might," Maddie shrugged playfully.

"What?!" Harry looked to her while the others laughed.

"Sure," Maddie smiled. "He's funded at least one new pair of shoes for me tonight. And a girl's gotta eat, no?" She glanced between them for a beat before the group erupted into laughter. Harry pulled her tight to him as they laughed at his friend's expense.

"Ohhhh...I love you," he nuzzled her nose with his before he kissed her; a tender, private moment that was not at all lost on his group of friends.

"Hmmm..." Maddie grinned; wrapping her arm around his waist. "I know..."

"You ready to go?" Harry kept his hand on the small of her back as he looked around the group. "Ella...you ready love?"

"Actually," she took a breath. "I think I'm going to go home with Bishop here."

"Fantastic." Bishop nodded; clearly ensorcelled with Ella.

"What?" Maddie felt her protective nature spike. "Harry?"

"She's a big girl Maddie...and it's Bishop. I would trust Bishop with my sister..." Harry ran his hands over the tops of her arms as he nodded to his friend.

"Fine," Maddie sighed, moving to kiss her friend goodnight. "You watch it Bishop." She did her best to glare at him through her laughter.
Harry pulled on her hand, moving her towards a parked car; leaning her against it, he took her face in his hands and kissed her right there in front of all of his friends and the ever-present possibility of a few cameras.

"Mmmm..." Maddie moaned against him. Absentmindedly, her hands moved down his sides into the pockets of his coat. And her eyes flashed open wide. "And what do we have here?" Slightly embarrassed, Harry watched as she pulled out a few pieces of her candy. "Harry?" She whispered.

"I thought you might want a piece while we were out tonight," his voice was low as he brought one of her hands to his lips for a kiss. "I thought it was best to be prepared."

"Oh you are most definitely a game changer," Maddie felt slightly teary as she pulled him to her for another kiss.

"Let me take you home...okay?" Harry's eyes searched hers.

"Okay," she nodded; in that moment, she would follow him anywhere. "Sorry guys! We're heading out."

"Booo!!!" Chorused throughout the group.

"I know, I know," Maddie called out, pulling Harry with her back to the group. "It was so nice to meet you...." And the goodnights began; rounds of hugs and kisses. And when Kiki hugged Harry, she held him close for a longer moment and when they pull away from each other they shared the same smile full of happiness; hers was there because his was.

Harry could hardly wait until the car door was shut before he pulled her to him. His desire, his want for her had increased as the night had gone on. She had blended in so well with all of them and them with her. It had been a day full of greatness; her sling was gone, his father adored her, and she could drink his friends under the table—all while maintaining her wits—and beating Bishop at the boards.

Maddie sank into him; surrendering her mouth to his. She had meant what she had said. The two that came before him were not even close when stacked up next to him. She hadn't really known this feeling was out there; certainly not where she ended up finding it. And now, they had put off this moment long enough; first to have tea with his father and Camilla, then to greet Ella and finally to be with his friends. But now, there was nothing holding them up.

They barely made it through the door before he turned to her. Pressing her back against the door, his lips met hers; hot and ready. She moaned into his mouth as his hands ran up her body; leaving a trail of desire behind them.

"Harry..." She gasped when his mouth left hers only to move the mission down her neck to her collar bone. Her hands twisted in his red hair as he moved to the peaks of her cleavage barely peeking out of the top of her shirt. Pulling his face back to hers, she regained a small amount of control; her hands tossed his coat aside and went to his shirt, making quick work of the buttons. Pushing it back and off his shoulders, she sucked in her breath as her hands met the hot flesh of his chest.

He was equally as nimble; pulling her blouse up and over her head, sending it to meet its fate next to his. And as his hands moved to tease her chest through the light lace of her bra, Maddie was thankful for the door behind her; otherwise she knew, with absolute certainty, she would have fallen long ago.
Her hands moved to the top of his pants, pulling at his belt, tugging at his zipper. When her hand slipped inside his boxers, he let out a guttural groan; forcing him to stop and take a breath. He pulled back from her slightly, his heart pounding in his chest.

"God, Maddie, I want you..." His eyes met hers in the brief second he took to collect his breath.

"You have me," she held his gaze; her eyes pouring all of her soul out to him. "You have me..." She took a step away from the door then, leaning up on her bare toes to kiss his cheek, she whispered. "Now take me."

And that was all he needed. With no more need for words, he lifted her up into his arms; her legs wrapping around him instinctually and, with a balance he hadn't known he had, he moved them both up the stairs to his room. Her laughter and sighs echoed behind them.

"You know..." Maddie's voice was soft as she rested on his chest. They had woken late in the morning and, after enjoying some coffee and light pastries, they had climbed back into his bed; enjoying the down time. "You never told me about yours."

"Mine?" He raised his eyebrows, his arm caressing her shoulder lightly.

"All the women you've loved before..." She laughed lightly.

"Ah..." He blushed slightly. "No I suppose I didn't. Come here..." He pulled her up to him and she went; resting her arms on his chest and looking at him. He took a deep breath and was honest. "There have been a handful of women along the way. They all meant something, but when you start talking about love...there was only one before you. I suppose she was my safe choice and my anti-safe choice." He brushed a strand of hair away from her face and moved to kiss her then. "And now I love you. It's really quite simple I suppose."

"Wow..." She paused; searching his eyes for a moment before she continued to kiss him. As his hands pulled at her, she swung her leg over his; effectively straddling him. "Who knew?"

Leaning over him, her hair fell around his face. His hands moved up her thighs, over her hips, to her back; pulling her down closer to him. His head lifted off the pillow, not wanting to break contact with her lips.

This time when they made love, it was sweeter, softer; longer. The night before had been all about passion and want; the desperate need to be with the other. That morning was about the tenderness, the compassion; the joy and surprise that they felt to have found the other.

But neither was without the love they felt; neither was without the connection they had made. And, as Maddie gasped his name, she didn't know how she was ever going to be able to leave his bed, his side; him ever again.
Chapter 23

Dinner with William and Kate was quiet, reserved and told tell of the small, tight, protective circle that surrounded Harry. No doubt, Harry's friends had been protective only in a slightly different way. Meeting his brother, again, and his wife was a wonderful experience for Maddie.

William was warm and welcoming; noting that the last time they had met were not the most ideal circumstances, and congratulating her on her recovery. He was smart and funny and Maddie could sense that, given the opportunity and the right group of people, he could really cut loose. Of course, he had met Maddie before, he had sat at her bedside with his brother sick with worry—so his familiarity with Maddie was on a different level than his wife's.

Kate was the more reserved of the two. She was sweet and lovely and much more beautiful than her photos did her justice. She was soft spoken and slightly modest. Maddie quickly attributed that to the presence of a complete stranger; a newcomer to the circle. And she understood that. Maddie imagined that this particular circle was very careful about who they let in, who they opened up to.

Though Ella had, appropriately, turned down the offer to attend dinner with the four of them, Maddie wished she could have snuck her in, if only so that she would have somebody to turn to, somebody to witness with her what she was witnessing. Instead, she had made plans with Bishop and politely excused herself.

As the dinner ran on, the group eased into friendly conversation with Harry as the willing ring-leader, offering up humorous and harmless tales about all three of them. When Maddie followed Kate into the kitchen to help bring out dessert, Kate smiled somewhat apologetically about her shy demeanor and told her that if, in the process of becoming Harry's girlfriend publicly, she needed anything; to feel free to contact her. Maddie was thankful for the offer that would prove to be incredibly useful in the not too distant future.

And when they finally left, after finishing off a bottle and a half of wine, Maddie tucked her arm into Harry's and sighed with a warm smile. It had not been as immediate as with his father and step-mother, nor as wild and boisterous as with his friends, but the approval of his brother and sister-in-law was there.

"Ella..." Maddie's voice called out as she knocked on the door to her friend's room. Harry had left for a meeting and the two of them were heading out to do some shopping.

"Come in!"

"So..." Maddie pushed into the room. "Are you and Bishop like...a thing now?"

"No," Ella shook her head. "We were for two glorious nights, but no. He is a really sweet guy but, I'm a lot to handle."

"Oh I know," Maddie giggled as they made their way downstairs to head out.

"But truly, he is a great guy and...he couldn't speak more highly of Harry."

"Sure," Maddie nodded as they stepped into the waiting cab. "Harry loves him too."

"And...Bishop really likes you..." Ella smiled at her best friend. "He thinks you're a great match for Harry."
"Well sure, He would have to tell you that."

"Na," Ella shook her head. "He meant it. I can tell."

"That's sweet," Maddie sat back in the car. "So, are you ready to do some shopping for Highgrove?"

"Hmmm..." Ella bit her lip. "Yes and no."

"What do you mean; yes and no?"

"Well..." Ella took a breath and smiled, knowing what she was about to say was going to surprise her friend. "I am ready to go shopping. But not for Highgrove. I'm not coming with you."

"What? Why?" Maddie turned her body to look at her.

"Well, my love, there are a few reasons."

"Care to share them with me?" Maddie was not mad; simply curious.

"First...this is time that you should be spending with his family; alone." She hurried before Maddie could cut in. "AND, you're doing really well here. They all seem to really like you and...well, you haven't called any of them by the wrong title and you have the curtsy down pretty well. You just don't need me here anymore."

"Ella..." Maddie began.

"I know that's not the only reason I'm here," she rolled her eyes; reading Maddie's mind. "But those are not the only reasons I'm not coming."

"Continue."

"Yesterday I was at lunch with Bishop and I started talking with this woman who was sitting across from me and she's a flight Paramedic through a hospital here in London. And..." Ella took a breath. "After a long story and a few drinks...she told me the hospital she's working at is hiring a flight nurse. So...tomorrow I am going to interview and then, on Saturday, I'm doing a fly-along with her."

"Ella!" Maddie's eyes went wide with excitement. "You've mentioned that as a possibility in the past but...wow... Wait." Maddie's smile faltered slightly as the car pulled to a stop outside the shops. "You're not going back to Bendal?"

Ella took a breath, looked down at her hands before meeting Maddie's eyes. "No, Maddie. I'm not going back to Bendal."

"Wow..." Maddie tried to process it all; unsure of her feelings on the topic. "And you're going to live here in London?"

"If all goes well," Ella grinned, pulling Maddie out of the car with her.

"I don't know what to say..." She felt a little overwhelmed; happy yet nostalgic and a tiny bit confused.

"How about..." Ella lowered her voice as she linked her arm with Maddie's. "Long live The Queen?"
And then, with muffled chuckles, they hurried into the store; ready to shop for their respective weekends.

On Friday morning, Maddie hugged Ella extra tight, kissed both of her cheeks, and then wished her the utmost of luck as she interviewed and went for her flight. Harry helped load her bags into the car that would be taking her to the hotel she was moving into and, with a warm hug, he thanked her for staying with them and offered to put in a good word for her at the hospital; which she quickly declined.

After waving good-bye, Maddie and Harry began packing up to head to the country. Maddie had purchased some wonderful, warm items for the trip to Highgrove. And, as their departure grew closer and closer, she found that she was incredibly excited.

They were loaded and sitting comfortably in the car before long. Holding onto Harry's hand, Maddie watched as the world flew by; the trees, the hills, the homes. England was truly a beautiful place. Without moving to look at him, Maddie spoke.

"Ella's moving to London..."

"It appears that way, yes," Harry nodded; watching her thoughtfully.

"I'm excited for her..."

"But?" He arched an eyebrow.

"AND," Maddie corrected, turning a grin in his direction. "I'm surprised."

"Why?" He laughed; not at all surprised that Ella, who he had known about as long as he had known Maddie, was ready to live in the city and experience something new—it seemed completely like her.

"I don't know," Maddie shook her head. "I suppose that I've just always known her in Bendal. And I just assumed that once they gave us the okay, she would be going back."

"Sure," he nodded and took a deep breath. As the topic of Bendal moved front and center, he suddenly felt slightly uneasy and nervous. "You know...your mandated furlough is almost over."

"It is," she sighed. "I actually have a meeting scheduled with some DWB personnel in exactly one week."

"Really?"

"Yes," she smiled. "Next Friday at noon. We'll be going over my paperwork, doctors' records and the like. She'll give me my options..." Her thoughts trailed off as her eyes caught his; seeing a hint of sadness in there.

"Tell me," Harry cleared his throat. "What are you hoping to hear at that meeting?" Maddie held her breath, her heart pounding in her chest and, in the most honest way possible, she shrugged.

"I really, really don't know." She squeezed his hand then, pulling it over into her lap so that she could hold it in both of hers. "Now you tell me...what are you hoping I hear at that meeting?"

"Hmmm..." He let out a breath tailed by a chuckle. "I really, really don't know." He echoed, smiling sincerely.
And that was the most honest either of them could be in that moment.
Camilla and Charles were there to greet Maddie and Harry as soon as they walked through the door. The valet was quick to take their bags up to their rooms as they stepped into the opulent home. Maddie was enchanted; from the moment they turned up the long front drive, she had been enchanted. There appeared to be miles and miles of green plants and flowers and trees. They were certainly in the country and Maddie felt a sort of homey connection to the place—almost instantly.

Before he had moved their luggage upstairs, the valet had handed Harry a folded card. Harry scanned it quickly and excused himself. He had a phone call he needed to make that was of imminent importance. He kissed Maddie's cheek with an apologetic look in his eyes, nodded to Charles and Camilla and slipped off to his room to make the call.

In a little under twenty minutes, Harry finished his phone call and hurried back down the stairs; eager to return to Maddie's side. Finding the foyer empty, he began to make his way through a few rooms until he found Camilla alone in the study.

"Hello," Harry stepped into the room.

"How did the phone call go?" She asked.

"Better than expected actually," he shrugged and looked around. "Where are dad and Maddie?"

"Well," Camilla sealed an envelope and turned to smile up at him. "She asked about the garden..."

"Oh God," he glanced towards the windows nervously.

"And he started to tell her about the orchards..."

"Where are they?" Harry moved to the windows; his eyes squinting as he searched.

"They were going out through the Walled Garden and then over by the Tree house..."

"You let him take her to the Tree house?!"

"Let him?" She looked to him with a grin. "He's your father..."

"I know, but..."

"Relax, Harry. She wanted to go. It's not as though he dragged her out there."

"Of course not," Harry sighed at himself; relaxing a bit.

"She seems wonderful," Camilla commented as she stood and followed as he walked towards the back of the house.

"She is," Harry smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. Even as his mind debated staying in the house or heading out after Maddie and his father, the mention of her made him pause. "I honestly don't think I've stopped smiling since she..."

And then, as clear as day, the sound of a shotgun echoed through the grounds; reaching Harry's ears. His eyes went wide as he stood tall.

"Yeah, that's it. I'm going out there." And with that Harry hurried out the door with Camilla
chuckling as he moved.

Moving quickly, Harry found them exactly where he thought they would be; standing in the Meadow with the trap shoot set up. Maddie had the shotgun in her hand as Charles pointed in a couple of places. Maddie was listening intently to what his father was saying. Harry could tell they were both somewhat mesmerized with the other. Harry waved so that they would see them.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets as he stepped up to them.

"Your father was telling me about the biodegradable clay pigeons he ships in from Laporte and I asked if they flew the same as the others..." Maddie smiled at Charles, who finished the story.

"So I put a gun in her hands."

"Sounds dangerous," Harry chided.

"No!" Charles shook his head. "She's an excellent shot. Go ahead." He nodded at her encouragingly. Maddie smiled and moved the gun shoulder height.

"Pull!" Maddie called out; expertly aiming, shooting, and hitting the pigeon. Charles chuckled approvingly.

"Wow! I had no idea you were such an amazing shot!" Harry watched her in awe.

"Yes, well, I'm the daughter of a farmer," Maddie shrugged, feeling the tiniest bit embarrassed. "There were coyotes that might stalk the animals and...my father made sure I could hit what I was aiming for."

"Your father is a farmer?" Charles perked up.

"He...he was," Maddie smiled warmly at the thought of her father.

"Oh? Is he retired now?"

"No," she shook her head. "He died; almost two years ago."

"Oh Maddie, I am terribly sorry to hear that." She could feel Harry's eyes on her, but she took a breath and smiled at Charles.

"Thank you," she met Harry's sympathetic gaze for a moment. "He would have loved what you've done to the grounds here, though; especially the delphiniums. They were his favorite."

There was a moment then between the three of them; a moment where, despite the cool chill of the evening, it felt warmer. Maddie sighed as she thought of her dad, as she thought of Harry and his mother. And, sniffing back the impending tears, she raised her gun shoulder height and called out, "Pull!"

She aimed.

She shot.

She hit.

With a warm laugh, Charles looked to his son and smirked, "be sure to keep her away from your grandfather."
To which Harry laughed loudly. "That's great advice. Thank you."

"So..." Maddie lowered the gun and turned to Harry. "Let's see what you've got, Captain."

"Me?" Harry grinned; eyebrows rising.

Maddie nodded and, with great ease, Harry stepped up to the plate. He managed to hit a few before they were called back to the house; dinner was at the ready. Maddie, needing to change before they were seated for dinner, excused herself.

"Thank you for allowing me to show off some of the grounds," Charles took her hand in both of his; pressing a kiss to the top.

"It was quite an honor, Sir," she blushed slightly before she nodded to Harry and turned back to the house.

"Did you enjoy showing Maddie around the orchard?" Harry looked to his father as they gathered up the shotgun and headed in.

"I did," Charles nodded with a smile. "Did you know that she grew up on a farm?"

"Yes, I did."

"She has a great appreciation for the land," Charles looked out at the grounds. "She knew most of the plants by sight and she gave me this great tip on how to..." Charles trailed off, noticing the wide grin on his son's face. "She's really quite something," he offered words for what Harry was feeling.

"Yes, she is Sir," Harry agreed.

"She's met your brother and Kate. She's come to Highgrove for the weekend," Charles watched his son closely. "It seems serious."

"It feels serious," Harry looked off over the grounds; his pulse beating faster. "Does that make me crazy?"

"No, no." Charles was quick to shake his head. "You've always known what suited you best; what you wanted. Clearly you want to be with her."

"I really do," Harry nodded.

"This might be completely overstepping my bounds," Charles took a risk; a risk that was spurred on by the never-seen-before look in his son's eyes.

"Oh-kay," Harry stopped walking; his focus shifting to his father who now seemed completely sincere as he smiled wide and spoke softly,

"Nothing, nothing in your private life—or your public life to some extent—is as important as choosing your mate; the person to stand next to you," Charles swallowed the lump in his throat that had grown as he thought over this incredibly hard learned lesson. "Nothing."

Harry was speechless for a moment; his mind spinning as he thought about what his dad said, why his dad said it and what...what exactly it was he was supposed to do with that. It made his skin shiver and his heart swell; the heaviness of it weighing on his entire body.

"Is that..." Harry cleared his throat, meeting his father's eyes. "Is that some sort of warning or
omen or...

"It's encouragement, it's support, it's..." Charles patted Harry's shoulder. "She's lovely son."

"Yes," Harry took a deep breath. "Yes she is."

And together, the two men began walking back to the house.

Dinner with Harry's parents was as warm and soft as the candlelight that flickered from the table. Maddie had changed, touched up her makeup and twisted her hair up and back in a soft, loose bun. Simple, classic, understated; much like the guest suit to which she had been assigned. She smiled to herself as she wondered where Harry was going to be sleeping that night.

On her way down the stairs, she glanced at the art work hanging on the walls; the family photos that were mingled throughout. And, as she stepped into the study where they were all waiting; dressed and smiling, the two men rose to their feet instantly. Camilla followed them, linking her arm through Charles' as they followed the young couple in to dinner.

The rest of the night was relaxed and familial. Maddie shared stories of growing up on a farm; drawing them all in to some of the hilarious occurrences. Charles offered entertaining tales of Harry as a child, threatening to pull out photo albums. While Harry blushed, Maddie loved seeing the interaction between father and son. And it was incredibly clear to Maddie that Camilla adored the both of them.

Following dinner, the four moved into the study for after dinner drinks. Due to Maddie's light prodding, despite Harry's pleas not to, Charles broke out old record albums and the conversations continued. And when, finally, Charles and Camilla retired to bed, Harry smiled lovingly at the opposite end of the couch where Maddie sat. Reaching down, he pulled her feet into his lap; tossing her shoes to the floor.

"Mmmm..." She relaxed as he began to rub them. "I could get used to this—all of this." She waved her hand out towards the property.

"You like it here," Harry pointed out.

"I love it here," she corrected taking a sip from her glass.

"Well, I am sure I heard my father extend an open ended invitation so..." He took a deep breath. "It appears you can stay as long as you would like."

"He's lovely," Maddie nodded in the direction that Charles and Camilla had gone. "Your father, he's absolutely lovely."

"Hmmm..." Harry agreed with a nod. "He's not here, you know. You don't have to go on and on and on..." His eyes were playful.

"Oh is somebody jealous of the attention?" She nudged him with her toe.

"Not at all," he laughed softly. "I think he likes you too."

"I hope so," she looked down in her glass, her mind sorting through all of the emotions that she was feeling; her attachments to Harry, her growing attachments to his family, the way her heart ached when she thought of the decision she was going to have to make soon.
"You know..." Harry dropped her feet and moved to sit closer to her on the couch. "This evening, when you were shooting and my father asked about yours...you smiled."

"Oh?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows.

"Yes," he took her hand in his, playing with her fingers. "You used to get sad when people would mention him. But tonight you smiled." When his eyes lifted to meet hers he could see a mixture of sadness and memories and warmth there.

"Hmmm."

"It was nice," he kissed the top of her hand. "To see you smile."

"It was nice to remember him..." Maddie let her fingers run along his jaw. "Especially here. He really would have loved Highgrove. He would have loved to see what your father has done here and I think...imagining his reactions...made me happy. I love that being here reminded me of him."

"Me too," Harry watched her as she sighed and smiled. "You know, you should invite your mother out sometime. If this brought on this kind of reaction for you, I'm sure she would enjoy it as well." Maddie felt her heart clench at the thought. Bringing her mother here, to England, to Harry—to Harry's family home. That was quite the thought.

"Hmmm...maybe." Her smile was lazy; tired. But her mind was reeling. Despite the meaning behind his offer, he was right. Her mother would adore Highgrove, and Harry. Catching her yawn, Harry rose to his feet, pulling her up behind him.

"Come on Doctor," he grinned. "Let's get you to bed."

"Whatever you say, your highness."

With muffled laughter, they held each other close; his arm wrapped around her shoulders, hers around his waist and they made their way upstairs. Though the valet had unpacked their items in separate rooms, Harry insisted on staying with her.

Though Maddie pushed him away, telling him that they were probably placed in separate rooms on purpose, Harry insisted—assuring her that was all for show and that his father would most likely not be checking in on them.

Harry endured and Maddie finally relented—allowing him to slip into her bed.

But that was where the concessions ended. As they pulled the covers up over them, she made it incredibly clear as to just what side of the bed his hands were to remain on.

Pushing his luck, he pulled her to his side where she cuddled close and with a sleepy smile, drifted off to sleep.

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Harry woke before her the next day, just before her. Not moving an inch, he pressed his lips to the top of her head; inhaling her shampoo. Maddie's eyes blinked open and she stretched awake—snuggling closer and closing her eyes.

"Good Morning," he breathed in her ear.

"Not ready to wake up," Maddie groaned through smiling lips. Harry chuckled; her hair puffing up from his breath.
"Sleep well?"

"Oh my yes," Maddie nodded. "It must be the fresh, country air here."

"It must be."

"And this bed is amazing. It's like the whole purpose of it is to keep people in bed as long as possible."

"Ha!" Harry laughed. "Well, we don't have to leave. I can call up for breakfast and we can eat right here."

"Shouldn't we dress and join your father and Camilla for breakfast?"

"No, they left first thing this morning, remember."

"Ah yes," Maddie recalled with a frown. "I feel bad that I didn't say good-bye."

"Well, now that they're gone," Harry ran his fingers along her spine. "Maybe you'll let me on your side of the bed?"

"Not a chance," she slapped at his hand.

"Fine." He laughed and rolled over, reaching for the phone.

When breakfast arrived, the valet pushed the tray into the room and informed them both that Charles had left a note with the small bouquet of hand cut delphinium lying next to the food before stepping out of the room.

"Hey, it's for you," Harry handed her the envelope with her name on it.

"Oh?" She smiled, looking at the beautiful bunch of flowers that she was almost certain he had cut himself. Pulling the card from the envelope, she read.

Harry watched as her eyes teared up.

"Madeline,

I am terribly happy to have spent time with you this weekend, happy to have met you, and happy that Harry has found you.

You are a wonderful young woman and I am absolutely certain that your father would be beyond proud to call you his daughter.

Please enjoy the rest of your stay here and know that you are welcome back here any time.

~Charles"

"Wow..." Maddie brought her hand to her mouth as she held the card out to Harry. She reached for the delphinium and was incredibly touched by the gesture.

"Smooth," Harry shook his head in awe. "My father is incredibly smooth."

"Must run in the family," she winked at him.

"You think I'm smooth?"
"You? Oh no," she shook her head as she moved to his coat pocket, successfully locating what she was looking for; two pieces of her Christmas candy. She tossed one in the air to him and unwrapped the other. "No. You're not smooth at all."
Chapter 25

It was early Saturday afternoon and Maddie and Harry had eventually made it out of bed. Dressed for the day, Harry offered to give her a tour of the house. When they stepped into the library, Maddie’s eyes grew wide and her heart skipped a beat. Taking in the tall shelves full of books that looked old and loved, she wanted to curl up in this room for at least a day.

"Wow..." She breathed, clearly in awe.

"Really? The library?" Harry crossed his arms and watched as she went to the shelves; her fingers reaching out to touch the stacks with reverence.

"I've always wanted a library," she confessed somewhat shyly.

"Well..." Harry smiled in amusement. "Do you want to spend some time here? I can grab my laptop and do some work, you can read whatever you like and..."

"Yes," Maddie nodded, not bothering to look back at him.

"Okay," he laughed at how quick her response was. "I'm just going to go grab my laptop and I'll be back. Need anything?"

"No," she shook her head, tossing a quick smile in his direction. "I'm just going to pick a book...or twelve." Harry shook his head as he stepped from the room, certain he had just lost his girlfriend to a shelf of books.

When Harry returned, Maddie was stretched out on one of the couches in the room; a book in her hands and two in her lap. With a tender smile, he took residence on the couch across from her. Opening up his laptop, he settled on the opposite end as she did; wanting to be able to watch her face as she dove into the books.

And there they sat for at least an hour. Harry answered emails and read briefings as Maddie scanned the books. She would occasionally offer up a light chuckle or a groan at whatever was occurring in the book. Harry would look up, watch her face for a moment and then, with a grin, return to his work. It was not lost on him how easy it was for them to sit in the same space, be wrapped up in completely different tasks yet—still be so at peace with each other. It felt safe, content.

He loved it.

He had grown so used to her silence, to her attention being focused on the books that when he glanced up from his computer to see her watching him, it surprised him.

"Hi," Maddie smiled, seeing his slight flinch.

"Hi," his voice was cautious at the curve of her grin. "What's on your mind?"

"I was just wondering..." She closed the book in her lap; her finger holding her place in the pages. "What would you consider our first date?"

"Well..." Harry gave it some thought. "I guess I don't know..."

"Would you say it was the Community Party?" Maddie's eyes narrowed as she thought it over. "Or the night of the reception when we finally figured it out...I don't know...that first night in
London when we went out with your friends?"

"God. I really don't know," Harry shook his head, leaning forward. "I'm not sure we've been on an actual first date. Jesus. I'm a terrible boyfriend."

"No," she shook her head, waving her hand. "Sorry. I didn't ask that to...I'm not complaining. Maybe we just...happened, without a first date. Is that how things normally work for you?"

"Well," Harry moved his laptop to the side; turning to face her. "Things don't work out normally for me ever. So...nothing is out of the question, I suppose."

"It's kind of nice actually," Maddie sighed. "Not having to worry about what to wear or if he's going to like me or if he'll kiss me at the end of the night...you know...none of the first date stuff."

Harry watched as she shrugged and turned back to her book.

He studied her thoughtfully for a moment before rising to his feet. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he pressed a few buttons. As Maddie's ringtone rang out, she looked confused as she pulled it out. Her eyes rose to his.

"Harry?"

"Hmmm?" He raised his eyebrows; phone pressed to his ear.

"You're calling me?" She held up her still ringing phone.

"Yes," he nodded. "Are you going to answer or what?"

"I'm right here."

"Answer the phone Maddie." He instructed. With a suspicious look on her face, she pulled the phone to her ear.

"Hello?" She smirked.

"Hello," Harry grinned. "It's me, Harry."

"Yes, I can see that."

"How is your day going?"

"How is my...Harry? What is happening right now?" She pulled her phone from her ear. Harry shook his head, motioning for her to get back on it. With a small huff, she did so. "My day is going well, thank you."

"Fantastic!" He ran his free hand through his hair and met her eyes. "Listen, I was wondering if, maybe, you would be free tonight to join me...for a date."

"Oh for Heaven's sake," she laughed. "I didn't say that earlier to make you feel like you had to..."

"Like I had to?!" He laughed. "I don't have to do anything. I want to take you out tonight. I'll pick you up, we can do dinner, drinks...something else I have in mind." He shrugged. "You won't have to worry about if he likes you or rather or not he'll kiss you at the end. Both are a resounding yes. But we'll have a good time. I promise."

"You're asking me on a date?" Maddie's heart melted slightly as a mushy smile spread across her lips.
"Not very successfully, but yes," he nodded.

"Hmmm..." Maddie watched him, her bottom lip pulled between her teeth. "I don't know, I have a pretty busy schedule and this is kind of last minute..."

"Oh-ho!" Harry laughed, his hand resting on his chest over his heart. "Be kind, Madeline."

"Well, I'm not sure I want to leave the country and go back to the city just yet."

"We won't. I promise."

"Okay," she sighed with a wide smile. "Okay. I would love to see you tonight."

"Wonderful. Can you be ready at seven?"

"I can."

"Then, it's a date."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

With a matching wide smile, Harry ended the call and, tossing his phone in the air and catching it, "I'm going to go make plans. You...enjoy the house, the grounds....and I'll pick you up at seven." He turned from the room; his mind working through the plans. "Oh! And wear pants. And real shoes."

"Real shoes?" One eyebrow lifted in confusion.

"You know, nothing strappy. Something sturdy."

"Oh-kay..."

"Wait!" He hurried back in, leaning to kiss her upturned mouth and then, with a quick peck to her cheek, he smiled and left her alone.

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As Maddie put finishing touches on her hair, she glanced at the clock—worried that she hadn't seen the least bit of Harry since he left her in the library. After finishing the first of three books she had pulled from the shelf, she had sat the other two aside and began to prepare for the evening. She slipped into her first-date-appropriate-pants-required-no-strappy-shoes outfit, spritzed on some perfume, grabbed her clutch and stepped out of the room.

Feeling suddenly nervous, and more than a little silly, she made her way through the halls. It was ten till seven as she knocked on the door to his room.

"Harry?" She knocked again, pushing the door open. She glanced around quickly. Though he had certainly been there, the room was empty. Closing the door behind her, she made her way towards the staircase. Looking down over the railing, she saw him. He stood in the foyer, oblivious to her presence as he checked his hair in the mirror. He looked absolutely stunning. Maddie rolled her eyes at the butterflies stirring in her stomach. With a deep breath she began down the stairs. At the sound of her footsteps, he turned to look up at her.

If she had been watching carefully, she would have seen his eyes widen slightly as he took her in, she would have heard the way his breath caught in his throat and she would have sensed that his heart rate had picked up the pace. She would have known that he suddenly felt just as inexplicably
nervous as she did. Nevertheless, Maddie was too caught up in the warmth of his smile, the twinkle in his blue eyes and the way her heart flip flopped in her chest to register anything else.

"I've been wondering where you were," Maddie smiled as she joined him at the bottom of the stairs.

"You look...wonderful," he leaned in to kiss her. Maddie breathed him in; he smelled amazing.

"Thank you," she took a breath. "Are these pants okay?" She waved down at her outfit. "And the shoes?"

"Perfect," he smiled and stepped away from her. She watched as he retrieved a large bag from where it sat on a nearby table. Holding it out to her, "this is for you."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows lifted. "A gift?"

"Yes," he smiled. "Also something you can use tonight."

"Oh-intrigue," Maddie opened the bag and gasped. "Harry!" Pulling out a cute, chic leather jacket, she looked up at him with confused eyes. "This is fantastic but..."

"Here, let me," he took the jacket from her; setting the bag aside. Maddie turned and slid her arms into the jacket as he held it up for her. "How does it fit?"

"Perfect," she looked down. Though she wouldn't have thought to pair a leather jacket with the outfit she was wearing, it gave it a funky, edgy look that she instantly adored; her purple flowy shirt in stark contrast to the slick black leather. "I...thank you," she kissed him. "I'm just confused..."

"Sure," he laughed and reached for her hand. "Come with me." Holding onto her, he opened the front door and led her outside. There, in the drive was his motorcycle.

"Oh wow..."

"I would like to take you out on the bike tonight," Harry explained as they hurried down the steps to it. "You can say no if you want to, I know it's not the best on the hair and..."

"Yes," she interrupted; her excitement evident as she nodded with a grin.

"That easy huh?"

"Are you kidding? My uncle had a bike and when we were younger, he would take us up in the mountains and..." She trailed off as he pulled on his own jacket. "Look at you." Her voice lowered. "You look amazing."

"Thank you," he winked as he lifted a helmet from the seat and moved to her. "May I?" He nodded to her head. Maddie twisted her hair back into a ponytail at the base of her head and nodded to him.

"Be my guest." Harry was careful as he put the helmet on her head, loving that she wasn't too stuffy or concerned about her hair to go with him. He fastened the strap under her chin and leaned in to kiss her. Pulling back, he adjusted his own helmet and swung his leg over the bike.

When he reached out for her hand, Maddie wasn't entirely sure what she wanted more; to slide onto the back of the bike or to pull him back into the house and have her way with him.
"Are you coming?" He grinned devilishly—not making her decision any easier.

Remembering that this was their first date, she decided to go with the former; she could have her way with him later. Taking his hand, she moved onto the seat behind him. He guided her hands around his waist. Leaning close to him, she could feel the hum of the bike below her, and the hum of her want for him inside of her. Harry's hand came back, sliding along her thigh and patting her.

"Let me know if you've had enough."

"Okay," she spoke into his ear—though she was absolutely certain that that would never be the case.

And then with expert ease, Harry drove them down the drive and away from Highgrove. Maddie watched as the scenery flew by, felt the wind around her and her spirit soared.

The night was an unmitigated success. They dined at The Snooty Fox. They had after dinner drinks at The Royal Oak. Harry helped her off the bike before stepping off himself, securing the helmets before escorting her inside. He held doors and pulled out chairs and fell in love with the way her hair mussed after wearing a helmet. Maddie was funny and chatty and smiled wide as she ate until she was full and not once did she have to run off to the restroom to check, check and double check her hair and makeup. Yes, it was a first date of sorts; they were picking up on traits in the other that they hadn't caught before then. Maddie liked her salad dressing on the side. Harry preferred rye over wheat. But the ease between them told of the well-established relationship that was far past the first date.

At The Royal Oak Maddie had three drinks and, because he was driving, Harry had only one. Maddie felt warm and giddy and completely taken by the man who sat next to her, whispering fun facts about Tetbury in her ear. The people around them seemed very unaffected by Harry's presence; it was almost disarming. She wondered if they didn't recognize him, if they recognized him and didn't care, or if they had grown so accustomed to having him and his family around that they had grown to think of him as one of their own and, therefore felt protective of him—just like his friends and family. As they stepped out of the pub, a light mist was settling over the town; the night air had grown chilly.

"You want to head back?" Harry ran his hands over her arms; as though the friction might warm her.

"I was hoping to see more of the countryside," she took a deep, crisp breath. "But if you think we should..."

"Nah," he shook his head. Looking down at her with adoration in his eyes, he pulled her into his arms; hugging her tight to him. "You'll be warm enough?"

"Snuggled up to you?" She held him just as tight; her head tilting up to look at him—her chin resting on his chest. "Most definitely."

Harry laughed; a loud, happy, from the gut laugh; and then, pressing a kiss to her forehead, her nose, then her lips, he patted her ass and released her from his bear hug. Maddie laughed as he handed her the helmet; pulling his own onto his head. Harry climbed onto the bike and then, with his hand holding her steady, Maddie climbed on behind him.

Both were acutely aware of the warmth that passed between them, of the way the town—grown hazy with the mist—made the landscape even more breathtaking. But neither of them were aware
of the young college student who stood almost two blocks away; her camera phone out—snapping as they drove off into the night.

Through many winding roads, over hill after hill, Harry and Maddie traveled along the English countryside. She held tightly to him, taking it all in. Yes, her nose was growing cold. Yes, she could feel the chill. But the rewards; the scenery, the closeness, the abandon, were all worth those costs. Maddie could feel Harry move one of his hands over hers; for a long beat, his fingers intertwined with hers. He moved her hand higher; up over his heart and with a warm squeeze, he returned his hand to the bike; steering them back to Highgrove.

Harry helped her from the bike first, before stepping off and reaching for her helmet. Though he chuckled at her hair as she pulled it from her head, he honestly could not have found her sexier than he did in that moment.

"Are you laughing at my hair?" She narrowed her eyes at him.

"I am," he confessed. "But only in the most loving way possible."

"Laugh away Wales. I don't even care," she shrugged, tucking her hands into her pockets for warmth. "You've seen me in a hospital bed after three days without a shower. This is nothing."

"Excellent point," he smiled and, finished with the bike and the helmets, wrapped his arms around her. "And I think this look is cute."

"Ah, you're just jockeying for a goodnight kiss," she grinned.

"Maybe," he laughed. "Are you freezing?"

"No," she shook her head. "Why? What did you have in mind?"

"Come with me," he released his hold on her and took her hand. Pulling her with him, they walked into the house; quickly through the halls. On his way through the living room, he grabbed a plush, warm blanket draped over the back of the couch. As they walked briskly through the kitchen, he went straight to the wine cellar, his eyes squinting as he read the labels. "Here we go..." He grabbed a bottle, quickly retrieved an opener and two glasses. And, before Maddie could offer to carry anything, he was pulling her back outside.

"Where are we going?" She tucked her arm in the crook of his elbow; her voice lowered to a whisper.

"Where you never ended up with my father," Harry's smile was sweet, endearing as he looked to her. Maddie shook her head in confusion. But she held tight to him. They walked quickly through the thyme, they hurried past the Gladiator sculpture and stepped along the path on the far side of the orchard. As they walked past the Temples, Maddie felt Harry's muscles flex. Focusing her eyes, she saw it.

"The Tree House," she sighed.

"The Tree House," he confirmed; the excitement in his voice clear as day.

Maddie let go of his arm so that they could successfully navigate up the stairs and onto the small deck that surrounded the house. Laying the blanket out on the ground, Harry gestured for Maddie to have a seat; which she very quickly did. Harry followed behind her as he opened the bottle of wine.

"Now this..." Maddie smiled as she took a glass of wine from him. "This is a tour."
"Yes," he sat down the bottle and moved closer to her. "Yes it is." Leaning back against the tree house, Harry pulled her to him. And she went, snuggling up under his arm; close to his side. Tipping his glass slightly towards her, he toasted, "to you."

"To you," she nodded; clinking her glass to his before taking a sip. They settled into silence; looking up at the sky, the stars, the surrounding trees. Maddie leaned against him as she turned her head to look at the house that was supporting them. "This is a pretty great set up you have here."

"Yes," Harry chuckled. "It certainly was."

"Did you and your brother spend a lot of time here?"

"Not a lot," he shook his head. "But enough. We used to pretend we were soldiers at war..." He took a drink from his glass. "It's nothing like actually being a soldier at war—in case you were wondering."

"Hmmm," Maddie smiled sadly; as she did anytime she thought of him in that scenario. "Do you think you'll ever go back there? To the front line?"

"I don't know," he shook his head. "I doubt they'll send me back. This last time I was going to be in the air and they still pulled me..." He let out a breath and looked to her. "How about you? Are you planning on returning to the front line?"

"Sorry?" She looked up at him quizzically; her heart skipping a beat.

"Well, Bendal was at times just as much a war zone as some of the places I've been."

"You think?" She was surprised at this; that this topic was coming up in this moment.

"I know that wasn't the first time you saw a man with a gun, Maddie. As much as I hate to think of it, I know that was a common thing, wasn't it." She sat upright, turning to look at him; trying to read what was going on in his mind. Sighing, she nodded.

"You're right. That wasn't the first time I saw a man with a gun."

"Just because you weren't armed, doesn't mean you weren't fighting."

"That's very profound," she reached for his hand. "Where is this coming from right now?"

"I was just thinking about you and Bendal and..."

"Don't," she interrupted with a nervous smile.

"Sorry?" A small laugh escaped his lips.

"Don't think about me and Bendal."

"But..."

"Don't," she smiled; shaking her head. "Not tonight. Not...here..." She waved her hand at their surroundings. "Think about this. Think about...think about how great those tomatoes were in the salad. Think about that poor man trying to get that lady's attention at the pub. Think about...think about riding in the dark with just me and the wind and..." She took a deep breath. "And let's not get worked up about something that may never ever be an issue."

"Maddie..." His voice was so sad, his eyes so tender that she felt her heart ache in her chest. But
she held his gaze, squeezed his hand, took a deep breath and avoided the topic.

"I had a lovely time tonight," she smiled. "Truly. It was perfect—as far as first dates are concerned." Maddie bit her lip as she watched him process it all; as she watched him debate what to do next. Should he take her direction and avoid what was hanging just ahead of them or should he dig in and force the issue. He swallowed the lump in his throat and nodded; she would win this round.

"Are you saying I have a shot at a second date?" He raised his eyebrows. His efforts meant the world to her as he allowed her to avoid this for at least the moment.

"Yes," she laughed; blinking back the tears that had risen to her eyes. "You absolutely have a shot at a second date." She took a drink from her glass and swallowed. "Truly, there is only one thing that would have topped this all off..."

"This." Without blinking Harry held out a piece of her candy. Her eyes went wide, and the tears returned.

"Wow..." She breathed. "You really love me don't you?"

"I really do," he laughed; at himself, at this predicament he found himself in.

"Hmm..." Maddie grinned, plucking the candy from his hand. "I'm a lucky gal, you know."

"Oh I know," he laughed again as she chewed. Leaning in to kiss her, he nuzzled his nose to hers and pulled back. "You're freezing."

"Am not," she shook her head; her rosy cheeks betraying her.

"Come on," he rolled his eyes and stood; holding his hand out to her. "Come on Madeline, let's go inside and get warm."

"Fine," she sighed. Taking his outstretched hand, she rose to her feet. Harry leaned down, scooping the blanket up.

"Here we go," he wrapped the blanket around her and gathered their glasses and the wine. Harry's free hand remained at her neck, just off to the side as they walked towards the house.

The contented silence returned as they stepped inside. They removed shoes and jackets and, after wrapping herself back up in the blanket, she followed Harry upstairs; her hand held tightly in his. They slipped into his room and, before he could shut the door, he paused.

"You know, I'm going to run to the library and get my laptop. I want to plug it in before we go to bed."

"Oh! I'll come with you," Maddie perked up slightly. "I want to grab those books. Maybe I can sneak in a little reading in the morning."

"You stay here," he kissed her forehead. "I'll bring your books back with me. Get comfortable."

"Okay," she smiled up at him; thankful for his chivalrous natures. "Thank you."

"No problem." With a smile, he was gone.

Maddie sat on the edge of his bed for a moment; allowing the blanket to warm her. And then, her mind wandered; remembering the entirety of their date. It had been such an amazing night; from
start to finish. She closed her eyes and tried to burn every single moment into her mind; the leather jacket, the way he looked on the bike, the way he pulled her to him, the food, the drinks, the tree house; the way he knew her, the way he loved her, the way he caved to her when she knew he wanted to talk about it, the way he touched her and held her and kissed her...the way she longed to be close to him, the way her mind kept reminding her that she had a career, a life, to return to that had nothing to do with this man, and the way her heart kept shouting down that noise with an overwhelming argument in favor of Harry.

Maddie opened her eyes and stood. Letting the blanket lay across his desk, she felt snug and cozy in his room, in his space. With very little debate, Maddie shed her purple silky blouse, tossing it aside. Her pants slid off easily, joining her shirt with a flick of her ankle. And there she stood, in nothing but a silk and lace camisole and boy shorts; her hair mussed, her cheeks pink.

She could hear him coming back to the room; his footsteps giving him away. When he stepped into the room, his eyes were focused on one of her books, his voice low and dramatic as he read from the pages, "Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them..." His eyes rose to her then; his words and his feet halting. Maddie smiled as seductively as she could manage.

"I was thinking of allowing you onto my side of the bed tonight."

"Are you sure?" He sat his laptop and the other books on his stand before walking over to her. "It is a first date and I don't want to take advantage...you are drunk, right?"

"Maybe a little," she giggled; stepping into his space, pressing her body to his and looking up at him through half-lowered lashes. "Keep reading."

"Really?!" His eyebrows lifted as he looked from her to the book and back again. "You're turned on by Oscar Wilde? The Picture of Dorian Gray does it for you?"

"It's not the book," she laughed, her hands slipping into his shirt; between the buttons. "It's your voice. You could be reading the phonebook and I would let you have your way with me; here and now."

And suddenly, she was standing alone while he moved around the room; searching shelves and his desk. "What are you doing?" She crossed her arms.

"Looking for a bloody phonebook!" He called out to her; his eyes meeting hers as she laughed.

"Come on," and he was on his way. When he reached her, he captured her in his arms, pressed his body flush to hers; his lips moving against hers. Maddie took a step backwards, towards his bed, but he remained still; halting her movement. His eyes swept over her and desire coursed through his veins. She was undeniably attractive; sweet and sassy and incredibly sexy.

"Wait." Her determination faded as Harry's hand rested firmly on her hip spinning her around and moving her back; sandwiching her between him and his desk.

"Here?" She asked with a glance at his desk.

"Now." He answered; his grin sending a chill down her spine.

"Oh..." She breathed. His hand at her hip slid down her side to the hem of her boy shorts. Slipping up under the fabric, his fingers drew a shiver from her skin as they moved higher and higher.

"Are you sure this arm can support your weight now?" His other hand moved to trace the scar that was at her shoulder.
"Yes..." She gulped. Harry bent to kiss the scar and then, in one fluid motion his hands were slipping out from under her shorts to grip firmly at her hips; sitting her up on the edge of his desk. The blanket underneath her provided a soft cushion.

Pressing closer, his lips caught hers; strangling the moan she had no control over. In an instant, her hands were at work; tugging his shirt from his pants; pulling him closer and closer still.

Quickly, and slightly clumsily, Harry pulled her camisole up and over her head and looked down at the shorts. He stood, dumbfounded by the sight; Maddie in nothing but those tiny, sassy shorts, perched on his desk with mussed up hair and flushed cheeks from their time outside. He had the slight presence of mind to wonder if she would forever have this effect on him.

"Harry..." Maddie breathed; pulling at his loosened shirt in effort to bring him closer and rid him of his clothing. His lips never leaving hers, Harry's hands took over for her, finishing off his buttons; his shirt falling to the floor. Maddie made quick work of his belt and just as soon, his pants were in a pool at his feet. Maddie's breath sucked in as she looked him over in his boxers; the image of him on the bike burned in her memory.

Surprise washed over her face when Harry pulled his lips from hers, moving down the column of her neck to her chest. Her breathing stopped when he continued down her stomach to the lacy top of her boy shorts—her only remaining clothing item. And when his hands ran down her legs, taking those shorts with him, to her ankles, slipping them off her feet with a toss, she felt her skin scorch.

His hands gripped her hips and moved them closer to the edge. Then, as he took a seat in his desk chair, he moved her feet so that they were resting on the arms of his chair. Her breath sucked into her lungs.

When he looked up to her with a devilish grin and naughty eyes, she gulped. He had another idea entirely.

And when she felt his hot breath against her, in that most intimate of places, her head fell back and a groan escaped her lips. "Oh God..." Her hands fell back to the surface of his desk; her elbows struggling to keep her upright. This was exactly why he had checked on her arm; he had every intention of turning her muscles into mush.

He chuckled lightly; the sensation of which almost sent her over the edge. His mouth was magic; his lips tantalizing, his tongue...

"Harry..." She moaned his name, hoping to lure him back up to her. But any hopes she might have had of him relaxing or giving her a moment to catch up were dashed completely as he pressed on.

Diligent.

Thorough.

"Harry..." She panted wanting desperately to pull one hand into the thick red hair that was tickling the inside of her thighs. But she didn't dare move for fear of collapse.

And he refused to budge.

"Please..." She moaned in a tone so close to begging that at any other moment she would be embarrassed. But she couldn't bring herself to care. "Harry. Please. I want you..." Pausing to collect her breath; he was tenacious. "I need you inside of me Harry...please."
And Harry, never one to turn down a request from her, obliged happily; though not quite the way she had in mind. When his tongue plunged inside of her, she could hear items falling from his desk to the floor, she could feel her arms weaken. And she hoped that nothing on the desk was irreplaceable.

But he remained steady, he remained focused and when she began to gasp and tighten her legs around him, he held onto her, unwilling to let her fall.

Refusing her attempts to pull him higher, ignoring his own throbbing desires, he stayed in place. And he was rewarded for his efforts; with moans and groans and the sound of her calling his name out in the breathy, sticky way that made him weak in the knees.

That night had been a rollercoaster for him. He had worried initially about just how far he had fallen for her and then, later in the date, he had worried about the distinct possibility that she could leave him; absolutely brokenhearted.

But, as she tightened around him and allowed him to bring her over the edge, he worried about nothing; felt nothing...except for an intense desire to bring her to that point again.

Maddie had zero time to recover, barely at the end of the intensity that had just flooded her body, when he moved. The chair pushed behind him as he stood. His arms pulled at her hungrily, gathering her close and pulling her flush to him. His hand cradled her neck, still loose and tilted back as his lips sought her skin. He planted big, wet, open mouthed kisses along the hollow of her neck.

Acting on instinct, her legs wrapped around his waist; aching for more contact, greater friction. Lifting her up off the desk, Harry moved them both. With blind faith, he turned them back towards his bed. Regaining a semblance of herself, Maddie's hands moved up his arms over his shoulders, to his face; pulling it to hers. Her lips pushed onto his, her tongue entering his mouth in a vain attempt to communicate the enormous amount of desire she had for him in that moment, in every moment. Yes, she had doubts about what was going to happen for her in the future, but her doubts were never, EVER about how much she wanted to be with him; how much she loved him.

"Hold on," he whispered into her ear. And she did; her hands held tight to him as he lowered them to the bed. Her back felt the luxurious fabric as she laid back, pulling him with her. His boxers pulled from his body in one blink of Maddie's eyes; heavy with lust.

Her mouth opened, ready to plead for him to take her. But her pleas were quickly replaced with his tongue. Without another thought, another word, he entered her. A happy moan escaped her lips as her body reacted reflexively; her hips moving up to meet him.

"Madeline..." He groaned into her ear, his body pressing against hers in a mixture of sweat and desire; his voice making a melody of her name.

"Yes..." She gasped, her eyes opening to watch him; to watch as he moved above her, to watch as his own passion grew and grew and drew him closer to where he had always managed to take her.

"Maddie..." His voice held warning and she knew he was close. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she smiled up at him and nodded ever so slightly.

"Yes..." She encouraged him; her legs tightening around his waist. "Yes Harry...yes...yes..." She arched up then, her lips seeking his; her hands stroking down his back and when she felt him tense slightly and speed up, she let her breath loose and felt her own moment building. "oh...." She moaned; slightly surprised, more than ready. Sensing this, Harry adjusted slightly and pressed on. And then, as her fingers pressed into the skin of his back, Maddie was going for the second time.
that night and he was right behind her.

"I love you," she breathed into his ear; his face buried in her neck as their hearts worked to steady themselves. "I love you...I love you..."

Eventually their hearts would slow, their breathing would steady and that night, Harry would fall asleep with her voice in his heart. She loved him. He was certain he could work with everything else.

The next morning Maddie awoke to the buzz of her cellphone on the stand next to her. Harry remained asleep, his light snore now a source of comfort for her. Moving cautiously, she slipped from the bed and wrapped up in her robe; not wanting to wake him. She stepped out into the cool morning air of the balcony and answered the phone.

When she stepped back into the room with the phone cradled close to her chest, Maddie was beaming.

"Who was that?" Harry called to her from the bed. He had barely woken just moments before but even he could see the tiniest of flinches cross her face as she looked to him.

"Khenda," she took a breath and held it. "She wants me back in Bandal."
"Khenda," she took a breath and held it. "She wants me back in Bendal."

"Wow..." Harry let the word tumble from his mouth as he sat up in bed; his heart and mind racing against each other.

"It's not what you think," Maddie moved quickly; tossing her phone aside as she climbed back onto the bed, moving towards him. "It's...I'm not..." Her eyes looked to him, wanting to take the sadness away. "She said that the community has recovered, mostly, from what happened the night..."

"The night you were shot," he provided the words she couldn't seem to say.

"Yes," she nodded. "They have repaired buildings, replanted the garden, and for the most part, morale has been lifted."

"But..." Harry's arms rested on his raised knees.

"But the kids..." Maddie smiled softly as she moved into professional mode. "Children have a more difficult time with the abstract. They are more concrete thinkers; more linear. And the last time some of them saw me..." Maddie trailed off as she met his eyes; hard and cold as he remembered. "Even though they tell the children that I'm fine, that I've recovered, they are having a hard time believing it. Almost all the people they know that are shot...die."

"Sure," Harry nodded; sad as he thought of it.

"So the staff Psychologist asked Khenda if she had any way to contact me, to see if I could come down—for a short visit—so that the kids could see with their own eyes that I am alive and well somewhere in the world."

"Okay," Harry breathed; feeling a little less tense.

"It's important, Harry. It's important that they know I'm okay, that sometimes people make it. And I'll only be gone Monday through Thursday really. I have to be back to meet with the DWB staff on Friday and...the psychologist, Khenda, they would not have called if it weren't important. My going down there could be a big turn for some of these kids and..."

"You don't have to explain," he held his hand up with a genuine smile. "I get it, Maddie. It makes sense. When do you leave?"

"When do I..." She shook her head with a chuckle. "Just like that? You're fine with it. Just like that."

"Hey..." Harry reached for her hand. "I'm sorry if I made you feel like you had to explain things to me, like you had to find an excuse for doing something other than you wanting to do it." He kissed the back of her hand. "You don't have to do that Maddie. I want you to...I want you to be wherever you want to be, to do whatever you want to do."

"But..."

"When do you need to be back in London?"

"I...I don't know. I was going to..." She looked around the room, her mind a little off as she took it
all in. Harry; clearly saddened by the mention of her returning to Bendal yet being totally, completely supportive of her going. She almost didn't know what to do with that kind of support—even from him. "Hey, do you..." She took a breath and took a chance. "Do you want to come with me?" Stunned, Harry opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Maddie rushed ahead of him. "Sorry, I know you have stuff to do, a busy schedule and you probably..."

"Yes," Harry cut in.

"What?"

"What?" He laughed. "You asked if I wanted to come with you. I said yes."

"You don't have stuff to do?"

"I do," he shrugged. "But most of it is stuff I can do on the road. I have one meeting on Wednesday that I can reschedule for Friday morning when we return. It won't be a problem at all. It's a standing meeting, nothing urgent."

"Wow."

"Were you being serious? When you asked...did you mean it or were you just trying to pacify me?"

"I meant it," she smiled wide. "I...you're coming with me?"

"Well, if I could get you to tell me when we need to be back in London, I would love to come with you, but so far..." Harry's light ribbing was cut short as Maddie wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him; all of her excitement pouring through to him.

"Thank you," she breathed between kisses. "Thank you..."

"For what?" He raised his eyebrows, his arms moving around her.

"Being you..." She met his eyes for a moment; a heavy, love-flooded moment, before she hugged him tight again.

From the moment Harry agreed to go with her on the short trip to Bendal, their lazy Sunday morning quickly gave way to a whirlwind of preparations. They were packed and in the car faster than Maddie could have ever imagined. As the car pulled away from Highgrove, she felt such conflicting emotions. She was happy to return to Bendal, to see her friends, her family and to help ease some of the angst that the children were dealing with. But, as the trees disappeared from her sight, she felt sad, upset even, to be leaving this wonderful part of the country that reminded her so much of her past, of her home—and provided a glimpse into what could be her future. Reaching for Harry's hand, she took a deep breath. At least he was coming with her.

When they returned to his place at Kensington Palace, Harry shifted quickly into work mode; he made phone call after phone call, arranging travel (she had offered, he had insisted) and moving around his schedule. Maddie, feeling the need to ground herself slightly, called Ella.

Ella was lively and boisterous and shared the great news that she had accepted a job offer to be a flight nurse in London. She would be apartment shopping this next week. And when Maddie told her that she and Harry were preparing to return to Bendal, she grew quiet.

"Are you coming back?" Ella asked tentatively.
"Of course," Maddie laughed. "I have that appointment on Friday. I can't miss it."

"Maddie..." Ella began and, just as quickly, ended. She knew her best friend well. Though she very much wanted to yell at her to stay in London, to come apartment shopping with her—most hopefully for something with two bedrooms—she knew better. Telling Maddie what to do was never a good idea, even when it was a great idea. So she wished her friend luck, demanded that she be careful, and made her promise to meet her for lunch when she returned—longing for details about Highgrove.

When Maddie finished her call with Ella, she found Harry in the kitchen, searching his fridge for a drink. He looked up to her when she entered the room, and smiled wide.

"So?" She smiled back.

"You ready to leave?"

"Now?" She was shocked.

"Two hours," he answered. "We leave for the airport in about thirty minutes. Does that work for you?"

"Yes," she sighed. "That was pretty impressive work on your part."

"Yes, well," he shrugged. "Most of the time, it takes me weeks to draft a memo but, occasionally—when it's important—I can make things happen."

"Harry..." Maddie's voice took a serious turn.

"Hmm?" He raised his eyebrows.

"I love you for this," she took a breath. "For a lot of reasons. But this...this is pretty high on the list."

"Good to know," he grinned and then, remembering something, he moved towards the counter—reaching for something. "I thought you might want this for the trip." Her eyes moved to the book in his hand.

"The Picture of Dorian Gray?!" Maddie laughed. "Did you steal that from your father's library?"

"I borrowed," he corrected with a smirk. "It is a library after all."

"Nicely done."

"You love me for this now, don't you." He winked at her.

"You know it," she laughed; reaching out to snatch the book from him. Leaning up, she kissed his lips. "Thank you."

"Mmmm..." He nodded; his lips brushing hers as he did. Kissing her one more time, he patted her ass and pulled away. "Let's get packed up. Those kids in Bendal have waited long enough to see you, don't you think?"

"Wow...you are really knocking it out of the park today." And, with an adoring smile, she followed him out of the kitchen.
Two hours later, they were in the air; on the first leg of this spur of the moment trip to Bendal. Harry had his laptop open, reading through information that had been waiting for him to look through on Monday; wanting to get as much work done before they landed as he could. Maddie, sighing happily, reached into her bag for the book Harry had confiscated for her. As she pulled it out, a piece of her Christmas candy fell out along with it. Knowing she hadn't packed any candy, there could be only one other way. Holding the candy in her fingers, she looked over at him; the man who had, in less than a year, turned her entire world on its head. Her heart was full as she settled back into her seat, pulling the wrapper off the candy and opening her book.

Bendal and all of the questions this trip was bound to raise, were miles and hours away. Soon—they would be there very soon.
Chapter 27

Arriving in Bendal brought about a rush of feelings for Maddie. It was later Monday when they finally touched down. The heat immediately hit her; warming every inch of her skin along with her smile. And as they drove closer and closer to the place she had called home for a year, her lungs opened up; breathing in the essence that was Bendal. They were early; earlier than anyone expected them. And, when the car pulled up to a stop on the street outside of the main complex that had been the last place Maddie remembered being, she felt her heart ache in her chest.

"Well, Doctor," Harry's voice broke into her thoughts. "You ready for this?" She turned to him then, finding a wide smile on his face.

"Actually," she lowered her voice. "I wanted to do one thing before we go in."

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"Come on," she gestured and, together, they stepped from the car. Of course, in Bendal as in London, Harry had a security officer with him. This had become such a fixture in her life that it no longer felt strange to have a third person along with them most of the time.

Taking his hand in hers, she led him across the street towards the home where the children lived. Knowing that there was an event planned, knowing the psychologists were preparing the children to see her, she didn't want to disturb them. Though she desperately wanted to see them, to see some of what she loved most about her time there. Careful not to make noise, they peeked through the gate. Harry held his hand to his lips; suppressing a chuckle as he watched her. The garden was back; growing and blooming. The children were off in the distance; playing and laughing. Maddie's eyes scanned around, looking at the green house that had remained relatively undamaged in all the craziness. She nudged Harry in the side and pointed.

"Care to give it a go for old time's sake?" She joked easily.

"Don't tempt me," Harry grinned. It seemed as though she wasn't the only one relaxing into the air and the sun of Bendal.

"Maybe later?" She offered.

"Say the word." Maddie laughed, knowing he was completely serious. Taking his hand back in hers, she turned back to look at the main complex. It looked not at all different than it had when she had last been there. She took a breath as she remembered the last time she was there. They had taken almost the exact same route they were on now. Though it had been raining heavily. And there was much more screaming. Feeling her shiver, Harry looked to her; concern in his eyes. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she nodded and continued on. They passed through the main gate and, without any issue, stepped right through the main doors; and that night came crashing back. Harry's jaw clenched as his hand squeezed hers. Maddie took a deep breath and let it out slowly; her eyes looking around, scanning the room—remembering everything.

Just as Maddie opened her mouth to ask him the question he had asked her, she was interrupted.

"Maddie!" Her smile stretched across her face.

"Khenda!" Maddie turned just in time to see her friend's matching smile before she was pulled into a bone-crushing hug.
"Collins!" Khenda shouted out. "They're here!" And then she moved to pull Harry into her arms; breaking nine kinds of protocol—and not caring one bit. As she did, Collins came through the door and with his wide, bright smile, he pulled Maddie to him. Hugging her tight, he lifted her right off the ground.

"It's so good to see you Doc," his voice was welcoming as he kissed her cheeks.

"Oh God, you have no idea," Maddie looked around at all of their happy faces.

"You look amazing," Khenda looked her over. "So refreshed and happy."

"I am," Maddie allowed a glance to Harry. "I am refreshed and happy."

"Thank you for coming," Khenda's face grew slightly more serious. "It's going to mean the world to them that you are here."

"No problem at all," Maddie shook her head.

"So, do you want to come in and meet the two new yous?" Khenda asked; nodding towards her old office.

"Not really," Maddie laughed nervously. But Khenda insisted. It was time for her first meeting. They are going to meet with the new Psychologists to discuss what was going on with the children and find out what their game plan was in reintroducing her to the community.

"I have to tell you," Harry spoke up with a grin. "I love that I don't have to rush off to a meeting."

"Me too," Collins clapped his hands together. "Actually, I'm going to take Harry back to our place to get you all set up and maybe have some drinks."

"Perfect," Harry nodded as Maddie laughed.

"And start dinner?" Khenda looked pointedly at Collins.

"Of course," he rolled his eyes playfully.

"You okay?" Harry checked on Maddie one more time; bending his head to hers.

"I am," she grinned; tilting her head up to meet his lips for a kiss that lasted one beat longer than normal. "Hmmm. Better now."

"I'll see you tonight," he smiled as he released her. Maddie caught the look that passed between Khenda and Collins; a mixture of surprise and awe. As the two men left the complex; already laughing and planning, Khenda nudged Maddie lightly, a knowing smile in place.

"You seem to be...doing well."

"I am," Maddie grinned wider. "I am doing quite well."

"You are going to fill me in on everything, right?"

"Ah, come on, a lady never tells..." Maddie linked her arm through Khenda's as they turned towards her old office.

"That's fine," Khenda sighed. "I'll call Ella. She'll fill me in."
Their laughter filled the hallway as it had not so very long ago.

Their first night in Bendal continued that laughter long into the night. After a successful and informative meeting, Maddie and Khenda packed up and went to join the boys at Khenda and Collins' home. And they had settled in quite nicely; having finished off an abundance of beers, they had dinner ready and waiting.

They ate and laughed and caught up with all that had occurred since they had all last seen each other. Staying up way past late, they finished off bottles of wine and had smiled so much their cheeks hurt. And that night, after a round of good nights, Harry held Maddie close; both of them supporting the other, as they made their way to the room they would be sharing while they were in Bendal.

Harry helped Maddie change into her pajamas and then she helped him pull the covers up over the both of them. And together, with warm smiles still in place, they drifted off; closing off their first day back in Bendal with nothing but happiness.
Chapter 28

The next day went just as the team of planners had intended. In the late afternoon, after the children had been fed lunch, there would be a private meeting at the Children's Home. The kids would gather in the community room and the two staff Psychologists would go in first; followed by Maddie.

This private meeting would be followed up by a community dinner in the courtyard; complete with a standard Bendal welcome—food, drink, music and dancing into the night. And as Harry, Maddie, and Khenda waited outside the Community Room for the other doctors to call Maddie in, they smiled at the good memories that evoked, instead of focusing on that one terrible moment that had proceeded their departure.

"Why am I nervous?" Maddie looked up to Harry as she fanned her face with her hand.

"I have no idea," he shook his head. "This is going to be the easiest thing you do all day."

"I know," she laughed. "Maybe I'm just excited and..."

"Doctor Forrester?" Maddie turned towards the voice of Lara, the Psychologist who had replaced her. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Maddie breathed, turning nervous eyes to Harry.

"Okay kids," Lara spoke into the room. "We have a very special guest today..."

"You got this," his voice was full of absolute certainty. Maddie nodded and, smiling wide, she stepped through the door.

Harry and Khenda could hear the uproar of excitement that erupted in the room as Maddie stepped in. Khenda felt tears come to her eyes and Harry watched in awe as the children swarmed around her. Some were crying, some were clapping their hands and jumping. But all of them were smiling wide and beyond thrilled to see her. He had always known she was a bigger celebrity in Bendal than he was.

"Look at that..." Harry's voice carried pride.

"They were right," Khenda grinned. "Those kids are so happy to see her."

"Of course they are," Harry nodded. "Look at how they watch her."

"Look at how you watch her," Khenda's voice lowered as she smiled at him.

"I can't help it," he blushed slightly.

"That bad, huh?"

"God yes," he chuckled.

"So," Khenda turned her full attention to him, seeing that Maddie's reunion was going well. "What happens next for you two?"

"I don't know," he shook his head as they turned away from the room. "I'm waiting for her to tell me."
"Oh wow," she laughed. "You're in the worst way, aren't you?"

"You have no idea Khenda," his eyes narrowed then. "And I blame you completely for this mess."

"Yeah, yeah," she rolled her eyes. "And you're welcome."

Maddie emerged from the room three hours later. It had been an emotional meeting for her as well. She had seen some of the children she had been working with when she left; children who had been dropped when she had been forced out of Bendal. Seeing them, hearing how they were doing, took a toll on Maddie. Even good emotions, good feeling—still took energy. When she stepped back through the door, Harry took one look at her red, puffy eyes and pulled her into his arms where tears slipped easily from her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Khenda watched, concerned that maybe this had been too much for her friend.

"Yes!" Maddie tossed her head back with a hearty laugh. "I am most definitely okay." Stepping away from Harry, she accepted a tissue from Khenda and wiped at her eyes. "That was...really great for my soul." She sniffed and smiled; her eyes shining, a smile fixing permanently to her mouth.

"Oh thank God!" Khenda exhaled.

"Seriously," Maddie gained control of herself; the tears fading along with all of the negative feelings she had left over from that night. "You two should go in there. It's better than a massage. It's better than therapy!"

"Ha!" Khenda clapped her hands together as Harry laughed, his hand stroking Maddie's shoulder.

"Okay," Maddie took a deep breath and let it out. "Let's do this."

Following her lead, the three of them moved down the halls towards the courtyard. Maddie reached for Harry's hand and leaned into him; her head resting on his arm.

"Thank you for being here for this," she smiled up at him.

"Thank you for letting me be here for this," he placed a kiss to her forehead.

As they stepped out into the evening sun, they were greeted with music and laughter and, upon being spotted, a round of cheers. Looking out into the crowd, Maddie wasn't the only one who had returned for this event. There were a few other familiar faces intermingled with the locals; all of whom were excited to see the Doctor back and in good health.

And the party began.

As the day gave way to the night, the heat gave way to a slight breeze and the feeling of home had returned, for the locals and Maddie alike. She had made the rounds; talking to the families who had come to see her and those who she had been able to work with in the community. Some of them talked about that night, but most talked about all that had improved since that night. Catching up with them felt like catching up with old family members. Maddie was delighted and felt such a surprising amount of relief to know that everyone was. And they, of course, felt the same kind of relief in seeing her and hearing what she had been doing since then.
Of course Maddie remained tight-lipped about Harry, though everyone could see that he was with her. She spoke, instead, of her time at home with her family, her time traveling with Ella (who most everyone remembered) and that she was very, very happy.

As usual, Harry easily folded into the mix of people. The lack of attention was one of the things that had always drawn him back to Bendal—before Maddie, that is. There were a few new staff members there who were surprised by his presence but for the most part, he was regarded as everyone else was. And, as Maddie made the rounds, he was more than happy to blend into the background.

Seeking solace with his thoughts, Harry had ventured off to a second floor terrace; looking down at it all. He was standing at the railing, leaning against it as he watched the dancing that had naturally commenced. He watched as Maddie laughed with the locals; that enormous laugh that had drawn him to her initially. He watched as something inside of her seemed to find peace; to find completion. He could see that it was good for her well-being to be back in this place she had loved so much, giving her the opportunity to replace that last terrible memory with something like this one.

As he watched, he felt emotions that he hadn't felt in a very long time; emotions that tugged at all of his heart strings. Being back in a place where she had almost lost her life, a place where he could still see, in vivid details, the look in her eyes after she was shot. It was a lot for him to balance with his longstanding love for the country.

And of course, there was the matter of his heart. As Maddie laughed and danced and sang along with the children, Harry knew he was witnessing the woman he loved fall back in love with Bendal. He had always known this was a possibility. But now, as he watched in happen in front of him, he wasn't sure he was prepared to deal with it. He didn't know if he was ready for her to leave him; even if she was leaving him for this beautiful place that he adored. He sighed heavily, wishing he could stop the spiraling thought process; and failing miserably.

Maddie was getting a drink when she spotted him. Meeting Khenda's eyes, she gestured; letting her know that she was headed up to him. Gathering another round of drinks, she made sure people weren't watching before she slipped off, climbing the stairs to where he was.

"Marco..." She called out lightly as she neared him. Sliding up next to him, she nudged him with her hip. "You're supposed to say 'polo'. It's a pool game..." She took a sip from her drink and held one out to him. "Did you ever play..." Her question came to an end as she saw the expression on his face. She turned then, leaning back against the railing so she could look at him. "Harry?"

"Maddie?" He offered a small smile; the best he could do.

"What's on your mind?" Maddie studied his face thoughtfully.

"My mother," his voice was soft as he took the drink from her hand and brought it to his lips.

"Oh..." Maddie breathed; her free hand moving to his arm that was braced next to her hip. "Want to talk about it?" He took a breath and smiled out at the people over her shoulder.

"I was just watching you talk with everyone and...it reminded me of her. She adored Bendal too."

"Really? I didn't know she had been here."

"Yes," he nodded and leaned closer; dropping a kiss to her shoulder. "The first time I came here was with her."
"I guess I didn't know that," she turned her head so she could kiss the side of his.

"Yes. I was ten, I think. It wasn't too long before she died." He surprised Maddie when chuckled as he remembered. "Actually, Khenda was the first person we met on our first trip."

"Really? I had no idea that you had known Khenda that long."

"Yes," Harry smiled wistfully. "Years and years. She's become a bit of a...she looks out for me."

"That's sweet," Maddie ran her fingers up his arm.

"Actually," Harry swallowed a drink. "I'm ninety-five percent sure that is why she had me come to that food bank opening a year ago."

"Why?"

"To meet you." His eyes met hers with great intensity. Maddie swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Really?" She felt teary—not an uncommon event that particular day.

"Well, I think so...but you would have to ask her for sure." Harry looked off in the distance again; as though he was looking into the past. "My mother would have loved you Maddie; everything about you. Your drive, your defiance, the work you do, your heart...she would have loved you."

"Harry...that's..." Maddie felt like crying as thoughts of his mother, memories of her father flooded her heart.

"I think Khenda knew that; when she met you. I think she knew that you were, that you are...a great match for me."

"Well..." Maddie knew she was reaching when she tried for levity. "My father would have been....okay...with you."

"Ha!" Harry laughed through the tears in his eyes. "I do appreciate your honesty."

"I'm only kidding..." She snuggled close to him; his arms dropping from the railing to wrap around her. "He would have liked you. A lot. Though, he would have thought you lived too far away for me."

"I suppose that I do," he agreed and watched as Maddie's eyes grew incredibly serious. It had been an incredibly emotional day and it looked as if she was going for the big one.

"Harry..." She bit her lip; her stomach tossing as she prepared for the conversation that she was about to jump into.

But this time, he wasn't ready.

"Shh..." He held his fingers lightly to her lips. Her eyes flew to meet his. "Please Maddie. I've been sitting here thinking about how much my mother would have loved you, how she would have been happy that I was..." He swallowed the lump in his throat. "I can't talk about it tonight. I can't have a conversation that might end with you leaving. I just really can't. Not tonight. I'm sorry."

Unable to speak, Maddie nodded and moved closer to him; his arms tightening even more. She felt him press a kiss to the top of her head, his hands rubbing up and down her back in a soothing fashion. And, for the first time since she had met him, she felt the overwhelming urge to take care
of him.

He had always been this tall, sturdy, strong man who carried the weight of his role with grace and ease, who looked out for those less fortunate, who fought in a war.

But now, as he laid his vulnerabilities out in front of her, all she wanted to do was to protect him; shield him from any harm. And somewhere deep inside, she knew that the hurt she was protecting him from in that moment was hurt that only she had the power to wield.

And it made her sad.

And sick.
Chapter 29

When Maddie woke the next day, she was sick to her stomach. And she was absolutely certain that it had nothing to do with the food she had eaten the night before—and everything to do with the wonderful man who was sleeping peacefully next to her.

She loved him.

Her eyes stung with tears as she thought of just how she loved him. But even that fact couldn't erase the way she felt being back in Bendal, the purpose that came with simply being there. That purpose, that sense of duty was so much a part of her, she wasn't sure if it would ever be something that she could move past.

Glancing at the clock, she realized just how early it was. Regardless, she wasn't going to be able to go back to sleep. She had tossed and turned all night thinking over and over of the way he had pleaded with her not to bring up The Discussion; thinking about the great sadness and bit of fear she had seen in him.

She sat up in bed and hugged her knees close to her. Watching the rise and fall of his chest, she smiled. At least he was sleeping now. She was careful as she slipped from the bed they shared. She was quiet as she moved to the large windows that looked out into the dawn of the morning. Taking a deep breath of the air breezing in the window, she longed for a way to clear her head, to sort things out.

Looking down at the floor, she had an idea. She moved softly around the room as she changed into loose, breathable clothing—something she could walk in. She pulled on her running shoes and a ball cap and, after pressing a kiss to Harry's temple, she left the room.

She hadn't planned for this when she left London, so she need to gather a few items. Looking through Khenda's hall closet, she found a backpack and a few supplies. Moving to the kitchen, she looked for a bottle for water and some snacks.

"Are you running away?" Harry's voice, rough with sleep, called to her. She looked up to see him watching her thoughtfully.

"Yes," she smiled. "You want to run away with me?"

"Absolutely," he grinned, moving closer to her. "Where are we going?"

"France?" She offered and chuckled as Harry's face twisted up.

"France?! Why in the world would we go to France? Do you even speak French?"

"Un peu," she held her fingers close together and he laughed at her. She was happy to see him smiling after the night before.

"Seriously though," he watched as she tossed a granola bar into a backpack. "Where are you going?"

"Remember that hike you took me on after Geru and Mante were killed?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to do that."
"Sorry?"

"I need to clear my head, Harry. I need to be outside, moving around, sweating. I need to get out and clear my head."

"Okay," he smiled. He could appreciate that. "Can you give me ten minutes so I can get ready?"

"No," she shook her head with a sweet smile.

"No?"

"I'm going alone," she zipped up the backpack and moved away from the kitchen.

"Alone?" He followed her.

"Yes. Alone."

"You think that's a good idea?" Even he had issue with the protective way he suddenly felt.

"I think it's a great idea," her defiant streak that he adored made an appearance.

"You know, you..."

"Spent an entire year down here without you here to protect me," she cut in; her arms folded across her chest. "Yes I do know that."

"Oh God," he groaned; scrubbing a hand over his face.

"Hey..." Collins' voice grumbled as he moved towards them. "Somebody want to tell me why you two are up at this God awful hour in my kitchen..." He glanced at Maddie. "Are you going to work out?" There was small snicker at the end of his question that he quickly tried to cover—seeing her glare. "Seriously though, what are you doing?"

"Going for a hike," she shrugged.

"A hike?" He blinked.

"Alone," Harry offered.

"Alone?" Collins' face twisted. "You think that's a good idea?"

"She thinks it's a great idea," Harry offered.

"I need to clear my head, Harry," she lowered her voice pointedly. "I need to think, I need to...figure things out and you just...you can't be there while I do that. You muck up the thinking process." And it dawned on him. This head clearing hike was about him; about the two of them...and what happened next.

"How about I go?" Collins offered; sensing what was happening. They both looked to him then. "I'll be there so you won't be alone and...and I'm just guessing here...but I'm pretty sure there's nothing to figure out when it comes to me."

Harry looked to Maddie, his eyebrows raised awaiting her answer.

"Fine," she sighed. "If you want to come, you can."

"Great!" Harry was happy. He wanted her to have time and space to think clearly; hoping that it
would ultimately work out in his favor. But he hated the idea of her out in the wilderness alone.

"Great," Maddie smiled; feeling slightly better than she thought she would at the news of company.

"Great..." Collins clapped his hands together and yawned. "I'll be back in ten minutes. Would you mind packing some water and stuff for me?"

"Not at all," Maddie agreed and returned to the kitchen.

"Thank you," Harry nodded to Collins. "I owe you."

"Yes," Collins smirked and patted Harry's back as he passed him. "You owe me huge."

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Collins had always felt a strong sense of loyalty and brotherly love towards Maddie. Even when she first arrived in Bendal, he had kept an eye out for her. And when she was shot, when all hell broke loose, he had been terribly worried about her. So, this time with her in the hills of Bendal, watching as she pushed herself physically and mentally, was precious to him. Seeing her with his own eyes; all recovered and lively, made him feel more at peace with everything. And knowing what she was tossing around in her mind made him want to push her to push harder; to really dig deep and make the right decision—even if it wasn't the easiest.

"You look great, Doc," he called out to her as they neared the summit. Honoring her request for silence for the majority of the hike, he just couldn't help himself any longer.

"Thanks Collins," she smiled warmly at him and looked out at the land below them. "It's so beautiful here."

"It is," he nodded; he had always thought so.

"Did I tell you...Ella is staying in London," she went for small talk, not quite ready to discuss what was really on her mind. "She's going to be a flight nurse there."

"Oh yeah?" He grinned. "That sounds exactly like her."

"You think?" Maddie's nose scrunched up. "I was having a hard time believing she wasn't coming back here."

"Really?" Now it was Collins' turn to look at her confused. "I'm not at all surprised. I figured she would never come back."

"Why do you say that?" Maddie stalled; her breath coming out in short bursts.

"Well," Collins took a deep breath as they came to a stop; resting for a moment. "Her last night here was...terrible."

"Yeah, I remember. But..."

"No," he interrupted her. "You don't remember. I mean...it was hard enough up until you were shot. Things were pretty chaotic but after you were hit...it was pandemonium. People were running everywhere; screaming and...and Harry and Ella were just...they were covered in your blood." Collins took a steadying breath. "Who knew that shoulders bled so much?"

"I..." This was the first time she had heard this part of the story.
"It was terrible. Just terrible. And poor Ella...she was running the save on you for a few minutes all on her own while we pulled the surgeon and..." Collins gulped and shook his head; the memory giving him a headache. "I'm actually surprised that Harry could walk back in the complex after what happened...if it had been Khenda, I don't know if I could have ever returned."

"Collins..."

"So no," he smiled lightly. "It doesn't surprise me that she won't step foot back here. And it's good...she was here for a long time. She needs to do something else." He pulled his courage and continued. "Just like you."

"Excuse me?" Her eyes went wide; her mind flying from the past to the present.

"You heard me." Collins began back up the trail.

"But..." Maddie followed after him. "You think I should leave Bendal?"

"I think you left Bendal," he corrected. "And I think you're thinking about coming back. I think you're thinking about leaving that man...that man who held you on the floor of the complex after you had been shot and..." He was getting almost angry with her and that wasn't what he wanted at all. Taking a breath, he tried for calm. "I think you're thinking of coming back. I can see it in your eyes."

"I..." Maddie was flustered, this show of feelings from Collins so unexpected it threw her. "I am thinking about coming back." And it was the first time she had said it out loud; and it caused her heart to pause in her chest.

"I thought so," Collins huffed. "And what does Harry have to say about that?"

"We haven't talked about it."

"Oh sure," he laughed; rolling his eyes at her. "Of course you haven't. Because what good would talking about it do? I mean, it's not like clear, honest communication is a cornerstone to a healthy relationship...right, Doc?"

"Collins..." She warned.

"Madeline," he countered. "You wanted to clear your head. You wanted to come out here and let your sweat and your feet pound it out. But so far all we're doing is talking about Ella...who has her life figured out."

"But..."

"No buts," he shook his head. "Big, life-altering decisions aren't easy. If they were, they wouldn't be life-altering. So stop with the bullshit. You have this man at home who adores you...though why exactly that is completely escapes me at the moment."

"You're an ass," she narrowed her eyes at him; knowing fully well he was far, far from it.

"An ass who's trying to stop you from making a big, life-altering mistake."

"You know," Maddie's voice grew clipped. "I hate you sometimes."

"Aw, come on Doc," Collins chuckled. "You hate me most times."

And then, with a quick burst of energy, Maddie surged ahead of him; trying to power out of
hearing range. There was nothing more frustrating than having somebody call her out on everything she had been keeping at bay. And there was nothing more annoying than somebody speaking the truth that she longed to avoid.

Yet there he was; calling her out, speaking the truth.
The entire way home from the hike, Maddie had remained silent. She had gone out that morning seeking clarity and she just didn't know if she had found it. If anything, walking with Collins had only drudged up more for her to think about, more for her to consider. And he had pushed her; pushed her to see the reality of what was happening—called her on her own avoidance. As the car drew closer to their place, Maddie knew what she needed to do.

She needed to talk to Harry. Yes, she had put this off all on her own accord. Yes, she had hoped that the stress of it all would simply go away. But now, as she made her way closer to him, she felt like laughing at herself. What had happened to her? When had all of her years of professional training gone out the window.

The only way through this was to go through it. And that meant that she needed to tell him. She needed him to know...that she was considering Bendal, why she was considering Bendal, and why never in a million years would she have ever imagined considering him over Bendal—even though she was. She needed him to know what was happening in her head; in her heart. It was the very least she could do in return for all he had done for her.

The car pulled to a stop and Maddie rushed from the car.

"Doc..." Collins called to her, the weight of his words was beginning to get to him. He knew that he had been the final push for the avalanche of emotions that his friend was handling. This was what he wanted, but he hoped it wasn't too much for her.

But she didn't answer; her entire mind, her entire body focused on a different mission. Pushing into the house, she looked around for them.

Harry and Khenda were out on the deck; enjoying drinks and laughing loudly. Seeing him made Maddie's heart leap in her chest. Blinking back a surprising burst of tears, Maddie took a breath and moved out to the deck. Collins followed behind her.

"Hey!" Harry was the first one to see her; his eyes lighting up as he grinned up at her.

"Welcome back," Khenda smiled at Maddie before catching the look on Collins' face. "How was the hike?" Ignoring Khenda completely, Maddie looked at Harry—her emotions exposed for everyone to see.

"What do you love about me?" Her voice was soft.

"Sorry?" He looked up to her, his smile still in place. Khenda's laughter faded as she glanced to Collins.

"What do you love about me?" She repeated, stepping closer to him. "And you can't say my ass because there are plenty of women in this world with better asses than mine."

"I wasn't going to say your ass," he laughed tenderly. "I mean...it's a great ass, but that's not why I..."

"What is why?"

"You want a list?" He glanced to Collins, wondering what the hell had happened on the hike. Collins shook his head; he had no idea.
"Please," she nodded. He cleared his throat, looking slightly embarrassed, but willing to play along.

"Okay. Well...you're funny. Not just good-at-telling-jokes funny but, you can laugh at yourself, you don't take things too seriously. And you're thoughtful and considerate and you're so damn smart." He shook his head. "I love how smart you are. You can hold your own with anybody in the world, I am certain. You're determined and independent and...you care so much about the people around you, about what's happening around you. You have this intrinsic warmth that instantly draws people to your side and..." He looked down at his hands and back up to her. "I don't know Maddie. What is it you're looking for with this?"

"All of those things you just listed," Maddie's eyes grew soft. "All of those things you love about me...All of those things are what brought me to Bendal in the first place. All of those things are because of my time here. All of those things about me are so tied to this place...I..." She trailed off as tears rose to her eyes and just like that the entire mood shifted. Maybe that hike had jarred more loose than she had thought.

Khenda glanced at Collins who nodded. As they passed by Maddie, they patted her arm and smiled at Harry.

And then it was just the two of them. And the great big elephant in the room they had been avoiding.

"So we're going to talk about it," Harry took a deep breath; his heart feeling the oddest combination of fear and relief.

"I want to be really honest with you right now," she blinked back her tears as she moved to sit in the chair directly opposite of him. "Even if...even if it hurts. I want to be honest with you right now."

"Maddie, I saw the way your face lit up when you saw Khenda and Collins. I noticed the relaxed way you walk through town; like you're...home. And last night, when you were dancing with the kids..." He had to look away for a minute; had to gain control. The last thing he wanted was for his emotions to take over this moment. Exhaling, he met her eyes. And she held them; tears and all, she held his look. "You're coming back, aren't you." It wasn't a question. She took a long moment to collect her thoughts before she could speak. And when she did, her voice was small, soft; quiet.

"If I don't live here..." Her eyes grew wide. "Where do I live? Colorado? I can't even imagine that anymore..."

"You could..." He let out a breath and steeled himself for her response. "Wow...you could live in London."

"London?" A small laugh burst through her lips.

"You say it like it's the craziest thing you've ever heard."

"Well...it is." Though it wasn't the first time the thought had crossed her mind. "In some senses, it is."

"Maddie..." Harry tried to make his voice sound soothing. "It can't be the first time it's crossed your mind." She was stunned as he put voice to her thoughts.

"No," the admission made her eyes water even more. "It's not the first time I've thought about moving to London. But..."
"But what?" Harry hated how eager he felt; how hopeful. "Think about it Maddie. Ella's going to be there. I'm going to be there. Bishop is going to be there."

"Bishop?" Maddie felt a burst of laughter push through her lips.

"Well, in case you need spare cash." Harry grinned; a moment of laughter passing between them, lightening the mood.

"I don't know what to...What would I even do there? I...my work is here, with DWB. Even if they don't offer me this on Friday, they are going to offer me another location where I could do the same kind of work and..." Maddie took a deep breath. "Harry, I don't even have a job possibility in London."

"Yes, but, up until last week Ella didn't have a job possibility and look what happened. A job fell in her lap!" He countered.

"Those kinds of things only happen to Ella. I doubt a job is going to fall into my lap."

"But you're educated and experienced and you're amazingly talented and..."

"And where would I live?" She threw up the next obstacle that raced through her mind.

"I don't know," he shook his head. "But there are plenty of flats for rent and until you found something, you know that you would have a place to stay. Me, Ella...I know my father would be more than happy to have you at Highgrove for an extended holiday..."

"Wow..." She breathed; her face a scattered mess that mirrored her emotions. She sat back in her chair; wiping at her eyes. This was crazy; absolutely crazy. Leaving Bendal for London—yet, something inside her felt...excited. Something in her felt alive. But that something was waging an enormous battle against something that had been anchored in her for so long.

"Maddie..." Harry reached for her hands; pulling them into his. "What do you want me to say here? That I don't want London on the table? I can't say that," he shook his head; his stomach turning as he said it, knowing this could very well be the moment she walked away from him. "If this is an honest-if-it-hurts moment then...then I want you in London; with me. I...I don't have a list of pros or great reasons. I just...I want you there. I love you, Maddie."

"I love you too," she squeezed his hands.

"I know that," he moved to the edge of his seat then, his legs moving to the outside of hers, his arms resting alongside hers. Locking his eyes with hers, he spoke clearly. "I am not trying to tell you what to do or make decisions for you or force you into some corner full of ultimatums, Maddie...I want you to be happy." His eyes seemed so sad, so full of heartache and she hated that she had anything to do with that. "If that means that you live in Bendal then...then you live in Bendal. I won't say I like it. I won't say that's what I want. I won't lie to you."

"And..."

"And... I want...you. I want us. And not the 'once in every three months' version of us. I want the everyday us. And I know it's not fair but...I feel like that can only happen if you're in England."

"Wow..." Maddie felt tears in her eyes.

"Please don't hate me for wanting you to be close, Madeline."
"I don't hate you, I..." She smiled through the sadness. "I couldn't hate you. I just...we're talking about my entire life, my career, my goals. I always swore that I would never put myself in a situation where I would even consider dropping it all for some guy." Her insecurities rushed forward, this old wall of protection building.

"Some guy?" His eyebrows shot up; his heart aching at her words.

"Even if he is you." And somewhere, in the back of her spiraling mind, there was a voice shouting at Maddie; warning her of grand mistakes and life-altering decisions. But she couldn't hear it. There were just too many voices shouting at her.

"Wow..." Harry leaned back in his chair, reaching for his drink. His eyes shifted away from her as he tipped back his bottle of beer; draining it. Maddie moved towards him then, leaning in, her hands on his chest; trying to pull his attention back to her. And when his eyes shifted back to hers, she looked sad and young and afraid.

"Harry..." She whispered over the lump in her throat. "When my dad died..." Her voice hitched and Harry shifted in his seat; catching her hands in his again. "When he died...I fell apart. I...I cracked. I was so lost." She blinked as tears escaped her eyes. "I didn't know what to do or where to go or even what mattered anymore and...and I came here. And I FOUND myself here. In Bendal. If it weren't for this place, if it weren't for this experience, I don't know what...I don't know what would have happened to me. And when I think of leaving here..." She shook her head, wishing she could stop the damn tears. "I know it's not rational and that it makes very little sense to anyone...but what if leaving here would...what if I lost myself again? What if that woman that you fell in love with here only exists here? What if I lose hold of myself again?"

And then, because it was the only answer he could think of in the moment, Harry's hands cupped her face; his lips meeting hers. Pressing soft, sweet kisses to her lips, her cheeks, her forehead, he shook his head. "I know that right now you're kind of..."

"Crazy?" She offered, closing her eyes as she rested her forehead against his lips. Rediscovering herself after the shooting had proven to be so tiring, so complicated. She felt crazy sometimes.

"I was going to say scattered," he chuckled lightly and pulled back to look at her; wiping at the tears on her cheeks with his thumb. "You've been through a lot Maddie. You were shot and sent home and you've been basically traveling for three months and...and now you have this big decision looming overhead and...I know that it's hard for you to see things clearly right now but...I also know that under all of this you know just as well as I do...that woman I fell in love with was in there long before Bendal. And she's going to be in there long after Bendal."

"Hmm..." She sighed with a small smile. "You seem so sure."

"I am sure." "Harry?"

"Yes?"

"If I decide to stay here, if I...if I moved back to Bendal...then..." She smiled sadly at him. "What happens to us?" Harry felt a lump in his throat as her question washed over him. How did he begin to answer that question? There were a number of possibilities.

They could make it work. He knew it was possible. He could travel more freely, he could visit her. She had breaks, holidays she could take. The first part of their relationship had been apart. It was only the last few weeks that they had actually been consistently in the same place. He knew
they could make it work.

But he also knew the other side. He had been here before; a long distance relationship with southern Africa. He had done the phone calls and the trips and the missing somebody more than he could put words to. He had been to that agonizing place where all he wanted to do was be thousands of miles from where he was. He had been through that moment when the woman he loved needed him and there was absolutely no way he could be there; when he wanted to hold her and wouldn't be able to for months.

And he had sworn he wouldn't do it again. When it all fell apart, he had sworn he wouldn't put himself in that situation again.

And then Khenda had called in a favor; bringing him to Bendal for the Food Bank opening.

And he had met Maddie.

And the love affair with South Africa began. What was it about this woman that made him toss everything out the window—he would never know.

"I don't want to let you go Maddie. I can't imagine walking away from you, from this...but what happens to us if we try to do this on separate continents..." He let out a breath, tightened his hold on her, and gave her the honest-if-it-hurts answer. "I don't know."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded; tears in her eyes, smile on her lips. She knew that was the answer. She had always known that was the answer. They watched each other for two full minutes; allowing it all to sink in, allowing it all to settle. And they were at an impasse. Everything was out in the open, on the table—thought nothing was decided. Sensing this, Maddie decided to call a time out. "Okay..." She sniffed and wiped at her eyes. With a shake of her head, she widened her smile. "Can we...can we take a break from this conversation for a minute?"

"Sure," Harry breathed; his lips turning up at the corners. He could see her coming to terms with what they had discussed; coming to terms with all that was happening for her.

"I won't even know what I'm dealing with until Friday and...and I just wanted you to know what was going on in my mind...though..." She laughed. "Though I'm not sure anything is any clearer."

"You need to hike that trail again?" Harry joked. "Cause I think Collins would be up for another round."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tossed back in laughter. "I'm surprised Collins didn't leave me out there." Maddie watched him for a second before moving to his lap. Straddling him, she settled over him; his eyes watching her with surprise. Her fingers moved to his face and then, her lips were on his; strong, warm, and full of all she felt for him. His mouth opened under hers as his arms wrapped around her; holding her close.

"What was that?" He breathed when she pulled back.

"I do love you," she sighed. "In all of this indecision, that has never even been up for debate. Do you know that?"

"I..."

"Know it," she insisted before leaning to kiss him again. "Now...I need to apologize to Collins and then...I need to take a shower. And then, we are going to enjoy our last night in Bendal with our friends and we can get back to this when we have to. How does that sound?"
"Perfect," He smiled as she rose to her feet.

"You'll be here when I get back?" She asked as she moved away from him.

"Yes," he answered. Always, he thought.
Chapter 31

The next morning Maddie woke with a slight hangover. She wasn't sure exactly what to attribute that to; the emotionally draining conversation with Harry, the bottles and bottles of wine the four of them consumed before dancing—and laughing hysterically—in their living room, or the intense sex Harry talked her into in the early morning hours before they both passed out. Either way, she was in desperate need of a long shower and hot coffee before they even began to pack up their belongings. They had an early flight, and an even earlier car ride to prepare for.

After they were dressed and recovering, the car pulled up and the good-byes were upon them. As Harry and Collins helped load the bags, Khenda pulled Maddie aside; hoping for one last chance to impart some wisdom to her young friend.

"We need to talk," she linked her arm through Maddie's, steering her off in the opposite direction of the car.

"About?" Maddie smiled at her friend.

"Collins told me what happened on the hike," an eyebrow arched sharply over her eyes.

"Oh. Good for him," Maddie sighed and prepared to hold her ground.

"Well..."

"Well, I know you too well for this Khenda. So why don't you just say what it is you're dying to say and..."

"Maddie...that man adores you." Khenda didn't think twice about taking the invitation.

"Khenda..." Maddie stopped walking and lowered her voice, wanting to keep this particular conversation between the two of them. "I know he does."

"Tell me you don't love him," Khenda turned to face Maddie. "Go ahead. Tell me you don't love him and I'll walk away with my mouth shut."

"It's not that easy."

"It is that easy."

"He wants me to..." Maddie grabbed Khenda's arm and resumed their walking. "Khenda, he wants me to move to London."

"Then move to London."

"What?!" Maddie laughed; astonished at the words that came from Khenda's mouth.

"You heard me."

"Please," Maddie shook her head. "You have a career, Khenda. You worked to get here, just like I did. Tell me you would ever leave Bental!"

"If Collins left? In a heartbeat." Khenda answered without blinking.

"What?!" Again, Maddie was shocked.
"I wouldn't even think about it. I would pack and go. Or just go...no packing."

"I'm sorry...I just...what?"

"Collins makes Bendal home for me Maddie," a soft, fuzzy look came over Khenda's face as she spoke. "Without him, it's not even close to home."

"I..." Maddie almost couldn't process it fast enough to respond. Khenda, the strongest, most independent woman she knew—giving it all up to move away with Collins.

"And I don't even care if people think that makes me a part of some antiquated patriarchal order...the feminist movement was about women making their own decisions. And mine is to be with Collins. He's my home."

"That is..." Maddie swallowed a lump in her throat. "I don't even know what to say. That's incredibly...sweet."

"Maddie, please listen to me..." But Khenda's words of wisdom were drawn short as the men caught up with them. Collins' arm went around her shoulders and she smiled up at him.

"We're all packed up," Harry smiled at Maddie, his hand resting on her back.

"Great," Maddie returned his smile and then looked to their friends; sadness washing over her.

Khenda moved to Harry, pulling him to her and Maddie went straight into Collins' open arms.

"You know I don't hate you," Maddie spoke into his ear as he held her tight. "In fact I adore you."

"And I you," Collins pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Be brave Doc." And then, with one final squeeze, he released her to extend his hand to Harry. Maddie turned to Khenda, both women looking at the other with such love.

"Oh I am going to miss you," Maddie sighed as they wrapped their arms around each other.

"I'll miss you too..." Khenda pressed her lips to Maddie's cheek and lowered her voice. "Go to London Maddie. Go where Harry goes."

And then Maddie was released; free to go. Looking into Harry's bright blue eyes, she couldn't deny the way he warmed her heart.

"Ready?" He nodded towards the car.

"Yes," she smiled. And, with final waves and promises to keep them updated; Maddie and Harry were driving to the airport—leaving Bendal behind.

The smile remained on Maddie's face until about halfway home. They were mid-air when she asked Harry for a pen. He gestured to his bag and, when she opened it up to look, she found a well-stocked supply of her candy.

And suddenly she found it difficult to breath. As a tear slipped from her eye, she tried her best to cover; reaching for a tissue and blowing her nose. Forgetting the pen, she replaced his bag and turned her face towards the window of the plane. Looking out over the clouds, she took long, deep breaths.

She hated the feeling of not knowing; of having two wonderful options but no idea which way to go.
Pressing her eyes closed, she tried for calm. In less than twenty four hours, all of the options would be on the table and maybe, just maybe, the decision would be made for her.
Chapter 32

As Maddie neared the London DWB office for her meeting, she was stuck on how surreal this moment was. At the beginning of the mandated three months off, she had thought they would never end; that she would be stuck in the endless purgatory. But it was coming to an end in a flash.

Harry had left her that morning to attend the meeting he had rescheduled in order to go to Bendal. He had kissed her and wished her luck and clarity. Maddie took a deep breath as the cab pulled up to the office. She paid and thanked the driver and then, she was facing her future.

She sat in the waiting area for less than ten minutes before she was pulled into an office with a wonderfully sweet woman named Marquita. She was tall and beautiful and Maddie wondered as she followed her why it was she wasn’t modeling somewhere exotic. But she kept those thoughts to herself.

After offering the obligatory water or coffee, Marquita shut the door to her office and sat down across from Maddie. Opening her file, they went over the doctor's notes, the releases that had been signed and then Marquita asked her the most popular question,

"What do you want to do next Maddie?"

And Maddie still didn't know. She shook her head and looked down at her hands. Unsure, confused, she explained that she was kind of hoping the options available to her would help with that decision.

"Well," Marquita sighed. "You recovered well from the incident in Bendal. Physically, you're good to go. I see you met with our staff psychologist and he has signed off on your mental status."

"Good to know," Maddie chuckled lightly.

"Though Bendal remains a contentious area to live in, it isn't any more or less dangerous than it was before you left—and we still have a team down there. At the time of your mandated furlough, you were in the middle of serving out an extended contract. So, if you wanted to return, we could absolutely send you there. One of the Psychologists is getting ready to end her tenure and I'm sure the community would welcome you back. You have some great recommendations in your file from the staff down there. So, that is certainly an option for you."

"Wow..." Maddie breathed. She should be thrilled to hear that. She had wanted to hear that—didn't she? "Wow. I just...that's what I was hoping to hear." She spoke the words though she wasn’t nearly as sure as she thought she would be.

Was it? She thought. Was it what she wanted to hear?

"Of course, if you were thinking of trying one of our many locations, we can certainly talk about that. Or, if you wanted to be done with the service for a while, that would be perfectly understandable."

"Done?"

"Some people need a break," Marquita smiled warmly. She had been through this meeting thousands of times; had seen this reaction and confusion thousands of times. Glancing back down at Maddie's file, she saw an additional note. "Oh...wait..." She pulled the piece of paper to the top of the stack.
"What is it?"

"Well," Marquita allowed the tiniest of smirks to cross her face as she read the note. "It seems as though..." She looked up to Maddie with a conspiratorial look in her eyes. "Normally I'm not supposed to pass on any opportunities that are outside of Doctors Without Borders. I mean, if you asked for resources, I could give them. But normally I'm not supposed to tell you about anything outside of the organization."

"Okay..." Maddie's eyes narrowed. "I'm sorry. I'm confused, are you..."

"It seems as though somebody wants you to consider staying in London," the young woman smiled at Maddie as she said the words.

"Somebody wants me to stay in London?" Maddie's throat grew tight as she repeated the words.

"Yes," Marquita passed a piece of paper across the desk. "There is an opening at the Children's Hospital, for a staff Psychologist—handling inpatient treatment and working with the trauma team." Marquita read from the paper. "It's a really great hospital. I know a med-tech there and he loves his job."

"Hold on," Maddie held up her hand, her face growing warmer and warmer as she sat with this news. "Somebody...found...me a job in London?"

"Well, kind of," Marquita seemed a little uneasy. "Somebody set up an interview for you. It's not a guaranteed job. You would still have to go through the process. But yes, somebody put in a good word for you and wanted to make sure that this..." Marquita shrugged. "They wanted to make sure that this fell in your lap."

"My lap," Maddie was certain her face was growing red as the anger took over her thought process. "But you said that you don't normally connect people with outside employment and..."

"Well, it seems as though this came from somebody with quite a bit of influence," Marquita leaned closer. "It's happened before but only in very rare circumstances and...and it almost always comes down from the top."

"The top," Maddie laughed bitterly. Somebody intervening in her life—from the top.

"Anyway," Marquita smiled and closed the folder. "As you can imagine, time is of the essence on these issues. I can give you forty-eight hours to think about it but twenty-four would be ideal. Only because I need to process paperwork—rather you decide to go back to Bendal or to the interview here in London."

"Sure," Maddie nodded; too angry to elaborate any further.

"Do you have any other questions before..."

"No," Maddie shook her head and took the file along with Marquita's business card. The young woman escorted her to the waiting area and wished her luck with her decision.

"I look forward to hearing from you," she smiled before she turned to greet another client. Clenching her teeth Maddie pulled her sunglasses on and stepped out onto the street to hail a cab.

As she neared Kensington Palace, her anger mounted exponentially. She hoped Harry had his security officer close by because, as she held the job interview that had fallen in her lap from the top, she was absolutely certain of one thing.
She was going to kill him.
When Maddie stepped into Harry's home, she was fuming. Even more so when she realized that he hadn't returned from his meeting. Taking a seat on the stairs, ensuring she would be the first thing he saw, she thought over what had just happened.

She hated being told what to do.

She hated people doing what they thought was best for her.

And she hated somebody stepping into her professional life to make things happen.

And he had just, in her mind, done all three.

Holding the paper in her hand, she sat and waited; her anger intensifying with every tick of the clock.

It was eleven minutes before the door opened; eleven minutes for Maddie's mind to spiral out. Eleven minutes before Harry stepped back into his home—the scene of his eminent demise.

"Hey," he smiled wide when he saw her. Taking a breath, he tried to ready himself for what was about to unfold. "How did the meeting go?"

"The meeting went..." Maddie laughed bitterly as she rose to her feet. "I think you know how the meeting went."

"What? I don't...I don't know what you mean," he sat his briefcase down in the foyer and moved further into his house; loosening his tie as he went.

"You know exactly what I mean." Harry stopped what he was doing then and really looked at her. She was mad—no, pissed. And he was incredibly confused.

"Maddie I..."

"You want to tell me what the hell this is?!!" She waved the piece of paper in the air.

"Oh!" He grinned. "Is that the gift I left for you..."

"Gift?!" Her voice echoed in the foyer. "This is your idea of a GIFT!"

"I..." His forehead wrinkled. "I thought you would like it."

"Like what?!" Maddie couldn't believe this was happening. She couldn't believe that he had stepped over her in such an important way. "You thought I would like you playing royal puppet master with my life? With my career?!"

"What?" Harry almost laughed because it was almost funny. Almost. "I don't know what you're..."

"I mean...even if you weren't going to stay out of it out of respect for me, I would think you would stay out of it because of the nature of your life!" She was so furious she could barely form complete sentences. "I mean honestly, Harry! What would your people think if they knew you were finding jobs for..."
"Finding jobs? My people?" His eyes were wide with confusion as he watched her pace his main floor. "Okay seriously, Maddie, what in the hell are you talking about?" His initial amusement at this craziness was dwindling, making way for frustration.

"The job interview. In London. That magically fell in my lap." She slapped the paper against his chest and walked away from him.

"Wait..." He caught the paper in his hand and looked to her. "You were offered a job in...."

"Oh pretend you don't know about it! Right after she offered me Bendal, she tossed that in my face." She threw her hands in the air. "She said it came from the top! She said it was falling in my lap...That's incredibly coincidental, don't you think?"

"Maddie why would you think I would ever do something like..."

"You told me you wanted me in London. You told me you wanted me close..."

"Yes!" His voice rose to match hers; tired of beating around the bush. "Yes! I want you here in London! But because you WANTED to be! Not because you had to be tricked or...God DAMN it Maddie!" He yelled in frustration. "I am not somebody you should have to be talked into! Being with me is hard enough when you want to be! If I have to talk you into it, it will never be worth it! Don't you get it?! Yes. I want you here. I told you that. But I want you to WANT to be here."

"This is my life, Harry! I have worked all of my life to be where I was in Bendal. Years of school and training and...do you have any idea the amount of responsibility and devotion that comes with something like this?!"

"You really think I don't understand the sense of duty and obligation?!" He hated how out of control he felt in the moment; hated that they were yelling over each other over something he didn't yet fully understand. "I get it. I really do. I understand it on a level that most people never even get a glimpse of but..."

"BUT?!"

"But yes, YES!" He was not afraid to admit it. "Yes. I want you here. I want you to stay in London with me. I don't care what kind of man that means that I am. I want you here! But I would never, in a million years go over your head and..."

"Then who in the hell did?!" Harry opened his mouth to protest; opened his mouth to tell her that he had no earthly idea who had done something like this, but she rushed ahead of him, too furious to argue. "You know what, I can't do this anymore." Turning on her heel, she headed for the stairs.

"Can't do what? Maddie!" He reached for her arm, but she jerked away from him, moving swiftly up the stairs. He followed her through the hallway to the room he had offered her the first night she arrived in London.

"Stop!" She turned on him. "I am really mad at you right now and I want to storm off but I can't because I'm in Kensington Palace! And I don't know where to go! Or how I would even get back if I did! So I'm going in here!" She pointed at the room that she had never slept in. "I...I need to be able to storm away from you right now and this is the only place I can go! I want to be alone, Harry! Please respect that!"

His hands moved up in surrender, his eyes growing incredibly sad. And Maddie, full of fire and anger and confusion, walked into the room; slamming the door behind her.
Stepping into the room, Maddie's anger began to slip as every other emotion bubbled to the surface. She looked around the room frantically. She felt suddenly claustrophobic, which was absurd since the room was massive. She moved to a window, seeking fresh air. Taking deep breaths, she tried to calm herself.

What in the hell had just happened? What was she doing? What was she thinking?

She needed help. She needed advice.

She needed her mother.

Without a thought or concern about the time difference, she pulled her phone from her pocket and dialed.

"Madeline? Are you okay?" Her mother was full of concern. Just as water released by a broken dam, Maddie let go. She gushed tears; flowed emotion. Through her sobs and deep breaths, she told her mother the entire story; meeting Harry at the Food Bank opening, the candy, the dancing, the greenhouse, the shooting, the recovery, the time in London, the time at Highgrove. She told her mom about her loyalty to Bendal, to the kids, to the community.

She told her that Bendal was what saved her when her dad died.

She told her that Harry was what saved her when Bendal was pulled out from underneath her.

And then she told her about the meeting; the meeting where everything she had believed to be true about Harry was tossed up in the air—how she felt betrayed and manipulated and controlled and how he had denied every bit of it when she had confronted him.

And when she was done, her mother allowed a minute for her to calm down, a minute for her to breathe before she told her the last thing Maddie ever expected to hear.

"Hold on," Maddie shook her head as she sat on the large, fluffy bed. "Mom, are you really telling me to...give up my life just to be close to some guy?"

"Oh Maddie, you're seeing it all wrong," her mother's voice was soft, caring; that of a wise sage bestowing advice on a young child. "Choosing to be closer to the person you love, who loves you...that's not giving up your life, that's living it." Maddie's heart thudded.

"But..." Her protest was already weakened; already dwindling. And her mother delivered the next hit.

"And since when is Harry just some guy?"

"So he's a Prince, big deal. I didn't think that sort of thing mattered to you."

"It doesn't," she laughed. "I don't care that he's a Prince. I care that he is good to you, that he is there for you, that he makes you happy. Does he do those things?"

"Yes, I..." Maddie moved her legs up onto the bed then, knocking against a gift wrapped box that had been waiting for her. And then, as her mother continued, Maddie curiously opened the box.

"Yes. He does. And when your life fell apart, after you were shot in Bendal, who was right there, the entire time? Slept by your bedside, called your mother three times a day, gave you space when you needed it, sheltered you from..." And though her mother was talking, Maddie could no longer hear her.
Because there, in that box was a gift.

From Harry.

Maddie pulled a piece of paper from the box and tried to read the words. Her eyes were teary as she tried to figure it out. It appeared to be a map and maybe a plane ticket and...

Oh God.

Maddie held the paper in her hand as she began to cry. This was what he had been talking about. Could it be possible that he really didn't know about the interview?

"Oh my God. Mom...I think I made a mistake."

"Yes I think you did."

"Mom!" Her heart ached in her chest.

"What do you want from me Madeline? I will always be honest with you. That's what family does..."

"Honest and loyal...." Maddie repeated; sure she was going to be sick. "I have to go mom. I'm sorry I called you so upset...I love you."

"You too dear. Be smart. Be brave."

Maddie couldn't disconnect the phone quick enough. Tossing it to the bed, she held tight to the paper from the box and hurried to the hallway; determined to find him.

She didn't have to look far. Defeated, Harry was sitting on the floor about halfway between his room and hers.

"It was Khenda," he spoke to her without looking up. "I made some phone calls and, the royal puppet master...was Khenda. ..." He pulled himself up to a standing position; avoiding her eyes. "She wanted you to have what you wanted and she stupidly thought that was me. She asked that you call her so she can explain...so..."

"Harry," Maddie's entire body ached as she looked to him. "In the box..." She held up the paper and his eyes focused on that.

"I found a place halfway between London and Bendal. There's a resort and..." His eyes teared up. "It's a map and an open ticket for you to meet me there. I figured that you would choose Bendal and I wasn't quite ready to give you up..." She had been so horrifically wrong. And this was the outcome; this look on his face, this coldness in his voice.

"I..." Maddie couldn't find words over the tears she was crying. But it didn't matter, because Harry was all but done.

"Let's not go round and round, Maddie. I do not want to fight with you. If you'll be happier in Bendal, then you should...you should be there." Maddie moved to go to him then, wanting to kiss away all of the hurt she saw in him. But he held up a hand, stopping her in her tracks. "I really want to be alone right now Maddie...I'm not mad. I am tired and confused and I just...I need some time to...deal with this. Please respect that." And then, his head hung low, Harry moved away from her into his room; closing his door quietly behind him.
Chapter 34

When Harry woke the next morning Maddie was gone. He had stalled in his room for less than an hour before he called Bernard, requesting breakfast be sent to her room. And, when he was informed that she wasn't there, he hated the surprise he felt; hated the way his stomach turned. At least her stuff was still there; he looked around his room, seeing her pajamas, a pair of shoes. She had to come back for her stuff. Right?

He was instantly filled with regret. He should have fought harder. He should have begged, pleaded; made her understand. Had he learned nothing at all over the last year? Had he learned nothing at all in this lifetime? Women like Maddie came along only once and when they did, they deserved a fight. And he had held onto his pride, tucked his tail, and left her standing in the hall.

He was mad; at himself, at the situation, at her. But at least she had stood and fought. She was pissed—mislead but pissed and she had stood and fought. Yet, when he was faced with his moment to be pissed, he had turned and left her in the hallway.

And now she was gone.

And he was tired.

He had a bit of coffee, half a piece of toast and then, needing to clear his mind, he pulled on his running shoes, called his detail and went out the front door; ready to pound the pavement. Ready to purge his mind of all that had occurred.

Three miles later, he had nothing to show for it but a lack of breath and a tired security officer. He was no further from thoughts of her than he had been before. He jumped in the shower, dressed and meandered downstairs. Pulling his cellphone out, he was debating his next move when the front door creaked open.

His head turned quickly, just in time to see Thomas walking through the door. And then, by some miracle he was sure he didn't deserve, Maddie followed him in. Harry was on his feet instantly; feeling shy and nervous. And when his eyes met hers, his heart cracked in his chest. Her eyes are puffy as though she'd been crying and what he really wanted to do was pull her into his arms and never let her go.

But he held his breath and waited. He knew better than to force her into anything at this point; even if it was his arms. Maddie waited until Thomas had stepped from the room before she spoke.

"I found my way out," she smiled slightly; her voice cracking.

"And back in," his smile matched hers; nervous and wavering. "Where were you?"

"Well..." She took a deep breath and met his eyes; holding them for a long beat before she exhaled slowly. "I had to get back to Marquita from DWB to give her my decision. She said time was of the essence so..."

"Oh..." Maddie could see Harry's face wash with disappointment and hurt. And she hurried along.

"And then...and then I went shopping."

"Sorry?" His eyebrows lifted lazily; as though his energy was completely drained.

"Well," she took one small, calculated step in his direction. "I didn't really bring anything with me
that would be suitable for an interview; a suit, an appropriate bag..."

"Interview..." Harry's heart jumped into his throat.

"And I need to get a haircut and..."

"Wait," Harry held up a hand. "You mean. You're..."

"Staying," her voice cracked as she nodded. She had found that after making the decision, her lungs felt less tight, her heart less strained—an enormous sense of relief had flooded her entire body. She felt free. "I scheduled an interview for Monday afternoon and if everything works out...which it should with the recommendation that Khenda sent up...I'm...I'm staying."

"But last night I thought..." He could feel the adrenaline racing through him as he took it in. "What changed your mind?"

"You..." She grew teary; her fingers fumbling with each other. "And my mother."

"How?" His eyes were dancing as he scanned her face. His mind was slowly allowing his heart to be happy about this news.

"Well, she told me to stay. And you, you told me to go..." Maddie wiped at her eyes and took a deep breath. "But essentially you were both saying the exact same thing."

"I don't understand."

"That you both love me enough to put my happiness, my needs, first." The tears in her eyes were not from sadness at turning down Bendal, they were from this realization that she now shared with him. "My mother knew that I would balk at giving up Bendal to be with you, but she also knew that you would make me happy. And you...you wanted me to stay..."

"Want you to stay." He cut in, wanting to be clear. "I want you to stay."

"Yet you told me to go...putting my happiness over what you wanted." She shrugged and wiped at the tears under her eyes. "Once that became clear...there was no doubt in my mind. So, first thing this morning, I called Marquita and I...I chose you over Bendal." Her lips twitched in a smile as she said it out loud.

"You chose me..." He wasn't sure he had ever heard those words before. And it almost brought him to his knees.

"I did," she nodded; her smile increasing slightly.

"Maddie..." Harry breathed; at a complete loss for words for just how impactful this moment was for him—just what it meant to hear those words from her mouth, to have her there in front of him choosing to stay.

"You know, if you don't kiss me soon, I'm going to just..."

Harry nodded and moved to her then. Though his movements were quick and purposeful, his lips urgent; he held her with soft hands, his fingers moved delicately to her face. Whispering over her skin, they embedded in her hair; tilting her face to his.

And then he was kissing her. And it was life altering—in all senses of the word. Twenty-four hours earlier he had been certain he would soon be kissing her good-bye, watching this woman drive away from him en route to Bendal. And he had spent that entire morning in the worst case of
And now she was in his arms; sighing into him, parting her lips under his—surrendering to him in a way that touched him on the deepest of levels. It was big and bold and brave. He knew what it meant to her, he knew how important it was. And if he could have found words in that moment, he would have promised her everything; his entire life.

But words always seemed to fail in moments like these. So he tightened his hold on her and refused to move his lips from hers—even when she tried to.

"I'm so sorry," she spoke into his mouth.

"For what?" His face twisted in confusion.

"For last night," she pulled back slightly; wanting to be sure he heard what she had to say. "I don't know why I automatically assumed that you..." Maddie swallowed. "She just said the same words we had used in conversation and I just jumped all over you and...I don't know what happened in my head but I am so, so sorry."

"It's okay," he shook his head, too blissful to be angry.

"No it's not." Her voice was strong as turned apologetic eyes up to him. "You've always been above reproach when it comes to being honest with me and I didn't even give you a chance to..." She took a deep breath. "You know, it's only fair for you to have a go at me. You want to yell, please...."

"I am not going to yell at you," he laughed lightly, his arms around her waist, pulling her close. "You had a moment of weakness in a long, stressful week. I get it." He kissed her forehead. "Just please, please, please...I need you to trust me."

"I do," she was quick with the reply. "It will never happen again. Ever." Harry's eyes scanned her face and then he smiled.

"Okay."

"Ever." And everything inside of her stood behind this promise to him. Now that the decision was made, now the felt the overwhelming sense of rightness that came with the decision—she couldn't imagine faltering when it came to him ever again.

"I believe you," he dipped his head; kissing her again. "You're really staying?" His smile stretched across his face as it all began to settle.

"I am," she let out a breath, her smile following his. "It's crazy really. I worried about this, stressed about it...spent so much time trying to figure it all out but when it came down to it..." She ran her hands up his arms. "It was the easiest thing in the world."

"I meant what I said last night, though. This isn't something you can be talked into. Convincing yourself won't work, you..."

"I want to be here." She interrupted. "I know I wavered. I know I blinked. But I'm done wavering. I'm done blinking. I...I signed my exit paperwork, Harry. I'm...wow..." she sighed at the emotions that came with what she was saying. "I'm moving to London."

"You're moving to London," he repeated; his eyes shining. "Tell me, is there anything, anything at all that you need from me? I can put you in touch with somebody who can help you find a place or I can call my father about Highgrove..."
"Actually," Maddie smiled as she stepped out of his arms. "I do have a favor to ask."

"Anything."

"Anything?" She laughed at his immediate response.

"Name it."

"You don't want to hear it first?"

"Nah," he shook his head with a chuckle. "I can make just about anything happen. I'm a royal puppet master, remember?" Her eyes flew to his suddenly. And he laughed.

"So that's how it's going to be?" Maddie smirked.

"For a while, yes," he shrugged.

"Okay then," Maddie shook her head; she deserved that. And God she loved him. "So, about this favor."

"Yes?"

"I need you to give me a week."

"Give you a week?" He was confused.

"Well," Maddie took a breath. "This morning I left something very important, something that was an enormous part of me so that I could stay here," he opened his mouth to say something, but Maddie hurried ahead of him. "And I'm glad I did. I am...thrilled that I made the right decision. And it was the right decision, Harry. It was time to leave. It was time to do something new, something different, something for me." Her voice tripped over the words. "And this," she waved her hand between them. "This is for me. But...and...it's also wrapped up in you. Because, let's face it, if it weren't for you, I don't know that I would be considering London. So...in order to keep this in perspective, to make this decision mine and not about..."

"Some guy?" He offered with a knowing smile.

"Exactly," she nodded with a smirk; leaning up to kiss him. "Also...I'm going to go stay with Ella."

"Wait," he pulled back. "Hold on."

"Harry..."
"You know you can stay here."

"I do know that. And I have really enjoyed being here with you. But, if we're going to settle in and give this a go, we need to give it a go. And me living here just isn't...it's lovely but it's not where we're at and moving too fast is a sure fire way to destroy this before it even gets going."

"Okay," he nodded. "But you can stay here while you find a place."

"Yes. Or I could stay with Ella. It will be great. I've already talked to her and she's beside herself. We're going to do girl things. We're going to spend the week shopping and looking for an apartment and...and we're going to do touristy things; Stonehenge, Big Ben, Buckingham Palace."

"You know I actually know somebody who could probably get you into Buckingham Palace."

"I know that," she laughed. "But I want to do it this way first. I want to be a newcomer to London who doesn't have the benefit of this boyfriend with amazing access. I want to do the touristy things, I want to figure out what part of the city speaks to me, I want to find a place that fits me, I want to blow this interview out of the water and then...at the end of the week, when, hopefully, everything settles, I want you to come to my new place with a bottle of ridiculously expensive wine and I want you to hear all about my week. I want you to make fun of my decorating sense and make love to me on the kitchen counter and sleep in my bed and be my boyfriend again."

"You know my security team is going to have to look the place over first," his heart warmed as she moved closer.

"I do know that," she grinned. "I'll be sure to hide my weapons."

"Okay," he sighed. "But a whole week?"

"Yes, a whole week." She held her ground. "A whole week that will make me feel like this is mine and not yours."

"Well, that is important."

"It is," she nodded. "Think you can handle that, your highness?"

"I think so. Though...I think you're going to miss me terribly."

"I know I'm going to miss you terribly."

"Just so you know," he smirked. "Also, you're probably going to want to toss this week time frame out and sneak in my window late at night..."

"Well it's a good thing I have Ella there to enforce the rules."

"She's actually always struck me as a rule breaker." His eyes danced; happy to have their banter back; happy to have them back. Maddie bit her lip for a moment, the levity a nice relief.

"I'm staying in London." Each time she said it, her whole body felt more alive and awake and full of excitement about what was to come.

"You're staying in London." And then, because there wasn't really anything else to add to that, Harry pulled her back to him; his lips hungry for hers. Not knowing when her week apart was to begin, he wanted to waste no more time with the back and forth.

She was staying in London. On her own accord, without pressure or interference, she had stood
up and chose to stay.

And victory had never, ever felt so satisfying.
Chapter 35

Sunday

And so the week apart began. Prying herself from Harry's arms proved more difficult than Maddie had anticipated, but she finally succeeded. Kissing him good-bye once, twice, and three times, she left him in a state of bliss and made her way to Ella's. Maddie knew herself well and, with the decision finally made, she could feel her sense of confidence and autonomy returning. She knew that, although she would prefer to spend the entire week in Harry's bed, it was best for her to get settle in her own space, in her own mind before she launched forward.

Harry watched as she moved away from him, away from Kensington Palace and, with a smile that hurt his cheeks, he pulled out his phone. There were a few phone calls that needed to be made. Harry called his dad and brother, who were genuinely thrilled for him—both commenting on how happy he had been this last year. He called Thomas who smiled warmly, having grown fond of the young woman, who would immediately let the appropriate people know. Bishop who couldn't stop grinning and would likely spread the news to the rest of their friends.

Harry wasn't the only one on the phone. Maddie called her mom and thanked her; for knowing her so well, for being available at all hours to knock some sense into her. She called Collins and Khenda who hooted and hollered and didn't need the apologies she offered. And then, as she stepped up to Ella's new place, she slipped her phone into her pocket. She had no idea at that time just how much time she would be spending on that phone; her one connection to Harry during her self-imposed week of solitude. And Harry had every intention of using it.

"I'm never going to make it Madeline."

"Ha!" He could almost hear her smirk over the phone. "It's been one night."

"One looong night."

"We've been apart for months at a time."

"Yes, but just yesterday you gave me the best news I've ever received in my entire life."

"A bit dramatic, no?"

"You couldn't have given me one night with you before you imposed this ridiculous..."

"Watch it."

"Ridiculously important...week apart?" She laughed at his save.

"I couldn't. I had a hair appointment this morning."

"What did you do to your hair?"

"I spent a year in Africa Harry. I needed a bit of a cut, a dash of color."

"What color?"

"You'll see," she teased.

"Why don't you stop over? I can see now."
"No way."

"How about I meet you and Ella for lunch?"

"We've had lunch."

"Tea, then."

"Harry..."

"Fine," he sighed dramatically. "What are you doing now?"

"Trying on clothes for Ella."

"What?"

"We're trying to decide what I should wear to the interview tomorrow."

"I could probably provide useful input."

"You're not coming over. You should let it go."

"Fine," he sighed. "And you're wrong..."

"Wrong? About what?"

"I'm not being dramatic. You staying in London—best news. By far."

"Harry..." Her voice grew soft.

"Hmm?"

"You're not coming over."

"Damn it!" They shared a laugh.

"Nice try though."

"Thanks. Listen, good luck tomorrow Maddie."

"Thank you. I hope they like me."

"I hope you like them."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow night?"

"Absolutely...I love you."

"And I you."

Monday Night:

Harry shrugged out of his suit coat and loosened his tie before he pulled his phone out; seeing that she had called when he had been busy networking. Dialing her number, he sat down to rid himself of his shoes.

"Buongiorno!" Maddie giggled into her phone.
"You just told me Good Morning in Italian," the corner of Harry's mouth lifted into a smirk. It only took one attempt at an Italian word for him to know she had been drinking.

"Oh!" She laughed.

"I was going to ask how the interview went, but I'm guessing well."

"Oui."

"You're switching languages you know."

"I know," she sighed. "I've been practicing a few. You see...now that I'm going to live in London, I have every intention of spending weekends traveling to the not so distant countries of Italy, France, Germany, Spain..."

"You're going to be busy."

"Si," Maddie giggled again.

"So the interview..."

"Oh God, Harry it went magnificently well," she was grinning. "I was smart, I was pithy and I think they absolutely loved me. Oh! The chair of the committee knew Khenda from Graduate school and couldn't speak more highly of her..."

"That's great!" He exclaimed; knowing Khenda had put in a good word for Maddie. "Did they tell you when they would let you know?"

"She said I would know one way or another by the end of the week."

"Fantastic. What do you say we celebrate?"

"Ella and I are two steps ahead of you...or two bottles ahead of you," she laughed again as Ella joined in on the laughter in the background.

"Ahh..." Harry groaned. "Let me come to you."

"Nein!" Her voice grew stern.

"Come to me," his grew low and gruff. "Maddie please...come see me."

"I can't," she shrugged.

"I want to celebrate with you..."

"On Saturday."

"Do you have any idea how many days are between now and Saturday?"

"Not really...but only because I'm not sure if it's still last night or early this morning you know. Ella!" Maddie yelled into the room. "Ella! Why don't you have a clock?" Harry listened to mumbled conversation before Maddie returned her attention to him. "Harry?"

"Yes love?"

"I adore you."
"Thank you. I adore you too."

"I mean it. I just...you're such a great guy; supportive and loving and..." Her voice lowered as she rambled. "And when you kiss me, something happens..."

"Come over, Madeline, let's make that something happen right now."

"Hmmm...I do like that thought."

"You would like the reality better, I promise."

"You promised you would give me a week and look, not even a day or two in and you're already trying to lure me there...."

"Lure?"

"Yes. Lure. But I can't come over there. You know that...." Maddie's voice trailed off as she collected herself. "Harry?"

"Yes?"

"I am so happy I chose London."

"Maddie?"

"Yes?"

"I am never going to tire of you saying that."

"Hmmm." She yawned into the phone. "You know what Ella's place doesn't have?"

"Me?"

"And...." Maddie laughed. "And my candy. It's sad Harry. You've spoiled me. I've become accustomed to a certain lifestyle and...."

"I have candy here with me now. I could bring it to you or you could come and get it."

"You're not going to stop with that are you?"

"Never," he shook his head. "Saturday?"

"Saturday."

"Okay. But only because I love you."

"Okay."

"Good night love."

"Good night."

Tuesday Afternoon:

"Hello?" Harry pulled his phone from his pocket as he stepped into the car on his way to a luncheon.
"I have great news," Maddie was beaming on the other end.

"Go."

"They called me back. I'm going to have an interview with the hospital board tomorrow morning."

"That's fantastic!" He let out a breath he had been holding. "I know people on that board. Do you want some tips?"

"No!" She exclaimed. "This is mine. Sink or swim, this is mine."

"Have it your way."

"God Harry..." She stopped walking and took a deep breath. "This could be it."

"Do you want it to be it?"

"Yes," she breathed. "More than anything."

"Then it will be."

"Where are you?"

"On my way to a luncheon."

"Sounds fun."

"In Wales."

"Really? For how long?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Spur of the moment?"

"Kate isn't feeling well, my brother called and asked me to join him."

"You're a great brother."

"Yes, well, what can I say?"

"You can wish me luck."

"Wished. You'll call me?"

"I will."

"You're smart, compassionate, quick on your feet and incredibly sexy. Knock 'em dead, Doctor."

"Well, thank you for that, your highness."

Wednesday Morning:

"Well?" Harry bit his lip, knowing she had gone into the interview an hour and a half earlier.

"I want you to know that I'm calling you before Ella or Khenda. Harry, I'm calling you before my mother."
"And I want you to know that I am standing at the door to a reception hall full of people waiting for my brother and I to walk through the door. Are you going to kill me with anticipation or are you going to..."

"I got it."

"You got it!" He called out, immediately lowering his voice. "You got it?"

"I did! They want me to start on Monday. I'll work three twelve hour days and have four off and the salary is fantastic and...Harry. I'm staying in London."

"It gets better and better every time you say it."

"I...wow. I'm going to go look for an apartment and...oh I wish you were in London. I want to see you."

"Ohhhh...." He groaned. "Why are you doing this to me?!"

"I'm sorry!" She laughed. "Now go. I'll talk to you later. You need to walk into that reception hall and do your job."

"Okay, okay," he sighed. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you."

"I'll call you tonight."

"Harry?"

"Yes."

"I love you."

"Hmmm...." He smiled. "And I you."

Wednesday Afternoon:

BEEP

"Hi Harry, it's Maddie. I am guessing you're still at the reception or...maybe on a plane or...I don't know. But I signed a lease; on a two bedroom, two bathroom flat in this beautiful area by... The security is fantastic and I...Wow. I wish you were here. I am just...I have a job. And a place to live and I would love to show it to you and...Saturday, right? My stupid rules," She laughed. "Okay. I'm going to go. Ella and I are getting dressed and going out. Have a wonderful night. Love you."

BEEP

Wednesday Night:

"Hello?!" Maddie's voice was loud, trying to call out over the music as she moved through the nightclub towards the deck out back.

"Maddie?"

"Hold on! I'm heading outside! I'm just...hold on!" Harry could hear music and talking and then suddenly she was back. "Please tell me you're still there."
"I'm still here," he laughed.

"Thank God!" She breathed. "Are you back?"

"Only just. Where are you?"

"Some club that Bishop brought us to."

"You're with Bishop?! How did you end up out with Bishop?"

"We wanted to go out dancing. We didn't know where to go. Ella called Bishop."

"Damn traitor."

"Me or Bishop?"

"Bishop! That man is my best friend and he's out with my girl and..."

"Your girl?" Maddie snickered. "Did we just time warp back to the fifties. Your girl?"

"Make fun all you want Madeline. Just tell me where you are."

"I don't know."

"Aw come on. Your message said you wanted to see me and..."

"I'm not being coy. I really don't know where we are. Bishop picked us up and we've kind of been under his influence all night."

"Bastard."

"Stop calling Bishop names," she laughed. "He's been great to us tonight."

"I bet he has."

"And he said my place is a perfect place for you to run away to; secure and..."

"Hold on," Harry shook his head. "Bishop has been to your place?"

"He picked us up there."

"Have you been drinking?"

"A lot, yes," she giggled. "And dancing. I've been drinking and dancing and Harry..."

"Yes?"

"I miss you. I know I said I needed a week... But I miss you terribly."

"I warned you."

"I know," she sighed. "I want you desperately."

"If you tell me where you are, I will come there now."

"I don't know, remember?"

"Put Bishop on the phone."
"I don't know where he is."

"What do you mean you don't know where he is? He left you there?"

"No!" Her laughter increased. "I was dancing with him when you called and I came outside to hear you and..."

"You're outside right now?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what you see."

"I don't know," she looked around. "I see...I see lots of people. I see...I can see the bar across the way. There are some...streetlights and I can see water from here but it's kind of hazy and...wow. I suck at this." At least she could laugh at herself.

"Oh-kay," Harry thought for a moment. "Can you go back inside?"

"Yes."

"Go to the bar, the one closest to the doors you just went out. Tell me what it looks like."

"You really know the bars in London well enough to know where I am based on a description of the bar?"

"Let's find out, shall we?"

"Are you really coming here?" She grew increasingly excited at the prospect of seeing him that night.

"Do you want me to come there? Be honest. I can take it."

"I..." She took a deep breath, tossing her stance out the window. "I really really do."

"You sure? Because I don't want you to regret this in the morning and..."

"Harry. Come to me. Please."

"You're going to kill me."

"Not on purpose, I promise."

"Please, go back inside and..."

"Going," she couldn't help the way her heart picked up as she moved back inside. Scanning the room quickly, she hurried towards the bar. "Okay. It looks like...it's tall and there's this half-door thing to the side and. You know what. What if I just ask somebody..."

"Can I buy you a drink?" A voice to her left cut in.

"I'm sorry, but I..." She turned towards the voice and about dropped her phone.

It was Harry.

"Oh my..."
"Your hair looks amazing." He was close to gawking as he took in the new cut, the few highlights.

"Thank you," she blushed, still speaking into the phone. "How did you know where to..."

"Bishop." Harry was smiling wide; looking sexier than she had even remembered.

"That damn traitor," Maddie grinned, letting her phone leave her ear.

"Yes," Harry agreed. "But also my best friend."

"You know, if Ella sees you, you're in trouble."

"Bishop is running interference for me. So, are you going to let me buy you a drink?"

"I don't need another drink. Harry..."

"Who's Harry?" He winked, stepping closer. "Harry was told to stay away from you for a week. I'm...Paul."

"Paul?"

"Yes. Come on. Dance with me." His hand stretched out to her.

"I don't know Paul. I have this boyfriend. He's incredibly powerful and protective and..."
Maddie's thoughts were lost as he stepped even closer. Then she sighed and smiled up at him blissfully. "I've missed you."

"You have no idea," Harry shook his head; taking her hand in his. Walking backwards towards the dance floor, he pulled them into the sea of people. It was dark and the music was fantastic. People were moving to the beat and so caught up in their own worlds that he went almost completely unnoticed.

Not that Maddie cared. She didn't. Notice, don't notice; she didn't care.

He stopped moving and pulled her closer; his hands moving around her waist as they began to sway. God, she thought, she had made the right decision. There was so much she wanted to tell him; the job, the apartment. But in that moment, his body dangerously close to hers, his eyes staring at her in that way, all she wanted to do was move closer. And closer still.

The music changed then; shifting to something a bit slower, more sultry; a teasing sort of a beat. His hands held her tight as he tilted his head slightly to talk in her ear; his warm breath tickling her skin.

"Come home with me." She felt a chill travel over her skin.

"I can't."

"You can. You've been there before. I've made love to you there. I want to do that again. Come home with me Maddie."

"You have no idea how tempting it is but..."

"Well, well, well," Ella's voice cut in as she and Bishop moved next to them.

"Ella!" Harry exclaimed, moving to kiss her cheek. "Don't be mad, love."
"I'm not mad," she shook her head, her eyes narrowing in on her best friend. "You know you could have just invited the man over."

"Yes, Madeline," Harry grinned. "You could have just invited the man over."

"Yes well," Maddie shrugged. "I like to do things the hard way. Which reminds me..." She turned to Bishop then. "You..."

"Now listen," he began his defense but was silenced as Maddie threw her arms around his neck in a hug.

"Thank you Bishop!" She giggled as he hugged her back.

"Thank you Bishop!" Harry laughed, tossing his arms around the both of them.

"Oh for the love of..." Ella shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Come on you three. We have less than an hour before they kick us out of here. Now. This isn't the warm nights in Bendal, but the music is great and I want to dance."

The group hug dissipated and they began to dance. Though Harry tried once more, Maddie could not be convinced. He was going home alone. And, though he liked to tease her, he was perfectly fine with that. He was fine with waiting a week. Hell, he would have waited longer had she asked.

Alerted to the presence of the paparazzi outside, Harry left first and he left alone; insisting that if she walked out the door with him now, she was not going to be able to shop alone the next day. Unfortunately he was right. So, as Bishop went out the back door with Maddie and Ella, Harry put on a smile and took the flashbulbs out the front door.

Seeing him had been brief but it had been exactly what she needed. That night she fell asleep with a wide smile on her face and, with a new job and a new place, this was becoming hers.

Thursday Afternoon:

"Tell me you don't regret seeing me last night."

"Seeing you?" Maddie smirked. "I spent last night dancing till the wee hours with a lovely man named Paul."

"Lucky guy."

"He was," she nodded. "And no, no regrets. I needed that. Besides, I'm back to my lockout today."

"Yes I know," he grumbled. "What is on the itinerary?"

"Well, this morning we went to the Changing of the Guard and we toured Buckingham Palace. Did you know that there is a chapel, a post office, and a pool inside?"

"I did," he laughed. "I've been swimming in that pool."

"I'm not sure my tourist mind can quite wrap around that fact just yet."

"Fair enough."

"We're getting ready to have lunch and then we're buying furniture."
"Furniture?"

"Yes. I'm not sure if you noticed, but I brought very little with me when I came to London. I need a bed and a couch and a desk...among other things."

"Sounds expensive."

"Not really. I have quite a bit of money set aside and we're finding some great stuff."

"Good to hear," Harry grinned. "Are you going to let me buy you a housewarming present?"

"Like what?"

"A couch, a tv..."

"Ha! No. Those are not housewarming presents."

"They are!"

"In what world is a television a housewarming gift?"

"It pains me to say what I'm about to say, but you remember who I am right? In my family housewarming presents are usually...like, I don't know; another house."

"Absolutely not."

"I have to get you something."

"I'll think about it."

"When are you moving in?"

"Tomorrow. Ella has the day off. We're going to get drunk and decorate the place."

"Charming."

"I'm sure it will be."

"Maddie. In all seriousness...I cannot wait to see you on Saturday."

"Hmmm..." Maddie sighed. "In all seriousness; neither can I."

Friday Evening:

Maddie and Ella had worked tirelessly throughout the day. The furniture had mostly been delivered that morning and they went right to it; adjusting placement, hanging pictures. Finally, Maddie had ordered takeout and opened a bottle of wine and the two friends were sitting down to enjoy dinner—at the couch in the living room as the dining table was still covered with kitchen items.

"Can I just say..." Maddie took a drink from her glass. "Moving couches, hammering nails; you are the best friend I have ever had."

"My dear," Ella sipped. "I would have to say the same for you."

"Cheers?" Maddie offered.

"I cannot believe I live in London."

"Well," Ella shrugged with a smug grin. "I live here, where else would you be?"

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "That is an excellent point. Seriously...thank you for all of your help Ella. I couldn't have done it without you."

"Of course you could have," Ella rolled her eyes.

"I don't just mean today, or this week even," Maddie's eyes grew watery as she smiled. "You were my best friend in Bendal. And I couldn't have made it through that year without you. And then when I was..." She took a breath, surprised that this was where she was headed. "Collins told me what you had to do that night and..."

"Shhh..." Ella held her hand up. She was smiling but her eyes were sad and full of tears. "I can't talk about that right now. I'm...I'm okay I just...every time I think about it all I see is you laying there in Harry's hands just covered in..." She looked away and wiped at her eyes. "I don't want to think about that tonight."

"I'm sorry," Maddie moved then; abandoning her dinner so she could move to Ella's side. Sitting next to her, she wrapped her arms around her. "I just wanted to say thank you for saving me. In Bendal and in London."

"You're welcome," Ella hugged her back.

"I love you Ella."

"I love you too Maddie." Ella sniffed as Maddie pressed kisses to the top of her head. "So..." Ella held tight to her friend's hand as they both leaned back against the couch. "You have a job, a place to live, and an amazing best friend..."

"Yes," Maddie grinned.

"Think you're ready to Prince Harry's girlfriend?" Maddie couldn't help the way her grin stretched wide as she thought of him.

"Yes," she sighed dreamily. "Think he still wants me to be?"

"Nah," Ella shook her head. "Did you see the way he looked at me Wednesday night? I think he's moved on."

As their laughter rang out into the room, the buzzer at her door called out. Confused, Maddie moved to press the button.

"Hello?"

"It's Bishop. Can I come up?"

"Sure," Maddie pressed the button and waited by the door, opening it before he could even knock. "Come on in."

"Thank you," he nodded. "Look at all this furniture and..." He spotted the wine and candles. A smirk spread across his lips. "Am I interrupting something?"

"You wish," Ella rolled her eyes.
"I do. I really do."

"What are you doing here?"

"Ella!" Maddie shook her head. "Sorry Bishop. Is there something we can do for you?"

"Actually," he turned a sweet smile to Maddie. "I come bearing gifts."

"You have Harry with you?" Her eyes perked up; hopeful.

"No," he laughed. "But I could make a call and he would be here in like a minute flat."

"No...I mean...that would be...but no. I see him tomorrow."

"Your loss."

"Oh I know," Maddie arched an eyebrow.

"Oh-kay," Bishop held out a small gift bag. "I was asked to bring this over; it being your first night in your new place and all."

"From Harry?" She took the bag from his hand and he nodded. Maddie peered into the bag and, because she had just been crying with Ella, tears jumped to her eyes. Slightly embarrassed, she pulled out a beautiful jar full to the lid with her favorite candy. "Would you just..."

"Candy?" Ella seemed confused.

"It's a long story," Maddie grinned happily. "One where Harry just..." She sighed and Bishop couldn't help but shake his head with a grin.

"I suppose this should probably be when I give you my speech."

"Your speech about what?" Maddie called to him as she placed the jar in her kitchen.

"About being good to Harry, how if you hurt him I'll hunt you down...that sort of thing."

"Oh please," Ella rolled her eyes.

"It's okay," Maddie winked at Ella and turned to Bishop. "Go ahead. I would love to hear your speech."

"Nah," he shook his head; leaning in to kiss her cheek. "I just...I've never seen him this happy and I would hate to see it fade."

"I would hate that too." She patted his arm.

"Okay. Well. Candy is delivered. I think I'll take off," he nodded to Maddie and turned to where Ella was sitting in the living room. "Ella love, you want to come home with me?"

"I'm staying with Maddie tonight," she declined. "Another time maybe?"

"Indeed," he grinned. "Ladies."

"Bishop," Maddie grinned, tossing a surprised glance at her best friend.

"Good night Bishop," Ella called out, waiting for the door to close and lock behind him before she
burst into laughter.

As Maddie settled back on the couch next to Ella, she returned to her dinner, to her wine, to her friend.

Only one more night before absolutely everything fell into place.

Friday Night:

"Hello?"

"Maddie."

"Harry, it's...it's midnight. What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, everything is fine. I just...it's Saturday and I thought maybe, maybe there was a chance you would come over and..."

"Oh Harry." Maddie chuckled sleepily. "I'm in bed. In my pajamas."

"Perfect. I'll come there."

"No," she shook her head. "I'll see you tonight."

"You want me there at six?"

"Yes. We're cooking dinner."

"Oh?"

"My father always said I could tell a great deal about a man by cooking a meal with him."

"And of course you're dating a man who would never really have to cook a meal if he didn't want to."

"Of course," she closed her eyes. "But I have faith in you."

"Sorry I woke you."

"S'okay..." Maddie yawned again.

"Go back to sleep. I'll see you soon."

"Hey Harry...thank you for the candy. You're just racking up the good boyfriend points these days."

"Well, I need to stockpile them for those moments you wish you were anywhere but standing next to me." Harry laughed lightly as Maddie opened her eyes and sat up in bed.

"I can't imagine a moment where I won't want to be standing next to you Harry."

"I was just joking, mostly..."

"Are you okay tonight?"

"Yes," he sighed. "I'm just missing you is all. It's been a long week and not seeing you has been hard and...Yes. I'm okay."
"Will you meet me at the gate?"

"Sorry?"

"To the Palace? I don't know how to get in there without you. Thomas helped me last weekend but I'm guessing he's asleep."

"Get in here?"

"I'm coming to you."

"But...You wanted to wait a week and..."

"I don't care. I...I'm on my way. I just need to find...shoes...damn it. Did I not pack shoes or a coat or..." Maddie sighed. "How do I get in?"

"You're not coming here, Maddie."

"I am. Right now."

"Stay put," he laughed. "I appreciate the gesture but it's not necessary."

"I'll never not want to stand next to you Harry."

"I believe you. You don't have to stand there right now."

"Are you saying I'm on my own at the gate? I'm scrappy, but the security there is pretty tight." He laughed and she joined in; sitting back on her bed. "I'm happy it's Saturday."

"Me too. I'll see you soon love. Get some sleep."

"I love you Harry of Wales."

"Hmmm...I love you Madeline of London."

Saturday Night:

The buzzer rang out into her place; her meticulously decorated and recently cleaned place. Maddie checked her hair in the hallway mirror as she moved to the door; smoothing her skirt. Ella had helped her finish up and had been gone for hours before Maddie had begun to prepare for Harry's visit. Taking a breath, she pressed the button.

"Hello?"

"It's me." Even his voice over the system made her sigh.

"Come on up," she released the door and waited; feeling slightly ridiculous at how nervous she was.

This was Harry; Harry who had seen her at her absolute worst, Harry who had anchored her to London. There was a soft knock on the door and, after checking the peep hole, she pulled it open.

"Hi..." She breathed. He looked amazing; casual and smiling wide.

"Do you mind if my friends take a look around?" He nodded to the two men beside him who Maddie recognized.
"Not at all," Maddie's eyes stayed locked with Harry's as she stepped aside; letting his protection team inspect her place; checking rooms, closing curtains.

"All good," they smiled. Satisfied with her place, they reminded Harry where they would be and stepped out of Maddie's apartment. "Good night Sir, Doctor."

"Good night," Maddie grinned.

"Good night," Harry called out, with no shame. "So, are you going to let me in or..."

"Get in here Wales." Maddie reached out for his hand and with one strong tug, she pulled him to her, pushed the door closed behind him and then him up against it.

"Wow, I..." Harry began, but she shushed him. With one hand, she pressed her fingers to his lips as her other moved to lock the doors' three locks and then type in the security code; effectively enabling the security alarm. When the light blinked green, Maddie turned to him and he could see her confidence, her strength, her wit...all things that he adored about her. All things this week apart had reinforced. And every single day way from her was worth it. "It's..." He cleared his throat. "It's Saturday."

"It is," she grinned; her hands snaking up around his neck as she leaned into him.

"You said something about a kitchen counter..." And before his smug grin could even form, Maddie had pulled his lips to hers.

It was Saturday. The week was over. She had spent the last seven days making this move to London about her.

And now, it was time to make it about him.
Saturday:

When Harry had arrived, Maddie had wasted no time at all. She had been wanting him all week; needing his hands on her body, his lips against hers. And it took Harry no time at all to catch up to where she was. Finally they were free of all that had been looming over them. Her arm was completely healed, there was no possibility that she would be leaving him for Africa any time soon, and she felt settled and free and home. And all of that was translating into this nearly embarrassing insatiable need to be with him—though Harry had zero issue rising to the challenge.

She had pushed him up against that door and he had dropped his overnight bag without a second thought. Moving from the door, to the kitchen, to the couch—they rid the other of their clothes along the way. And now, Harry was underneath her in a tangled mess of limbs and post-coital bliss as they both tried to catch their breath.

"Wow..." Maddie breathed against his bare shoulder as she slumped forward; letting her body rest on his chest.

"Yes," Harry chuckled, his hand traced a lazy line along her spine; tickling her as it went.
"Welcome to London."

"Ha!" She tossed her head back with laughter; moving so that she was sitting up. "That was some Welcome Committee. Does the Visitors' Center know about you?"

"No," he shook his head, his hands resting on her bare thighs that were straddled over him. "And don't tell them. I could get in a whole host of..." Harry laughed against her lips as she leaned down to kiss him again, a moan escaping her lips. "Maddie, love, I appreciate your spirit but I am going to need to rest for a moment before we..." She kissed him again; longer and with more passion. Both of Harry's hands moved to her hair as he responded in kind.

"Five minutes?" Maddie pulled back slightly.

"Sorry?" Harry smirked.

"You need to rest," her eyes were sultry as she looked him over. "Will five minutes do or do you need longer?"

"Ohhhhh..." His laughter rumbled in his chest. "I had no idea a week apart would ignite such a..."

"Fire?" She finished for him. "I didn't either. Though I have to admit, I thought you would be more up for the task." And with a wicked wink she lifted herself off of him and moved towards her bathroom.

"Oh come on Maddie!" He called after her. "I asked for five minutes! It's not like I..." He heard the bathroom door shut. "And now I'm just yelling like a maniac, to myself."
When he returned, he could hear Maddie moving around the kitchen. He pulled on his boxers and a t-shirt as he moved to join her. He saw her a moment before she saw him and he stopped to watch her as she moved. She was wearing his blue button down with the sleeves rolled up and her lacy panties underneath—as she pulled items out of the fridge and the cupboards.

Moving up behind her, Harry put his hands on her hips; pulling her back to him. His lips planted kisses on her neck as she moved to him.

"Mmmm..." She moaned, her hand reached back to twist in his hair. "Is five minutes up?"

"No...." Harry chuckled into her neck. "And I may very well need ten. What are you doing?" He reached out around her to take a cherry tomato from one of the bowls in her hand; plopping it into his mouth.

"We are going to cook dinner," she turned in his arms then; pressing a kiss to his cheek. "I think we're going to need refueling."

"I think maybe you're right," he couldn't help the smug grin on his face as he watched her move away from him; continuing her search through the kitchen. "Oh! I brought wine." Leaving her to what she was doing, he went back to the entryway where his bag sat, just as he had left it. Harry moved the bag into her room and returned to the kitchen with the wine in hand. "Would you like me to open this?"

"Yes please," she nodded; retrieving a cork screw and two glasses. "Do you know how or do you usually have people who do that for you?" Her eyes glinted with laughter. "I mean, you said you were the guy who would never have to cook for himself, so..."

"Wow," he shook his head as he maneuvered the cork screw expertly. "You sure are on tonight, aren't you?"

"I know," she grinned wide. "I think I'm finally starting to settle into myself."

"Fantastic," he pulled the cork and poured two glasses. "Look at that. All on my own."

"Nicely done," she took the glass he offered.

"Welcome to London," he raised his glass in a toast.

"Thank you," she clinked hers to his and took a sip. "Though I'm pretty sure you already did that." Harry shook his head with a smirk as he took a drink. "This is wonderful."

"I'm glad you like it," Harry took another drink.

"I do. Oh! I've decided what you can give me as a housewarming gift," she moved to him then, her hands resting on his chest as she smiled up at him sweetly.

"Oh? What's that?" His smile mirrored hers.

"This shirt. It's lovely; so soft and it smells just like you." She turned her nose to the collar and inhaled; her eyes closing.

"You want my shirt?"

"I do," she nodded and stepped away from him then; turning all the way around so he could get a
good look. "I think it looks fabulous on me."

"No arguments here," he shook his head. "If you really want the shirt..."

"Please."

"It's yours."

"Thank you," she leaned up on her toes to kiss him. "But you can feel free to try to take it back from me anytime you like." With a swift pat on his ass, she turned away from him then.

"You're killing me Madeline." Harry shook his head. "Absolutely killing me." His eyes turned then to the spread of food she had assembled on the counter. "Tell me, what exactly is it you're hoping to do in here tonight?"

She arched an eyebrow suggestively.

"Besides that," he laughed as Maddie cracked; her smile reaching her eyes.

"Well, I want to make a salad, some pasta with sauce and some garlic bread." She waved her fingers in the direction of the foods as she spoke. "It's relatively well-balanced, filling and pretty simple. Even you can't mess up pasta."

"Well now, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Harry warned. "What do you want me to do first?"

"First..." Maddie looked around. "First, I want you to wash and chop these veggies for the salad while I get the sauce going."

"Done." Setting his wine glass aside, Harry followed her orders and the cooking adventure began.

"Well," Maddie swallowed her last bit of pasta and looked across the table at him. "That wasn't half bad, Wales."

"Half bad?" He laughed. "I thought it was fantastic. Particularly that salad..."

"Enough about the expertly chopped radishes; it makes you sound like a crazy person."

"Fine, fine," he spread his hands up in defeat. "So...what did you learn?"

"Sorry?"

"You said that your father told you that you could learn a lot about a man by cooking a meal with him. So...other than my amazing skills with a chef's knife, what did you learn?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie smiled warmly; he had remembered. "I learned...I learned that you take orders well..."

"Of course you knew that already—having been ordering me around since the very beginning," he joked and she laughed.

"And you're a great listener; very attentive." Maddie pushed back from the table. "You pay great attention to detail, you want to make sure you get it right—even if it means you have to start over." Leaving her chair, she moved closer to him. "You are really great with a knife—and that shows agility and dexterity; control and determination."
"You were really paying attention, weren't you?" Harry's voice was low as she moved to stand next to his chair.

"Most importantly," she sighed as she pushed him slightly back in his chair, making room for herself in his lap; her knees on either side of him. "You wanted to please me."

"I do want to please you," his hands made their way around her waist; pulling her closer to him.

"Has it been five minutes yet?" She cocked her head to the side suggestively.

"God yes," Harry breathed moments before his lips crashed into hers.

Forgetting the food on the table, the dishes, the dessert she had prepared earlier that still remained in the fridge; Maddie held tight to Harry as he stood, taking her with him. She wrapped her legs around him and pressed her fingers into the flesh at his shoulders as he took the party to her bedroom—leaving everything else behind to be dealt with in the morning.

"Hello?" Maddie answered the phone as her eyes drifted to the clock. It was Sunday afternoon and they were still in bed, though Harry had risen at her request to bring back coffee and the dessert from the night before. They had eaten, made love, and fallen back asleep until now.

"I'm so sorry," Ella was on the other end. "I know you were with him last night and I wouldn't bother you if it weren't important..."

"It's fine," Maddie smiled as Harry lifted her hand and placed a kiss on her wrist; slowly moving up her arm. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong, it's just...." She took a breath. "I was looking at a royal blog late last night and..."

"A royal blog?" Maddie laughed. Harry's eyes glanced up at her from where his lips were stationed at the inside of her elbow. "What are you doing..."

"They have your picture." Ella interrupted. "Well a couple of pictures."

"They what?" Maddie sat up straight in bed, her arm pulling from Harry's fingers.

"Is he there with you?"

"Yes," Harry moved so he could take her hand back in his; his lips starting their journey over again.

"Don't freak out."

"I'm not," Maddie took a breath. "How bad is it?"

"It's not bad," Ella looked it over again. "It's night and it looks like it was raining. You can really only see the back of you but you can totally see him. Your hair looks terrible. Maddie, were you riding on the back of that motorcycle?"

"Tetbury," Maddie breathed; remembering their date.

"Tetbury?" That drew Harry's attention. His mouth left her skin as he sat up and focused

"The good news is, they don't know who you are. Right now you're just mystery blonde. Some
girl was visiting the area on holiday, saw Harry and then took some photos from quite a distance, posted them on twitter. She was interested in him, not you."

"What's the bad news?"

"The bad news..." Ella chuckled. "Well, it is incredibly clear that Harry is in love with you. The girl who posted it said that he seemed very in to you; attentive, doting. He has his hand on your ass in one and the way he is looking at you in this one..."

"Sorry, how is that bad news?" Maddie's hand rested in Harry's lap as he watched her closely.

"Because now..." Ella took a deep breath. "Now they are really going to want to know who you are."

"Oh..."

"There are some theories; some British actress, a college student...one poster even suggests he's back with Chelsy. But nobody's even close. You okay?"

"Of course," Maddie sighed; sitting back against her pillow, leaning closer to him. "It was bound to happen eventually."

"I suppose you're right. Sorry that I bothered you. I just thought...I thought you would want to know."

"Well, I appreciate the heads up."

"Great. Now I'm going to let you get back to...whatever it was you were doing before I called," Maddie could almost hear the smirk on Ella's face. "Tell Harry hello."

"Will do. Thank you Ella. Good-bye."

"Good bye dear." Maddie hung up the phone and turned to Harry.

"Ella says hello."

"Okay, are you going to tell me what that was about?" He raised his eyebrows.

"There's a picture; on the blogs."

"Of?"

"Us. In Tetbury." Maddie sighed and turned so that she was looking at him.

"Ah...I see." His jaw grew tight.

"It's night. You can see the motorcycle and you," her fingers ran down his arm. "And the back of me...Ella said my hair looks terrible and your hand is on my ass."

"Ha!" Harry laughed; his hands running over her legs. "Of course it is. Do they know who you are?"

"I am mystery blonde woman right now," Maddie chuckled at the idea. "The hypotheses include a British actress, a college student, and a reunion with Chelsy."

"Yeah," Harry breathed; running a hand through his hair. "They're never going to let that one go."
"So there you go."

"You okay?" His eye squinted as he watched her as though he were searching for something.

"What? Yes!" She scooted closer to him; pulling on his t-shirt to bring him in for a kiss. "A picture was bound to surface eventually. And, I would imagine it is going to get worse than mystery blonde with bad hair and your hand on my ass."

"Yes." Harry thought for a moment. "It's going to get a lot worse. You know, maybe we should talk about how you want to handle the press."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, there's an office at the palace that sifts through everything about us. Do you want me to ask them to pass the stuff about you onto you? Or would you rather not see it?"

"Wow...I don't know. I guess I haven't..." Maddie's mouth turned down in a frown. "Can I have some time to think about it?"

"Of course," Harry nodded. "Just let me know."

Though it would still be some time before the world discovered the identity of the mystery blonde, Harry was already gearing up, already preparing for what he knew was just around the bend. He watched as Maddie slipped from the bed, telling him something about needing to shower and make an effort to keep her hands off of him and he hoped that what was about to come towards her would be met with the same smile and shrug that she had met everything else so far.

"Harry?" Maddie's voice called to him as she peeked around the door.

"Yes love?" He raised his eyebrows.

"You coming with me?"

"I'm going to need a vacation to recover from this weekend," Harry grumbled playfully as he tossed the covers back and hurried to join her in the bathroom. At least she would accomplish one of her two goals.
Chapter 37

Maddie's first two weeks at her job went by in a flash. It was great; hard work, long hours, but it was great. The staff was friendly, the children were fantastic and she felt like she had in essence returned to some of the work she had left in Bendal.

As Maddie fell into a routine, she and Harry evened out. On the nights that Maddie was on, they wouldn't see each other. She was working three back to back twelve hour shifts and her down time was hers—a stance he smartly decided not to challenge. Harry was busy as well; working and sometimes traveling for official functions.

When he was home and she was off, they would see each other and they relished those moments together; both if they were at home cooking dinner together or jetting off to night clubs with Harry's friends and Ella—dancing into the morning. They had become quite the circle.

And when Harry was gone, Maddie would occupy herself with a variety of interests. She helped Ella repaint her bedroom, shop for some new artwork and choose between two of the men she was thinking of pursuing. And Maddie knew exactly who to go to when she needed help preparing for an upcoming date with Harry.

"What do you know about polo?" Were the first words out of Maddie's mouth as she slid into a booth across from her friend at lunch one afternoon.

"Lots. Why?" Ella's smile pulled at her cheeks as she leaned closer to her friend. "Are you going to a polo match?"

"Harry is playing in a charity event in two weeks and he wants me to go. I watched a video on youtube about the rules, but I thought you could fill me on the other stuff."

"Oh God! I am so...unf... Polo players are unbelievably sexy—with their legs wrapped around the horses and their arms buff from swinging that stick and..." Ella coughed and sipped her water. "Sorry. Is it inappropriate for me to talk of your boyfriend that way?"

"Do you remember when we first met Harry and you scoffed at me calling him Harry? And now...you're going on about his toned arms and his muscular thighs...You've come so far."

"I said nothing about the thighs," Ella pointed out. "And if you want me to stop..."

"Oh no, continue." Maddie laughed at her best friend. "But seriously, when you say lots, do you mean more than just how sexy the players are?"

"Yes."

"Great! Think you can help me out? I'm American. We don't do polo. At least not where I'm from and I think it would behoove me to have a better understanding of it than say...how sexy my boyfriend's arms are."

"But they really are," Ella sighed dreamily. "Sorry. Serious. Yes. I can teach you the basics about polo."

"For real this time?" Maddie's eyes narrowed at her friend. "Not like when you explained the
intricacies of rugby only so I would look like an absolute fool when I suggested that Harry..."

"For real this time," Ella laughed remembering that particular conversation. "Now. Let's start with the most important thing."

"You're going to tell me what to wear now, aren't you."

"I am going to tell you what to wear. Yes. See...you know me so well," the two women faded into laughter as the waitress came to their table to take their order.

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Ella had done her job as Maddie's friend and had, thankfully, prepared her quite well for her first Polo Match. When Harry picked her up that crisp Saturday morning, she felt ready to go.

"You look beautiful," he scanned her before leaning in to kiss her.

"Thank you," she smiled warmly. Reaching for her sweater and clutch, she followed Harry out to the waiting car. "Hold on. They let you drive?" She saw one protection officer in the back seat, the two front seats open.

"Excuse me?" He laughed, opening her door.

"They let you drive? I...wow. I really didn't think they let you drive around London." Maddie slid into the car and he shut the door behind her; rounding to the other side. "Good Morning Jim."

"Good Morning Doctor Forrester."

"You're never going to drop the formalities are you?"

"Afraid not ma'am," he shook his head with a smile as Harry stepped into the car.

"Maybe you tell me your last name so I can call you...Mr. Jim instead of just Jim." She watched as he shook his head. "Fine." She turned her attention to Harry. "They let you drive?"

"Not all the time," he shook his head and pulled into traffic. "Occasionally I get to drive; when we're going to be out of traffic and on country roads. Today, I get to drive."

"Fantastic," Maddie smiled and settled into her seat. "Any chance you can talk Jim into calling me Maddie?"

"Ha!" Harry laughed at the thought. The people who worked with him were incredibly professional. "I doubt it. But I'll see what I can do."

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Maddie grew more nervous as they pulled to a stop and stepped from the car. The day was warming and the sun was making a slight appearance. The grounds were beautiful; lush and green. And there were already a large amount of people there. Taking a deep breath, she took it all in. Tents full of well-dressed people sipping champagne and eating from passed trays. It was an immaculate scene she had never seen before. Harry pulled his bag from the trunk and took her hand; leading her over to a large tent.
Slipping inside, Harry made quick work of introducing her to the tent host and saying hello to a few people. William and Kate were there with their dog Lupo and a few friends. They were both happy to see them; welcoming Maddie to London and congratulating her on the new place. William ribbed Harry about the upcoming match and Harry muttered disparaging comments under his breath while Kate and Maddie laughed. It was incredibly clear that these two men were close to each other. For a moment Maddie was jealous; having never had that experience with a sibling—that bond that comes with knowing somebody your entire life.

"You okay?" Harry nudged her lightly as she looked out over the grounds.

"Yes," she breathed; pulling a smile. "Sorry. I'm fine. Just taking it all in." Maddie glanced towards the horse trailers. "You ride a thoroughbred?"

"Yes," the side of his mouth pulled up in a half smile. "You ride?"

"I had a Quarter Horse at home. She's old but she's beautiful. I've been riding since I was young."

"I would like to see that sometime."

"Maybe you will."

"Maybe," Harry's smirk shifted to a wide smile as he waved to the people approaching them. Maddie turned to see Kiki, Sean, and Bishop heading their way. Maddie's smile widened; she had just seen the three of them a few nights before when they were drunk and dancing at a rooftop bar. While Bishop remained a favorite, Kiki was lovely and incredibly kind to Maddie. She enjoyed spending time with her.

"Madeline!" Bishop was the first to bring her to him. "It's been ages!"

"Bishop, not long enough," Maddie rolled her eyes and kissed his cheeks before she turned to Kiki who embraced her. "I'm so glad to see people I know. Sean," he pulled her to him with a soft smile; quieter than usual. If Maddie had to guess, he was recovering from a hangover.

"Harry, can we take Maddie with us?" Kiki linked her arm through Maddie's with a warm, friendly smile. Harry raised his eyebrows at Maddie who nodded.

"I suppose," he eyed Bishop. "I have to go change and stretch and... This is her first match. You'll bring her back by the tent and introduce her and..."

"We'll take care of her," Bishop nodded with a wink to Maddie.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that," Maddie joked.

"I'm not sure I do either," Harry narrowed his eyes at Bishop before leaning in to Maddie. "Stick with Kiki, she's been coming to these since she before she could walk. Don't let Bishop get you drinks and...if you need anything...the tent host knows who you are; she'll help you out." He pressed a kiss to her lips; oblivious to all the onlookers. "I'll see you when this is over."

"Good luck," she smiled and watched as he walked away from them. "So, the last time I saw you, the two of you were debating who would make the better...sorcerer?" She waved a hand between Sean and Bishop. "Did you ever settle that?"

"Oh God," Kiki groaned.
"As a matter of fact..." Sean spoke up.

"We've decided to battle it out," Bishop finished.

"Battle it out?" Maddie smiled as they began to walk along the grass.

"We're going to have a Sorcerer-off."

"Sorry, what in the world is a..."

"Sorcerer-off?" Bishop finished. "Glad you asked."

"Oh God..." Kiki groaned louder as Maddie began to laugh. This was going to be an interesting day, no doubt.

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Kiki took Maddie under her wing; showing her around, introducing her to people Maddie was sure she was never going to remember. She pointed out the different players; the different guests. And, in a very loyal fashion, she stayed by her side. Maddie was incredibly grateful to her; thanking her more than once.

As the match was about to begin, Maddie had settled on a large blanket with Sean, Kiki, and Bishop who had just returned with a tray of drinks. They were just off to the side of the tent which still housed Kate and Lupo and her friends. Bishop sat down to the side of Maddie and nudged her.

"Here you are Doctor," he offered a glass of champagne.

"I don't know," she eyed him playfully. "Harry told me not to take drinks from you."


"Give me that," she glared, reaching for the glass. "Well played. You should have no problem out-sorcering Sean."

"Hey!" Sean mocked offense as he reached for a drink and pointed towards the field. "Ah! Here we go."

And when Maddie looked up, the riders were coming out on the field. Her eyes scanned the men looking for him and when she found him, her breath sucked into her lungs. Ella was right; those strong arms, the muscular thighs. "Oh holy hell..." Her hand flew to her mouth, embarrassed.

"What?" Bishop turned to her. "What was that?"

"Nothing. I just...Harry..." She shook her head and swallowed some champagne to calm herself. "I think he's the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

"Ew..." Bishop groaned as Kiki laughed.

"Sorry to offend your pretty little ears Bishop," Maddie nudged him with her foot. "But that man is...wow."
"Stop!" He swatted at her foot as the three of them laughed.

"With those boots and that whip..." Maddie's voice was low as she continued to torture him.

"Okay that's it," he stood up defiantly. "I'm going for more champagne. While I'm gone, you...control yourself!" And in a wave of laughter, Bishop turned towards the bar.


"Who's the sorcerer now?" Maddie raised her eyebrows and turned her attention to the field as the whistles blew and the playing began.

Bishop eventually returned, with more champagne and a running commentary that Maddie found not only amusing, but educational as well. She paid close attention to the action; watching as Harry scored a particularly difficult shot and rode the length of the field in great joy with his stick in the air. She clapped and laughed and made plans with Kiki for an upcoming lunch date with Ella and Penelope. And, as the game neared the five minute half-time, Bishop drained his glass, straightened his tie and turned to Maddie.

"Come with me?"

"Where?" She smiled nervously.

"To the tent," he nodded. "Peter's here with Autumn and the girls. Harry asked me to make sure you were introduced to the right people."

"Oh..." Maddie took a deep breath and smiled; Harry's cousin. "Sure." Bishop stood and held his hand out to her. She stood, smoothed down her skirt and nodded at him before they began over to the tent. She couldn't help but be impressed by the way Bishop went from slightly crazy party guy to the epitome of propriety and protocol in a second flat. Maybe it was something that came with growing up in this world. She wondered if she would ever develop that skill. "Hey Bishop?"

"Yes?" He leaned in slightly.

"Sorry, I'm new to all of this and I don't want to look foolish but, Harry's cousin, do I..." She rolled her eyes at the absurdity of the question.

"No," he answered with no judgment. "Peter doesn't hold a title. And, honestly, if he did I think he would prefer that you not. I think most of them are uncomfortable with it." He smiled to her then; friendly, encouraging. "You can relax Maddie. Peter and Autumn are amazing. They'll like you."

"Oh?"

"Absolutely," Bishop came to a stop and stepped aside; gesturing for her to step in first. "You're incredibly difficult not to like."

"Thank you," she smiled sweetly; appreciating the kind words from Harry's best friend. "You're difficult not to like too."
"Ha!" He laughed, leading her across the tent. "Don't get too carried away. We have another half to go and you're slacking on your champagne intake. We're never going to get you drunk enough to judge the Sorcerer-Off at this rate."

"Bishop!" Peter noticed the two of them heading in his direction and his face brightened. Already Maddie felt better.

"Peter! Good to see you," Bishop shook his hand; allowing him to pull him into a hug before he turned to Maddie. "Peter, this is Doctor Madeline Forrester."

"Maddie," she cut in apologetically as understanding washed over Peter's face with a wide grin.

"Yes, Maddie," Bishop winked at her. "And Maddie, this is Peter Phillips, Harry's cousin."

"Maddie," Peter repeated, reaching for her hand. "It's lovely to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you I was beginning to wonder if you weren't a figment of Harry's imagination."

"No, not quite," she smiled. "It's nice to meet you as well."

"You enjoying the match?"

"Oh yes," she nodded enthusiastically. "It's been a great day so far."

"Fantastic!" He smiled and glanced to where his wife was playing outside with their two children. "Do you have a minute? I would love to introduce you to the girls."

"Absolutely," Maddie smiled; feeling more and more at ease.

Bishop stayed off to the side, but close by as Maddie followed Peter outside the tent. Peter introduced her to Autumn, Savannah, and Isla and Maddie felt instantly in her element. Autumn was bubbly and funny; making Maddie feel relaxed.

And the girls. Maddie was drawn to the girls; giggling and clapping as they played in the grass and the adults talked. Savannah was enchanted by her necklace, which she promptly handed over to the young girl; watching as she eyed the sparkles that reflected from it. The Phillips' were so incredibly welcoming; asking Maddie about her time in Bendal, her work with children and, when Maddie wasn't watching—sending each other knowing looks. Harry was in deep, deep trouble with this one.

Bishop watched, making sure Maddie was fine; knowing Maddie was more than fine. And then he slipped away; returning to the blanket with the other two.

"You left her alone in there?" Kiki nodded towards the tent.

"Don't worry," Bishop shook his head. "She's got this."

The match was incredibly close and, as it neared the very end, everyone was drawn out of their tents. Peter with Savannah on his shoulders, Autumn with Isla in her arms. Even Lupo joined in on the excitement standing next to Kate and her friends. As Maddie stepped up to the line, she was joined by Bishop, Kiki and Sean.
"You left me," Maddie smiled at Bishop.

"In good hands," he smiled back. As the horses ran past them, their attention focused on the action.

She had to admit; watching a polo match had turned out to be more adrenaline producing than she had anticipated. And watching Harry ride in a polo match had done more to draw her to him than she would have ever imagined. Even after the match was over and he, along with his team, had been presented with the trophy, she still couldn't wait to have him back by her side.

So, when he finally made it over; sweaty and exhausted, it took all she had not to draw him into the tent and close the sides. A small round of applause made its way through the group as he and William stepped up to the tent where their friends and family now mingled—champagne flowing freely. Hugs and congratulations were passed around and then he moved to where she stood chatting with Autumn about when she first moved to London. Her eyes lit up as he approached.

"Ladies," he smiled, leaning to kiss Autumn's cheeks.

"Nicely done," she nodded towards the field.

"Thank you," he grinned and turned to Maddie. With something of a smirk on his face, he leaned down to kiss her; his hand at her cheek.

"Congratulations," Maddie blushed slightly as he pulled away.

"Enjoy your first match?" He raised his eyebrows accepting a bottle of water from a waiter. "Thank you."

"More than you know," she smiled as a wicked gleam caught in his eye.

"HARRY!!" The sound of Savannah's adorable voice reached them only seconds before she came running to him full speed; Peter right behind her with Isla in his arms. Harry bent to scoop her up; blowing kisses on her cheeks.

"My darling!" He cooed as she giggled. "Look at you! You've grown so tall and...look at this..." His eyes fell on the necklace he knew Maddie had been wearing. "Now, where did you find this? Was it in your dessert?"

"No!" The little girl giggled.

"Was it in a hole full of dirt?"

"No!"

"Well then wherever did you find it?"

"Maddie," Savannah explained, pointing to her before whispering to Harry. "She's very nice."

"Yes," Harry nodded meeting her eyes. "She is very nice."

"Okay love," Autumn stepped forward, pulling Savannah into her arms. "Let's leave Harry and very nice Maddie to their afternoon. We have naps to take."
"Boo!" Harry grumbled as the little girl left his arms. Autumn smacked his arm and took the necklace from Savannah.

"Tell Maddie thank you," she instructed her daughter as she returned Maddie's necklace.

"Thank you," she stretched her arms out to hug her. And Maddie, moved by the sentiment, hugged the little girl tight.

"You're very welcome precious." And then, with a round of hugs and nice-to-meet-you's, Peter and his family were off. Harry watched as they stepped away and then looked at Maddie with a wide smile. Lowering his voice, he stepped closer to her.

"You are so getting lucky tonight," he reached for her hand. Maddie laughed.

"I was just thinking the same thing about you." And then, as Bishop, Kiki and Sean moved to their side, she sighed. "But first. I have been invited to be a guest judge in the first ever Sorcerer-Off."

"Sorcerer-Off?" Harry chuckled. "You let Bishop bring you drinks didn't you? What did I tell you about that?" And then, with another kiss for Maddie, Harry slipped away to change before the five of them slipped off into the night.

The next morning, Maddie awoke next to Harry in his room. Amazingly, she had no headache left over from the night before. As she recalled the ridiculous way the night had unfolded, she couldn't help but laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" Harry grumbled from under his pillow next to her.

"Sean and the...Sorcerer-Off," as she said the words, her laughter increased. "I cannot believe he..."

"Oh believe it," Harry pulled the pillow from over his head and looked to her. "I have crazy friends."

"You have great friends," she sighed and leaned up on her side; resting her head in her palm as she looked at him. "I had a great time yesterday; from start to finish."

"I am happy to hear that," he leaned up to kiss her. "Did you ever decide on a winner?"

"No," she shook her head. "Penelope, Kiki and I decided that we needed to have a round two some other night."

"Give them another opportunity to make fools of themselves?"

"I mean, why stop now," she shrugged.

"Of course," he kissed her again. "Want me to call up for breakfast."

"Actually," Maddie smiled as she sat up all the way. "I need to be going."

"What? It's Sunday."
"Yes, well, I have a lunch meeting with a man named Gerald..."

"A man named Gerald?" Harry's eyebrow arched as he watched her leave his bed. "About what?"

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that; get your opinion on something," she moved to his side of the bed and sat down next to his legs. "Kelly at work gave me his number. I told her I was looking to volunteer some time and he works at Saint Joseph's in Veterans' Services..."

"You're going to volunteer in Veterans' Services at Saint Joe's?" Harry raised his eyebrows.

"I think so," she nodded. "I'm going to meet with Gerald today to talk about it. I only work three days and I am used to being much busier so...I thought I could spend two days running a group or two and seeing a small client load. I would work with soldiers who are having difficulties reintegrating, some PTSD issues and their families. I would have a small client load, but...I don't know. You once said that Bendal was like a war zone and I have all this experience in trauma work. I thought...why not."

"You..." Harry trailed off as he caught up with her; his emotions taking hold of him for a moment. "You're going to work with returning soldiers and their families."

"Yes," she watched him for a moment. "Is that...sorry. Is that okay with you? I know I'm an American and these are British soldiers, but I have this skill set and Gerald doesn't seem to think that will be a problem and..." And his lips were on hers.

"It's...it's more than okay with me." He kissed her again. "I think it's a wonderful thing for you to do."

"Good," she breathed.

"Though there is one small issue," Harry took a breath.

"What's that?"

"I'm going to have an even more difficult time letting you leave this bed." And with that, he pulled her down to him; his lips meeting hers as her laughter rang out.

In that moment a multitude of things were happening. Maddie was unknowingly stepping into a role that would follow her throughout the rest of her life; advocating for assistance for servicemen and women and their families. Harry was growing closer and closer to solidifying a decision he had subconsciously made long ago. And across the UK, people were opening up their computers, thumbing through their newspapers to read about the charity polo match and were getting a better glimpse of the mystery blonde woman who had enchanted the Prince.

The handful of photos of their date in Tetbury had eventually faded into the blogosphere and Maddie had all but forgotten them. But as readers and watchers scanned over the photos of the young blonde playing with the youngest generation of royalty, sitting on the sidelines with the inner circle and finally—receiving a kiss from 'The Spare', a whole new level of interest was beginning to bud.

Unbeknownst to them, their relationship was about to unfold to the nation, to the world and all either of them could do was hold on; to themselves, to each other, to the foundation they had worked to build before it all hit.
Chapter 38

Maddie would never have been able to guess just how crazy her life would become over the next six weeks. It was the strangest sort of dichotomy. As Maddie's professional life settled, her personal life was tossed up into the wind.

She began volunteering at Saint Joseph's co-leading one group of returning soldiers, one group for families of deployed men and women, and she began seeing new individuals as the need arose. This, along with her continued work with the children provided her with the mental and intellectual stimulation that kept her mind lively and engaged.

Her personal life was an entirely different story. Harry was drawing her further into his life; closer to his family. And as Harry introduced her to the family, the press was slowly discovering who she was and introducing her to the world.

After the pictures from the polo made their debut, it was easy to see that the mystery blonde was not the supposed British actress, nor was she the return of Chelsy. But so far, that was all they knew. She was back to mystery blonde. Though Maddie knew that with every outing, with every meeting, they were all growing closer and closer to a time when the mystery would lift.

Maddie met Harry's cousin Eugenie and her boyfriend Jack at a concert. Maddie was nervous initially but when the four of them met up at Harry's before heading out, her nerves were instantly tamed. Eugenie was warm and funny and incredibly sweet. And Jack, having been in Maddie's shoes offered jokes and hilarious tales of the family—putting Maddie at ease.

After the concert, they stole away for drinks in the corner of a dark and crowded pub as tales of a royal childhood tossed back and forth across the table. And after they finally parted ways well into the next morning, Harry confirmed his suspicions. Eugenie and Jack loved her...and he had a picture message on his phone of them both offering two thumbs up to prove it. Maddie allowed him to take a similar picture of her to send back to them. She loved them too.

Though photos never emerged of this night out, at least none with Maddie in them, there was a series of tweets that went out telling of Harry's whereabouts and that he was indeed out with the Mystery Blonde who was very clearly not just a flash in the pan for the young prince.

More pictures emerged shortly after Maddie's second polo match where she met Harry's cousin Zara and her hilarious husband Mike. Zara was quick to agree with her brother's read on Harry's feelings for the young American who held genuine interest in hearing about Zara's Olympic experiences all while matching Mike's quick witted jabs; punch for punch. That night, when she and Harry had drinks with the Tindalls, Maddie felt a part of the group, completely comfortable in this new environment.

As the press was focusing in on her, the photographs from that day were clearer, her face more detailed.

Ella called the next morning with the good news;
"Your hair has improved significantly since the first photos."

And the bad news;

"If Harry doesn't learn to keep his hand off your ass, people are going to start to talk."

It was on a return trip to Highgrove House that the press gained their greatest advantage in the search for the mystery woman. Taking an extended weekend, Maddie and Harry had packed up with Harry's crew and Ella in tow and left the city. The trip was amazing; late mornings, later nights. They ate amazing food, drank fantastic wine and enjoyed the relative freedom from onlookers at the local pub fare.

It was in one of those pubs, when Maddie was overheard ordering a drink at the bar, that the hunt for her identity reached a turning point. A tweet went out, then a blog post and before the end of the extended weekend, the world knew.

The Mystery Blonde was an American.

Harry had made it a point for the two of them to spend more time with William and Kate; going for dinner at their place on more than one occasion. William continued to kid with Maddie while Kate continued to warm to her; finally allowing herself to cut loose and open up a little. They even spent a night at their place in Wales; Kate offering up some private childhood photos she had inherited of the brothers. Harry had watched with warm pride while his sister-in-law bonded with his girlfriend; knowing that it was important that the two women at least get along.

There were lots of moments from that weekend that Maddie would take with her; the sweet way William spoke to Kate, the way the two brothers held an infinite amount of love and devotion to the other, and of course, the way the three of them made her feel a part of their tiny circle.

But Maddie would never forget the moment her mother called her, a week after her trip to Wales, speaking the words Maddie never thought she would hear,

"Madeline," her voice was a whisper. "You're in this week's edition of People."

"What?!" Maddie had stopped in her tracks; almost causing Ella to run into her as they were shopping.

"You are..." She could almost see her mother crouched low, watching for people that might overhear her—even though she was at home alone. "There is a picture of Kate Middleton walking her dog on the beach with...God, they are still calling you The Mystery Blonde...The headline says Who is this woman?" Her mother took a breath. "They know you're an American, but they haven't figured out your name."

"Does anyone there..." Maddie looked around before she spoke again. "Does anyone recognize me?"

"Not at all," her mother chuckled; knowing the family had already received strict instructions to remain quiet. "I saw it at the salon while I was getting a pedicure and nobody had a clue... You look great though Maddie; so much better than the last time I saw you."
"Well, the last time you saw me I had just been shot..."

"Which reminds me," her mother's voice returned to normal. "Tell Harry that if he doesn't watch where he puts his hands, I'm going to show him just how great of a shot I am."

"Will do mom," Maddie laughed at the image. "Will do."

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ It was right after Eugenie and Jack announced their engagement that Maddie had her first tiny freak out moment and finally insisted on some assistance understanding proper royal protocol and etiquette. Ella was fabulous and ready to lend her knowledge, but she wasn't an expert and Maddie had a suspicion that with an engagement party on the horizon, she would very soon be under the scrutiny of many, many people.

"What if I didn't know to curtsy to Anne?! " Maddie asked that night as they readied for bed. "What if I meet somebody and I'm not sure...You know it would help if I had a list of some kind."

"You do know that it's not something that anyone requires. It's not something that anyone expects. Even the Queen doesn't expect people to..."

"That's easy for you to say," Maddie cut him off. "Nobody is watching to see if you know proper Royal protocol. I can see the headlines know; Naïve Mystery American makes Royal Ass of herself."

"That's funny," he eyed her, not laughing at all. "You can't let the press decide how you're going to live your life..."

"And you don't get to tell me what I can care about. This is your family! Your career! This is...this is everything about you! And if I mess this up, it's about me not you. Now. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Sorry," he reached out for her hand. "Of course I'll help you. How about I set up a lunch with my Aunt Sophie? She would be a great person to talk to about protocol and the like. She's been in your shoes, she married into this non-sense." Maddie was too scattered at the moment to catch Harry's hint at his intentions—she was just grateful for the help.

"That would be wonderful," she sighed and climbed into his bed. "Now do I..."

"Yes," he rolled his eyes; pulling her to him. "Though she would prefer that you didn't, she would be somebody that you would curtsy to."

"Thank you," she nuzzled close to him then; relaxing considerably.

"Goodness," he chuckled. "I had no idea you were so passionate about this."

"I'm passionate about you."

"Aw..." His heart warmed.

"And if you don't fall in line, I'm going to start curtsying to you in public."
"You wouldn't."

"Try me." And he decided it was in his best interest to...not.

Lunch with Sophie was an unmitigated success. Maddie instantly likened to her. She was smart and funny and truly did understand what it was like to be walking along unnoticed one day and then the next day be all over the news. She hadn't grown up with the attention like Harry had so she could sympathize with Maddie. And she was more than happy to help. They talked about titles, curtsying, proper protocol and what it was like to be in the room with such a family. When the lunch was over, Maddie felt infinitely better about the watchful eyes that were only increasing.

"How was lunch?" Harry asked her that night over dinner.

"You know how all this time I've been calling you Your Highness?"

"Yes," his face twisted.

"I shouldn't have been doing that."

"That has been my point all..."

"I should have been calling you Your Royal Highness," she interrupted.

"I can see I'm going to regret introducing you to Sophie," though there was a hint of a smirk on his face with the knowledge that Sophie found Maddie incredibly endearing.

"Massively so, I would imagine." Maddie shrugged and kissed him. She felt so much better about walking under the watchful eye of the public. She could not control so many things about how this all unfolded, but she felt more in control of the way she conducted herself.

The press was curious, more than curious. There were pictures floating around blogs, on websites trying to discern her identity; but by and large they were from a great distance as the couple had managed to elude them for longer than Harry ever thought they would. As Maddie grew closer to Harry and his family, the paparazzi grew closer to discovery.

And then, one night, it all came crashing to a head.

It was two in the morning and they had been out all night with their regular group of friends celebrating Anna's new job. They had just finished their last of many rounds of drinks and the group was starting to disburse. As it was an off night for her, Maddie would be going home with Harry and she had already dropped her bag at his place. Seeing her yawn, Harry reached for her hand and gestured towards the door.

"Come on love, let's get you to a bed."

"Sounds like a line to me," Maddie joked, "but I'll take it." She followed him from their seats.

"We're right behind you," Kiki nudged Sean who obediently nodded and stood. They said their good-byes, wished Bishop luck with his self-appointed task of getting Anna home that night and headed towards the door. Harry was helping Maddie with her sweater when Kiki let out a gasp.
"Oh my God..." She pointed and the other three sets of eyes followed to where hers were already focused.

"What in the..." Maddie squinted; confused.

"The paparazzi," Sean groaned. Maddie could see the strain in Harry's jaw as he turned to look at her.

"Well, Doctor," he sighed in defeat. "I'm not sure you're going to be Mystery Blonde much longer. I think they've found us." Maddie's eyes grew wide as Harry turned to the Protection Officer who was with them. They spoke briefly before he got on a radio and called for another body man and the car.

"You mean they are here for..." Maddie trailed off, her finger pointing at her own chest. "Oh God."

"It'll be fine, I promise," Harry reached out to smooth her hair; tucking a strand behind her ear. "You going to be okay?"

"Yes?" She asked with a nervous laugh.

"Listen..." Sean stepped up. "Do you want us to..."

"No," Harry shook his head with a smile of gratitude. "I appreciate it, but you should go ahead and get out of here before it goes nuts."

"You sure?" Kiki looked from Harry to Maddie.

"Yeah, of course," Harry smiled as he leaned to hug her and then Sean.

"Good luck love," Sean leaned to kiss Maddie's cheeks and was followed by Kiki who did the same.

And then Maddie watched as they walked away.

"Harry?" She moved closer to him. People in the club were starting to notice the commotion outside and the cause for commotion and Maddie felt the urge to move closer to the protection he offered.

"Come with me," he took her hand and followed Jim, his PO, off to a corridor that would lead them outside; pressing closer to her as they were joined by the other member of the security team. With an apologetic smile to the two men, he turned his focus to her as he explained. "Okay Maddie, this is how this is going to go. Jim is going to head out first. Then I'll go so I take the brunt of the hit...with you right behind me. I will hold your hand the entire way. When you walk out the door, look first for the car, so you know where you're headed. The flashbulbs are going to be insane, so don't look directly at them or you'll be blind all night. Once we're in, Brad jumps in after you and the car takes off. Don't panic, hold onto me and we'll get you there. Okay?"

"Okay," she nodded slightly nervous.

"You ready to make a run for the back door yet?"

"No," she shook her head trying to remain calm and collected. "It will be fine, right?"
"It will be fine," he smiled reassuringly and leaned to kiss her.

"Ma'am," Jim cleared his throat. "I'm sorry but, your skirt..." He pointed down to where Maddie's skirt had bunched up, leaving her backside slightly exposed.

"Oh God!" Maddie quickly adjusted it with a nervous laugh. "Thank you Jim. Really..." She met his eyes. "Thank you very much."

"No problem ma'am." The car pulled up out front and Maddie took a deep breath.

"Ready?" Harry raised his eyebrows and held out his hand. With a nod, she placed her hand in his. Harry nodded to Jim who glanced at Brad and then, the door opened and Maddie's breath sucked in. The distance between the main corridor and the outside door was a small one and she could see the throngs of people and cameras that were waiting outside.

And then, as the door was pushed open, the cold air rushed in and the flashbulbs started. Just as he had told her she looked for the car and held tight to his hand.

And she stepped outside.

Never in her life would Maddie ever be able to explain just how surreal that moment was. Stepping out of the nightclub and into the sensory overload that awaited them. The clicks of the camera, the flashes of light; she was simultaneously amazed and confused at the plethora of photos that must have been taken in those ten feet from the door to the car.

Just as he had told her, she held onto his hand.

Just as he had told her, she looked straight ahead to the car.

And then, in a moment of surprise, she made one vital, amateur mistake. Just as Harry stepped into the car, just as she was about to follow she heard among the crowd somebody call out,

"Madeline!"

Without thinking, without blinking, without any thought to controlling her reflexes, Maddie turned towards the voice.

And as the flashes and clicks multiplied, the mystery was over. Somebody knew.

Just as quickly as she had been pulled off track, she snapped back on. She stepped into the car, slid right next to Harry. In a second Brad was next to her and they were in motion; leaving the photographers behind them. Taking a deep breath, Maddie blinked her eyes; her mind trying to process all that had just happened.

"You okay Maddie?" Harry's thumb stroked her hand in his. Maddie turned to look at him and laughed lightly.

"I can't see your face..." She blinked again.

"You're okay," he chuckled; pressing a kiss to her temple. "The flash will fade in a minute. Just hang on to me and you'll be fine."
"Okay," she sighed; leaning back against him. "Harry?"

"Hmmm?" His lips where pressed to her forehead.

"I think I made a mistake," she felt slightly shaky as she remembered.

"A mistake? If you're going to say you wanted to run for the back door, it's way too late for that." He joked but she wasn't laughing.

"Somebody said my name and I...I turned to look. Harry...they know who I am. I..." He could feel her hands tremble in his.

"Hey..." His voice was low, calm, reassuring. His hands clasped hers. "Look at me."

"I can't," she hated the way her voice teetered. "I just see this big white light."

"So they know who you are? Who cares? They were going to figure it out eventually. And clearly somebody did. All you did was confirm it. And that was going to happen sooner or later."

"Yeah?"

"Of course," he chuckled and pulled her to him. "Don't worry about it. Come on...don't worry about it." He kissed her lightly as she took a deep breath; calming. "Okay?"

"Okay..." She sighed and leaned back; slightly embarrassed at her moment of breakdown. "Okay."

Neither of them would ever know exactly how it was her name was discovered or who it was that discovered it but by the time they woke the next morning the whole world would know.

Prince Harry had fallen for the American born Doctor Madeline Forrester.
Chapter 39

Maddie had one day, twenty four hours, before it all came crashing down around her. The day after they discovered her name had been the calm before the storm. There were posts and articles but most of them contained merely the newly founded identifying info. The Mystery Blonde was a Psychologist from the United States by the name of Madeline Forrester. That was all they knew.

Over the next twenty-four hours they began to print more than what they knew; digging deep for a story, for a piece of gossip to attach to this no-longer mysterious blonde. And when the calm passed; the storm raged.

Maddie woke to blogs, tweets, even a newspaper article; all featuring her name and photo. Her mother had called; worried about her welfare. Managing to convince her mother that, despite the photos and the stories, she was doing just fine, Maddie pulled on her running clothes and shoes for the first time ever and headed outside; ready to sweat it out. And when she did, the now familiar click of the cameras from across the street sent her back inside. Closing the curtains, Maddie sank to her couch; her mind struggling to keep things in perspective. Her phone rang out and she answered it quickly.

"Ella..." She breathed; feeling the strangest of comforts knowing she was connected to her best friend.

"So," Ella took a breath. "They know."

"Apparently."

"You've been sleuthed."

"Yeah," Maddie sighed. "You want to come over and help me..."

"On my way."

"You're the best."

"Yeah, well..."

"I mean it."

"I know. I'll see you soon."

It took Ella less than twenty minutes before she was ringing Maddie to let her up.

"Wow. You didn't tell me I would need full hair and makeup for this meeting," Ella laughed as she stepped into Maddie's place. "You know there are cameras down the street."

"No! You're kidding!" Maddie's voice was dripping with sarcasm as she shut and locked her door.

"Okay, okay," Ella kicked off her shoes and sat on Maddie's couch. "What can I do for you?"

"Well..." Maddie came back into the room with two coffees. "I was wondering if you could be my filter."
"Your what now?"

"I can't read it all. I started and...it'll make me crazy. So I was thinking you could read it and pull out the important stuff; let me know how it looks."

"Okay..." Ella reached for the open laptop on the table and pulled it into her lap. She clicked and read; clicked and read, and clicked again before, five minutes later, she looked up to Maddie and sighed.

"Well?" Maddie bit her lip.

"You know I love you right?"

"Oh God."

"It's not that bad...." Ella was quick to comfort her. "It's not. It's just....well. They don't know much about you so they are running with what they know. Which is that you're an American and he's British Royalty. And the writers can't seem to get enough of all the possibilities that presents. You know the history of the US and the UK....and the headlines...it's just, you know the options are endless." Ella glanced at the computer. "For instance, here they are playing on the Declaration of Independence. Here, it's the Constitution...in order to form a more perfect union...that sort of thing. Oh!" Ella's lips pulled up in a smirk. "And one particularly trashy magazine makes an interesting yet smutty parallel to the Revolutionary War."

"A smutty parallel to the Revolutionary War? How do you even..."

"Something about 'The British are Coming' though...well, you know..." Ella snorted as she laughed at the line. Maddie glared. "Sorry. I can't help it. The British are...Harry's British. Okay, well you get the idea."

"Oh God," Maddie moaned as she sank into the chair opposite Ella and the couch.

"But, you know...the plus side is..."

"There's a plus side?" Maddie raised her eyebrows.

"Well, it's out now. You're not waiting for the other shoe to..." Ella's eyes caught another headline and went wide. "Oh..."

"Oh what?"

"Nothing," Ella shook her head.

"What?!" Maddie turned the computer towards her and read. "Wallis Simpson!? How can they...."

"She was an American, you're an American..."

"She was married and divorced. Twice! And that was in the Thirties! Haven't we moved on from this?!" "Yes well..." Ella's half-hearted explanation was interrupted by Maddie's phone ringing.
"It's Harry," she smiled despite her stress and answered it. "Hello."

"Hi. I finished up with my meeting and I wanted to check on you."

"I'm...I'm okay. Ella's here," she smiled at her friend who had gone back to scanning everything. "Have you seen the stuff they are printing?"

"No, but I'm going to guess you have."

"The Declaration of Independence, really? You have to really want it to be able to...."

"You're going to make yourself crazy if you keep reading."

"The train's already left the station if you know what I mean."

"Hey," Ella called from the couch as she read the Wallis Simpson article. "Ask Harry if he would abdicate the throne for you!"

"I am not asking him that." Maddie rolled her eyes at her friend before speaking to Harry. "What do I do?"

"You turn off the computer. You stop reading," Harry took a breath. "And you tell Ella that I can't abdicate a throne that isn't mine."

"Stop reading?" Her voice was quiet.

"Stop reading. They don't know you Maddie. They will never know you. They are searching and grasping and nothing you read is going to make any difference in your life or in mine. You stop reading."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It is."

"Harry..." Maddie glanced down at the newspaper on her table as her eyes teared up defiantly. "You know what, I'm coming over."

"You can't," she shook her head; wiping at her eyes frustratingly.

"Why not?"

"They're here. They are outside, across the street and down a block but they'll see you and..."

"And what?" He laughed. "They'll know that I'm seeing you? Know where you live? The cat is out of the bag with that one love."

"Wow...I guess you're right." She let her mind spin on that for a moment. "So this is it huh? Cameras wherever I go?"

"Makes you wish you were standing anywhere but next to me?"

"Makes me wish I was standing right next to you." Her love for him, her loyalty to him,
surmounting any of the anxiety this was bringing in to her life. Harry took a breath; steadying his heart before he continued.

"I'm on my way. Are you free for lunch?"

"I am," she smiled her first real smile that day. "Though I think I owe Ella more than that."

"I'll take you both out. We can't let them dictate how this is going to work Maddie. They are going to write what they want to write rather we stay inside or not. I say we go out."

"Okay," Maddie let out a deep breath. "You're on your way?"

"I am," he smiled. "Madeline?"

"Hmmm?"

"I love you."

"You had better," she cracked a laugh.

So they went out. Harry was right after all. They couldn't stay inside, they couldn't hide and they most certainly couldn't alter their entire lives. So they went out.

That day it was for lunch with Ella. And over the next week they would continue to emerge; hands clasped and heads held high. Maddie stood on the sidelines with Harry's family at a polo match in Beaufort. She went shopping with Anna and Penelope. They stayed out late dancing with Bishop and Ella. And the paparazzi continued to document, continued to write

Their friends and family rallied around them. Maddie would be forever thankful for the way his family reached out to her in those first few hectic days; Sophie, Eugenie, Kate. They had been there, they knew. Maddie took a deep breath and watched as her life, her history was pulled out for the world to see.

Her schooling. Her resume. Her family. It was strange, sickening at times, how much access the world now had to everything about her. But at least people were starting to get a better picture of who she was—not just a blonde American.

And then the most wonderful thing started to happen.

People started to stand up for them. While their close circle remained mum; the palace declined comment, Maddie's family remained blissfully silent despite the inquiries, others began to speak out. Harry's friends moved into action; circling around them when they were out—looking out for Maddie while maintaining the code of silence. Maddie watched in awe as these people—these people who were wild and crazy and could party with the best of them—rose to their feet and stood tall in protecting Harry and by association her. They were loyal, they loved him. And not one of them was going to stand for anyone disparaging something that had brought one of them so much happiness. So they stood, they defended; Harry and Maddie.

It wasn’t just their close friends, it was people who had met them along the way; people who had benefited from their strong characters and warm personalities; people who had no obligation to do so were offering up their support.

A mother of one of her clients was quoted by a newspaper columnist calling Maddie
"professional, compassionate" and credited her with saving her child in their darkest of moments. "The doctor has been a blessing in our lives and we are forever thankful that she chose to be here in London; for whatever reason that might be."

And Maddie watched as Harry grew emotional when one of the men from the Walking With The Wounded expedition went on camera to offer his support. "For many, many years my government has asked me to arm myself and stand next to the Americans at war; to be injured with them, to die with them. Prince Harry was asked to do the same and he did and...I don't know. Is it really too much to ask that he wants to stand next to an American and love her? I just don't see how that can be any worse than what we've been asked to do. If he's happy, who am I to decide who he's happy with? You know?"

This was far from the last time the media would come at Maddie and the young couple. But this was also far from the last time that people would rise to their defense. Maddie only hoped that if she simply followed the directions he had given her the night they found out—look at where you're going and hold onto me—they would make it through together and intact.
Chapter 40

As the media attention leveled out and Maddie adjusted to this new normal, her relationship with Harry was rising to the challenges that were placed before them. Though some of the articles and attention most certainly could have driven them apart, it had in fact had the opposite effect. They had grown closer. Not once had Maddie thought of walking away from him, from all of it. And everyone around Harry noticed how serious this was to him; how important—his family, his friends and, to some extent, the media. And the media was out in droves the night they attended what would be their first true public appearance together—though they would not prove to be the biggest issue for the couple that night.

Harry's friend Leo had been working tirelessly for a year in preparation to open a posh club that would cater to London's elite and Harry's circle of friends would be out in full force to show their support. So that night Harry and Maddie dressed up, hopped into the car they were sharing with Ella and Bishop—who were on again; at least for the night—and joined in the celebrations.

As the car rounded the corner, Maddie could see the paparazzi already lined up outside; waiting for the arrival of any one of the numerous famous people that would be attending.

"You look beautiful," Harry whispered in her ear as she looked over her dress; checking for any revelations she didn't want to make. The car pulled to a stop out front.

"Thank you," she smiled. "You know, I would kill for a mint candy right now."

"Well, you are in luck," he reached into his pocket and placed a piece of candy in her palm. "No killing required."

"Look at that," Maddie grinned as she took it from him. "You're the best."

"There's more in my pocket if you need them," he patted his suit coat pocket.

"Oh I'm sure it wouldn't make headlines if I were to stick my hand in your pocket," Maddie laughed as he stepped from the car; flashbulbs clicking away.

"Shall we find out?" He winked and held out his hand. Ignoring calls for her and Harry, they went straight for the doors with Bishop and Ella right behind them.

They were quickly whisked inside and handed drinks as the party began. The club was beautiful and everyone seemed to be having a massively good time. Maddie laughed and danced and had the most spectacular mixed drink she had ever been handed. And when, later into the night when Leo was finally able to briefly join the group of friends stationed around a table towards the back, she was quick to tell him that.

"This is really amazing, Leo," she kissed his cheek. "Well done."

"Thank you," he sighed with an appreciative smile. "I can't believe the turn out," he took a drink from Bishop and relaxed slightly. "Oh! Harry. I wanted to tell you, Wally is around here somewhere."

"Wally? No shit?" Harry smiled as he explained to Maddie; his hand at her waist, "Wally went to school with us at Eton. I've known him forever, though he's been gone for a bit."
"He's been in Spain doing...I don't really even know what he's been doing," Leo laughed and glanced back at the mass of people still partying. "But if I seem him again, I'll send him over."

"Great," Harry nodded.

"Okay friends, back to work," Leo nodded to Anna and Penelope who were sitting at the table with Bishop and Sean; he hugged Kiki and Ella who stood next to Maddie and patted Harry on the back before he slipped away; back into the wonderful atmosphere he had created.

Maddie was laughing with Ella and Kiki; gently poking fun at Bishop's new haircut when the group was joined by their longtime friend.

"Wally!" Harry called out; reaching his hand out to the dark haired man that approached them; drink in hand.

"Wales!" He pulled Harry close; slapping his back in; his drink sloshing in his hand.

"How have you been?" Harry watched him with humor as he slapped hands with Bishop and Sean; leaning to kiss Kiki's cheeks.

"I've been good. I've been..." His eyes passed over Maddie and Ella; his eyes hazy with drunkenness. "Well, well, well...what do we have here?" Ella raised her eyebrows and bit her tongue; already sensing she wasn't going to like this guy.

"Ah yes," Harry smiled wide, his hand running along Maddie's back. "Maddie, this is Wally. Wally, this is Maddie and her friend Ella."

"Good to meet you," Maddie smiled as Wally took a long sip from his glass.

"Yeah..." He sighed; the drink teetering in his hand as he stayed focused on Harry. "I heard tell that you had brought something back with you from Bendal..." He laughed into his glass. "But I have to admit, I was shocked to find out it was an American."

"Excuse me?" Maddie shifted uncomfortably at the way he was looking at her, the tone of his voice. Harry's hand moved to her shoulder and tightened.

"Oh I heard the cute story floating around," Wally finished his drink and placed it on the table in front of Bishop before he crossed his arms and looked to Maddie. "Didn't recognize Prince Harry of Wales? That's quite a tale Ms. Forrester."

"It's Doctor Forrester," Maddie unflinchingly met his gaze; holding her ground as he took a step towards her.

"Of course it is."

"Hey," Harry's eyes hardened as he moved between him and Maddie, not entirely sure what was happening.

"Wally, man, what are you doing?" Bishop rose to stand next to Maddie.

"Trying to figure out what exactly is going on here," Wally's posture adjusted as he stepped up to Harry.
"What is going on here?" Harry moved to match his stance.

"A middle class farmer from the United States, Harry..." The disdain in his voice made Maddie want to slap him.

"That is enough," Harry's face was red as his hand met Wally's chest.

"It would serve you well to watch that hand," Wally glanced down at his chest.

"And it would serve you well to..." As Harry took a step forward; Sean moved to his feet and, along with Bishop, moved to separate the two of them.

"Whoa..." Bishop's eyes were wide.

"Okay, here we go," Sean patted Harry on the back as he nudged him back a step.

"Harry," Maddie's hand rested on his arm; his muscles straining underneath.

"If you have something to say to me Wally, spit it out!"

"You know what," Anna spoke up as she noticed a few watchful eyes. "Maybe this isn't the time and place for this."

"I would be more than happy to take this somewhere else," Wally was smug as he shrugged Bishop's hands from his shoulders.

"Yes. Why don't we," Harry's jaw was taut; his shoulders squared.

"Come on," Penelope stepped up, reaching for Wally's arm. "You don't want to do this here, not like this. Why don't you let me get you to a cab."

"Ah, I see how things are. You're all on board with this?" His eyes traveled around the group; the group who stood ready to intervene, not one of them sympathizing with his rant. "You're just going to let him..."

"Let him?" Harry took a step in his direction but Maddie held tight to his hand; wanting to avoid an altercation at all costs.

"Here," Bishop moved to help Penelope. "Come on man. This wouldn't end well for you. You're drunk and it's late...let's get you into a car."

Wally grumbled something incoherent as Penelope and Bishop maneuvered him away. And just as quickly as it had started, it had ended. As the group settled back into their seats, Harry turned to Maddie; his eyes searching hers.

"Hey..." His fingers ran along her face; smoothing her hair back. "You okay?"

"What? Of course," she managed a smile as her mind processed what had just transpired. She squeezed his hand. "I'm just going to...sorry...I just need a minute and..." She shook her head. "I'm going to go to the restroom. I'll be right back."

"Maddie," Ella moved to her.
"I'm fine," she smiled to her friend; purposefully avoiding her eyes. "I just need a minute. Okay?" She leaned to kiss Ella's cheek and then Harry's lips. "I'll be right back."

"Okay," he nodded and released her hand; taking a breath as she walked away from him and through the crowd. Meeting Ella's eyes, Harry took another breath and shook his head; his adrenaline still flowing through his veins.

"She'll be okay," Ella nudged him with her elbow. "She's taken on bigger assholes than that guy."

"Ha..." Harry's laugh had a bitter clip. "That doesn't make me feel any better."

Maddie hurried down the long hallway towards the relatively private confines of the bathroom. Passing through the lounge area to the stalls, she stepped inside and locked the door behind her; her breath coming out of her lungs in a long, staggered sigh.

Back in the club Ella ordered Harry another drink; forcing it into his hand while neither of their eyes left the hall through which Maddie had just disappeared.

And out on the street, Penelope and Bishop were pushing Wally into a cab while he put up little objection.

"You should watch her Bishop," Wally patted Bishop's arm as he slumped into the backseat of the cab.

"And you should watch yourself Wally," Bishop leaned close; slapping his cheek lightly. "Someday, you're going to be bowing to that woman." Bishop paid the driver, gave him an address and then, with a knowing look from Penelope, he escorted her back inside. He had known Harry almost his entire life and having watched the two of them together, he knew without a doubt, Maddie wasn't somebody who was going to fade into Harry's history—as long as Harry had something to say about it.

..............................................................

Taking a deep breath, Maddie composed herself before she stepped out of the stall. She wasn't upset, she was angry. She was confused. She was taken off guard by Harry's friend. And now she was trying to let it all go. Stepping out of the stall, she moved into the small lounge area, washing her hands and checking the mirror quickly before turning to leave and then she saw her walk in the door.

Chelsy Davy.

"Wow..." Maddie let out a breath. This night just kept coming at her.

"Hi," Chelsy smiled sweetly; a slight hesitation as she waved her hand. "This is odd, right?" She was breaking the ice; putting it out in the open.

"Meeting you in the bathroom? Yes," Maddie chuckled. "Though right on par with my evening."

"Sorry, I shouldn't assume..." Chelsy moved, stretching her hand out. "I'm Chelsy Davy."

"Yes," Maddie smiled. "I'm..."

"Doctor Forrester," Chelsy nodded; shaking her hand.
"Maddie, please." She let out a breath. "It's good to meet you. I've heard wonderful things about you."

"As I have about you," Chelsy smiled. "I've been looking forward to meeting you. Though I would imagine this is one of the very few times we will be see each other."

"What makes you say that?"

"The comparisons, the media..." Chelsy rolled her eyes. "Harry loves you. He'll do all he can not to fuel that particular fire."

"Ah yes," Maddie nodded. She was right—she could only imagine the headlines.

"Listen, I may be overstepping my bounds, but..." Chelsy moved closer to Maddie. "Can I give you some advice?"

"About Harry?"

"No, not about Harry," she laughed. "You don't need advice on Harry. About...everything else."

"Sure."

"Don't let it get to you. I know, I know...easy thing to do right?" They shared a laugh. "But really. You seem to be doing so well, you seem to be handling it fantastically well. Just...rely on those who were closest to you before it all hit and stay true to yourself. It's clear that he adores you—and it's clear that you have your head on straight. So just...don't let it get to you and you'll be fine."

"Thank you," Maddie smiled grateful for the words of encouragement. "I mean it. That's very sweet of you to say, thank you."

"You're welcome," Chelsy smiled and took a step towards the door. "Oh. And don't pay any attention to what Wally said. He's an ass who has always been jealous of Harry. He just...he wants what he sees in Harry's eyes and...and nobody pays attention to him anyway."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "Good to know. Thank you."

"Of course. It was good to meet you Maddie. You look great standing next to him. And he looks...happy."

It was funny to Maddie that these words were the first that night to bring tears to her eyes. With a nod and smile, Chelsy slipped from the bathroom. Meeting her reflection in the mirror for a moment of composure, Maddie took a breath and returned to the party.

"Hey," she nudged Ella who turned worried eyes to her. "I'm fine. I promise," with a genuine smile, Maddie looked around. "Where's Harry?"

"He needed some air," Ella pointed towards the deck out back. "And I'm guessing he could probably use a little reassurance that you haven't gone around the bend."

"Well, let's not get carried away," Maddie winked. Patting Bishop's shoulder as she passed, she made her way to where Harry was leaning against the railing; looking out over the city.
"Your royal highness," she smirked as she nudged him with her hip.

"Doctor," he chuckled; moving to wrap his arm over her shoulders.

"I think I'm going to reach into your pocket for some candy now," she pressed a kiss to his jawline.

"Knock yourself out," he hugged her shoulders tightly; pressing a kiss to the side of her head.

"Hmmm..." Maddie smiled as she unwrapped a piece and took a bite. "You okay?"

"Yeah..." He sighed. "Listen, Maddie, I'm so sorry."

"For?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"For all of it. For Wally acting like a prick, for the press outside your place, for the fact that you can't leave the curtains in your front windows open for any long amount of time."

"You don't need to apologize for any of that."

"It's a lot."

"It's not a lot."

"Well, it's not a little."

"No...it's not that either."

A moment of silence settled over them as they looked out across the night sky. Maddie's voice was low as she spoke first,

"You know...I expected to hear all of those things..."

"Hey..." He shook his head.

"No really. I did. I knew all along that eventually somebody would have issue with me being an American, with the unlikely story that I really didn't recognize you, that I'm the daughter of a middle class farmer..."

"Maddie..." He interrupted her; his heart hurting at the words she was repeating.

"I just didn't expect it to come from one of your friends. That's all. It threw me for a moment."

"He's not my friend Maddie."

"Don't say that. He's just looking out for you."

"No, he's not. He's...I don't know what he is. But any friend of mine would know that this is the happiest I've been in...forever. They would know that and they wouldn't care if you were an American, if you were middle class. Hell, they really wouldn't even care if you DID recognize me. Because who cares? That's what a friend would say. Not what he said to you." Maddie nodded and swallowed the lump in her throat.
"Do other people feel that way? Your family or..."

"No," he cut her off; turning to face her. "Look at me. I'm telling the truth. Nobody feels that way." Her eyes met his and she believed him; honest even if it hurt. She nodded and sighed; a bubble of a laugh escaping her lips.

"What does it say about me that it was easier to walk into a community surrounded by violent militants than to walk into a party filled with the aristocratic elite?"

"Nothing," he laughed. "It says nothing. Except that maybe you're even better suited for me than I had previously thought. Which I suppose is saying a lot."

"It gets easier?"

"It does." He kissed her forehead. "And in the meantime, you can take all of your frustrations out on me."

"Oh?" She grinned; stepping into his welcoming embrace. "What did you have in mind?"

"Nothing I can say with out loud in public," he laughed moments before his lips met hers; soft and firm. Sighing, Maddie leaned into him; letting him kiss her there on the deck—despite the fact that there could very well be cameras capturing every second of their private moment. The cameras, the Wallys; Maddie wasn't going to let any of it come between her and Harry and this. This feeling that he sent through her; from her hair to her toes.
Chapter 41

The night of Eugenie and Jack's engagement party was full of significant moments for Maddie and Harry; from start to finish. The event was black tie which, after seeing Harry in his tux, Maddie was infinitely thankful for. And when Harry saw her dressed and done up, he honestly debated the ramifications of missing his cousin's party. With promises of revisiting the images in his head, Maddie convinced him it was in both of their best interests to remain clothed and attend the party.

It was also a private event which meant two things. First, once they were inside the private estate, there would be no press, no cameras. Second, it meant that Harry's entire family would be in attendance. Having met most of them, Maddie felt considerably more at ease than she had before. And when Harry told her that after the "adults" left many of their friends would be joining the all night extravaganza, Maddie relaxed even further.

Even though it was a private party at a private residence, the press was still lined up outside; ready to snap pictures of the royal family as they made the short walk from the car through the arched gate that was the entry to the party. As per usual, when Harry stepped from their car and took her hand, pulling it through his arm, the cameras went crazy. But Maddie didn't care. It was a night of celebration and they weren't going to be able to chase the smile from her face. So she held tight to Harry and watched where she was headed and the glaring white light in her vision only lasted for a brief moment. It wasn't until the next day when Ella saw the pictures that Maddie would learn of the significance of Harry arriving at such a high profile family event with Maddie already on his arm; the level of seriousness it implied.

Once inside, Maddie was in awe. It was amazing. The home was grand, immaculate; with a large pool out back and a deck built with entertaining the masses in mind. The gardens were well manicured and expansive. They had set up a large tent complete with floors, lighting and overhead fans to help with the heat. And inside the tent was no less than impressive. Maddie was certain she had never been to a party that was quite this caliber. She glanced at the house, the mansion, and wondered which of the multitude of rooms she would be staying in and if they had put her and Harry in separate rooms for the night. Though Maddie had initially been unsure about staying, after Eugenie insisted that all of their friends were staying, she gave in. This amazing property would be their playground for the next twenty four hours.

As they walked along the candlelight path to the tent, champagne was handed to them by well-dressed waiters and waitresses. Harry held tight to her hand as he passed her one before taking one for himself.

"To Eugenie," he held his glass to hers.

"To Jack," Maddie countered; clinking her glass to his before drinking.

"Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?"

"You did," Maddie nodded as they continued on. "Right about the time you were trying to convince me to lose the dress."

"Well, it wasn't because I didn't like the dress."

"Fair enough," Maddie laughed.
"Think it would be entirely inappropriate for me to pull you off the path for a quick..."

"Entirely, yes," she nodded and then, tugging him to her lips, she gave into impropriety for a moment.

"That's lovely," Harry sighed when she stepped away from him. He reached out to wipe at a bit of smudged lipstick with his thumb.

"Thank you," she turned her head so she could kiss his hand before it left her face to pick her hand back up.

As they neared the tent, they could hear the band playing lively, fun music and the atmosphere was complete. It was going to be a glorious night full of family and fun and wild celebrations that Maddie had only heard tale of. And now there she was, right in the middle of it all.

When they stepped into the tent, they were instantly greeted by family members. Autumn and Peter were already there, without the girls for the weekend, Kate and William were seated with Harry's father and Camilla. Stopping to greet them first, Kate hugged her close and complimented her on her dress and Charles asked her if she had seen the gardens on the way to the tent.

As Harry guided Maddie to where they would be seated with Autumn and Peter and Zara and Mike, he lowered his voice and told her,

"One of the benefits of being with me instead of William is that you are never sat at the big kids table...it's always the party table with me."

"I'm sure that's not the only benefit," Maddie winked at him and smiled wide as they approached their table. Their four tablemates were already there—drinks flowing. They rose to hug Maddie and Harry and were quick to pass more champagne to the two of them. And the pre-party began. Beatrice and her boyfriend Dave made a beeline for the table; having been dying to meet Maddie. As they fussed and fawned over this new side of Harry, Beatrice pulled her parents over to the table, pointing out Harry's new girlfriend. Maddie smiled and dazzled and sat down in quite a haze. No matter how comfortable she had grown with Harry, meeting a new member of his family always caused her to pause, breathe and take it all in.

Maddie knew the instant Harry's grandparents entered; the room hushed and rose to their feet. Yes, it was mostly family but she was still the Queen and there wasn't a person in the room who thought twice about standing. As she and Prince Phillip joined Charles and Camilla and William and Kate, the room eased up and the party began.

Feeling bold, Mike had ordered a round of shots and though Maddie initially protested, Harry threw out a dare and she gave in; hating that she did.

"All in good fun," she muttered as she took the shot. As she followed the shot up with some water, she missed the look between Harry and Peter just before Harry turned to her and leaned close.

"I have something very important to ask you."

"After you gave me a shot of tequila?" Maddie raised her eyebrows. "I can't wait." The smirk on his face faltered as he took a breath.

"How do you feel about meeting my grandmother tonight?" Maddie's eyes grew wide; her face
flushing.

"When you say grandmother, you really mean..."

"The Queen, yes."

"But I just took a shot!" She waved at the empty glass as evidence.

"You wouldn't be the first person in the world to do that," he laughed.

"Harry!"

"It's okay," he held his hands up. "If you're not ready, it's fine. Don't worry. I'm going to go with Autumn and Peter to say hello and then I'll be back."

"Are you sure?" She watched as he rose to his feet and gestured to Peter and Autumn.

"Of course," he bent to kiss her. "Hang out with Mike for a few minutes and I'll be back." Maddie nodded and watched as he moved away from her before she turned back to Mike and Zara who were watching her with matching grins.

"You know you're going to have to meet her sometime," Mike nudged her lightly.

"You think so?" Maddie bit her lip.

"Ha! Yes, I think so," he laughed at her. And before she had time to mount a defense, Harry was back at her side.

"That was quick. How did it go?" She smiled up at him; glancing to Autumn and Peter who followed right behind him.

"Great," Harry clapped his hands together and handed her a glass of champagne he had acquired on his way back. "Here, try this."

"Thank you," she took a sip. "This is really marvelous."

"It is," he nodded and took a deep breath. "Okay, listen, what I'm about to say is going to freak you out a bit, but..." He held out his hand. "She wants to meet you."

"Who wants to...NO..." Her eyes went wide as Mike laughed out loud. "I think I'm going to vomit."

"You're going to be fine," Harry shook his head with a grin. "It will be quick and easy. Andrew is going to be making a toast soon anyway."

"Here, take this," Peter offered another shot. But Maddie brushed it away with a glare.

"I can't really refuse the Queen can I?" She looked from Harry to Zara who shook her head.

"Not really," Autumn smiled sympathetically and offered her gum.

"Thank you," Maddie took it and smacked Harry's arm; eyes narrowed. "It would be really great if I hadn't already been drinking."
"Here, look at me," Harry pulled his chair close to hers and sat down facing her. "Take a breath. This is just my grandma. She's heard about you from my father and Anne and Eugenie. She knows you're responsible for the smile on my face and now she just wants to meet you. My granny. Come on, Doctor. You've got this."

"But if I mess this up, I'll never get to..." Maddie trailed off as she caught herself. Harry grinned wide.

"Well, we're going to revisit the end of that sentence in a bit, we have to do this first." He held out his hand. Maddie nodded and took it.

"What if I don't curtsy correctly and..." She stood and followed behind him.

"She doesn't care if you curtsy to her..."

"You always curtsy to the Queen!" She spoke through a clenched jaw and he knew she was freaking out just a bit.

"Okay," he smiled and pulled her off to the side and into his arms; holding her tightly to him, he whispered in her ear. "Listen to me. Close your eyes and listen to me..." Her eyes fluttered closed and she tuned to his voice; his breath on her cheek, the way his hands held her flush to him. "You are a strong, amazing woman. You are the daughter of amazing parents. A father who would stand tall with pride next to you. A mother who bragged endlessly about your brilliance and devotion. You were the first in your family to go to college and you went all the way to the top. You've traveled to the poorest corners of the world to save children. Maddie, you are amazing. You are smart and kind and you use your powers for good. And right now, Prince Harry of Wales is so madly in love with you that, if you asked him, he would follow you to the ends of the earth. Nobody can touch you. Nobody. Now...open your eyes." She did as he instructed. "Take a breath." Though she would never know how—she did. "Give me your gum and let's go." Maddie put her gum in the napkin in his hand and nodded; her heart overflowing at his pep talk—at his words.

Holding her hand in both of his, he turned her in the right direction and took ten steps and then with a wide smile and pride that could be seen across the room, he took their relationship forward to a whole new level,

"Granny, Grandpa, I would like you to meet Doctor Madeline Forrester. Maddie, this is my grandmother and grandfather...."

"Your Majesty," Maddie's knees held out as she dipped. "Your Royal Highness."

And the night had only just begun.

For the rest of her life, Maddie would remember the night she met The Queen, Harry's grandmother. She would remember how sweet she was, how lovely; how the anxiety Maddie had built up was without reason. She would tell the story over and over; at least ten times before the sun rose. But the most amazing part of the story, the part she never told anyone else, was that meeting The Queen—as monumental and amazing as it was—was nowhere near the most memorable moment of that night.

From the second Maddie stepped away from The Queen and Prince Phillip, she had moved into
this permanent state of elation; she was giddy. Not only had she curtsied correctly, she had held a conversation—albeit two minutes long—with one of the most respected and revered women of the last two centuries. She had even managed to make Harry's grandfather laugh and nudge Harry in the ribs teasingly. And, as Eugenie's father made his way to the stage for a toast, The Queen had smiled and said, "It was lovely to finally meet you Madeline." And then Maddie allowed Harry to escort her back to her table. And it was a good thing she had his arm to hold onto otherwise she might have just floated away.

"So?" Mike arched his eyebrows as Harry and Maddie rejoined the table.

"How did it go?" Autumn smiled warmly; knowing enough to know it had gone well. Maddie looked to Harry who deferred to her.

"Oh it went so well," Maddie sighed with a wide grin.

"There you go," Peter nodded in her direction.

"Yea!" Autumn clapped her hands quietly as the rest of the table smiled and nodded.

"And you were so worried," Mike nudged her playfully.

"Who me?" Maddie rolled her eyes jokingly.

"So, we can have these shots now?" Mike waved his hand at the table.

"Oh God yes," Maddie nodded; a rumble of laughter rounding the table.

"To Eugenie," Zara raised hers.

"To Eugenie," they echoed. And down they went. When Maddie turned to look at Harry, his eyes were already fixed on her and when she smiled, he winked in a way that was a little wicked, a tad naughty and somewhere inside, Maddie just knew that this night was going to be a party the likes of which she had never seen.

Eugenie's father Andrew took the stage then, bringing all conversation to a halt. He was charming and well with words and told tales of his daughter growing up, meeting Jack, and how proud he was to be able to welcome such a wonderful young man into the family. There were hugs and applause and quite a few happy tears. Harry held her hand as they watched; pressing a kiss to the top of it when he thought nobody was looking.

And the festivities continued. There was dinner, toasts and an overall merriment. And when the band kicked up and the dancing began, Harry rose to his feet, buttoned his coat and offered his hand. Closing her eyes and leaning against him, Maddie sighed happily. She felt so...free.

Maybe it was the high from meeting The Queen. Maybe it was the champagne and shots. Maybe this was what happened when you were doing exactly what you were meant to be doing in life. She didn't know, but she loved it. As she looked at the crowd, Maddie could see the same sort of serene smile reflected on the faces of everyone else. Maybe it was just a magical sort of night.

Eventually the party-goers began to filter out. The Queen and Prince Phillip left and the atmosphere relaxed slightly. They spent time talking with Charles and Camilla before they too departed; the first of the parents to leave. While Harry caught up with William, Maddie chatted with Kate about their upcoming trip and then the two of them retired to the house; Kate not feeling
well.

As Eugenie and Jack's friends began to arrive, the party moved locations. The more formal, family event gave way to a more raucous occasion by the pool. Harry carried a bottle of champagne as he led Maddie down the path to the expansive veranda/pool area. There was a DJ spinning lively dance music. There were stations set up throughout with drinks and food and Maddie could see that this particular group of people had no intention of retiring anytime soon. Acquiring two glasses as he passed a station, Harry and Maddie moved to a small table and he poured more bubbly—which she happily drank. Beatrice and David joined them; curious about this woman whom they had heard so much about. They danced and they laughed as they watched the crowd. By the time Bishop showed up with Sean and Kiki, the second phase of the party was well underway.

"Well, well, well...what do we have here?" Bishop's voice was low as he stepped up to the table. Harry rose to hug his friends; with Maddie right behind him.

"Bishop!" She exclaimed; tossing her arms around his neck. "Bishop I met the Queen!"

"Like this?" He smiled as he hugged her back; his eyes meeting Harry's; impressed and not the least bit surprised by this news. "I am sorry I missed that."

"Well, not quite like this," she laughed and turned to greet Kiki and Sean. The group settled at the table as Bishop unloaded a tray of drinks he apprehended along the way.

"Well," Bishop took a long drink. "When are we getting in the pool?"

"Don't know," Harry shook his head and nodded towards his newly engaged cousin. "She's been eyeing the water though, so I think it'll be soon."

"Sorry, we're going swimming?" Maddie raised her eyebrows.

"The adults are gone," Bishop explained. "Everyone is well pissed...I think moving the party into the pool comes naturally don't you?"

"It's something of a tradition," Harry added.

"An insane tradition," Kiki rolled her eyes. "A bunch of drunk people swimming around in their black tied finest? Excellent idea."

"Well I didn't see you putting up a fuss at Anna's birthday party last year," Harry raised his eyebrows and the rest of them laughed as they remembered that particular evening.

"I didn't say I didn't participate...just that it was an insane way to finish out the night."

"Hold on," Maddie held up her hand. "You end all of your parties by jumping into the pool fully clothed?"

"Mmm Hmm," Bishop nodded. "There are games and competitions. Everything's better in the water."

"Except for Bishop," Sean laughed.

"I can't believe I've never heard of this before..." Maddie shook her head.
"Well, there are some things that the public doesn't get to be a part of." Harry nodded out towards the crowd. "There's no press, no outsiders..."

"But I'm here," she pointed out and Harry chuckled.

"You're not exactly an outsider, love," Bishop winked at her.

"No? I've just met some of these people tonight." Bishop shrugged and continued.

"You cannot be an outsider if you're sleeping with Prince Harry."

"Hey!" Harry shook his head.

"Do you have to be so crass?" Kiki smacked his arm.

"Sorry," Bishop actually looked embarrassed as he turned to Maddie. "My apologies, I simply meant..."

"It's okay," she patted his hand and smiled smugly. "Though we actually don't get much sleep—if you know what I mean." Harry nearly choked on his drink.

"OH!" Bishop called out with a loud laugh; clapping his hands together.

"I don't know, Harry," Sean warned. "She gets along much too well with Bishop."

"I think so," Harry laughed and took a drink just as Jack and Eugenie walked towards them. Eugenie grinned wide as she sat her drink on their table, pulled off her shoes and then with a wink to her cousin, she turned and ran, hand-in-hand with Jack before they jumped straight into the pool.

And the crowd erupted; hoots and howls, applause and laughter.

"Finally!" Bishop drained another drink and shrugged out of his jacket. "Wales, Doctor," and with a laugh, he was off—following the exodus of people towards the pool. Maddie looked over to Harry and raised her eyebrows.

"Care to join me in the water?" Harry held his hand out to her. Maddie kicked her shoes from her feet and took his hand. With a wide smile she nodded and they were out of their chairs. Maddie could hear laughter and applause as they joined the party in the water.

The water was warm, inviting and the liveliness in the pool was intoxicating. There was laughing and splashing and a carefree ease that was addicting. The music played on, the drinking continued and as Harry reached out to take hold of her, Maddie felt the last bit of anxiety she had about being in Harry's inner-circle slip away from her.

"You okay?" He smiled; his hands wrapping around her waist.

"Oh my God!" Maddie laughed as she bobbed in the water; pulling at her skirt. "It's so much more difficult to swim in a dress than I thought it would be!"

"It's okay....I got you, I got you," Harry laughed and held onto her as they treded water. "You could always take the dress off...if that would help."
"Oh you would like that wouldn't you?" She laughed.

"Na," he shook his head. "There are way too many people here for that."

"Harry?" She held on his shoulders as he moved them closer to the edge of the pool; away from the splash-fest that was beginning.

"Yes love?"

"I'm a little drunk."

"A little?" He chuckled; smoothing a hair away from her forehead.

"I blame you."

"Sounds fair." As they reached the edge, he moved them so that Maddie's back was against the side of the pool. Maddie moved her hands up over her head to hang onto the ledge. Harry placed his on each side of hers.

"Hi," she grinned up at him as they dipped up and down in the water.

"Hi," he grinned back.

"Promise me something?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"Anything." He answered without blinking.

"Anything?"

"Yes."

"What if it's something crazy?" Her face twisted up. "I mean...you shouldn't just go around agreeing to anything."

"Didn't you hear me earlier?" He moved closer to her; his face inches from hers. "Massively in love with you...ends of the Earth."

"Ends of the Earth?" She whispered.

"Mmmm." His eyes danced like the water. And there in their little corner of the pool she felt like they were alone; in their own private, heated, weighty banter.

"You really shouldn't talk to a lady like that, you know," Maddie was smirking. "It's dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"She might start to think that you have...intentions." She arched one eyebrow and Harry's face flashed serious for the briefest of moments before his grin returned.

"Well, maybe I do." His voice was strong, sturdy; his eyes trained on hers and for a split second, her heart stalled.

"Maybe..." Maddie breathed before she cracked, allowing laughter to break the tension, she
shrugged. "Or maybe you're just as drunk as I am."

Harry laughed and leaned in to kiss her. His lips were warm and wet and Maddie was thankful they had found the ledge to hold onto.

"Actually..." He began.

"Harry!" Beatrice called out. "Harry! Come on! Genie wants to do our synchronized swimming routine from when we were kids!"

"Synchronized swimming routine?" Maddie giggled.

"Ah come on!" Harry turned to his cousins. "Haven't we made big enough fools of ourselves?!!"

"Peter's going to do it too!" Eugenie yelled back. "And it's my night! So you have to!"

"Fine!" He yelled and groaned to Maddie; placing a peck to her lips. "You should come and watch this...I promise it'll be memorable." He kissed her one more time and let go of the side of the pool; pushing back from the wall and swimming backwards away from her a bit. "I meant what I said. Ends of the Earth, Madeline. Ends of the Earth."

She watched as he turned away from her then; laughing as he swam to where his cousins were assembling; drunk and happy and full of celebration. Maddie took a deep breath and moved closer. In her entire life, she never would have imagined the way this night had unfolded before her. She had met The Queen. She had jumped fully clothed into a pool with an entire generation of the British Royal Family and now she was getting ready to watch them perform a synchronized swimming routine from their childhood. It was surreal. And far from over.

And of course, as she situated next to Bishop on the stairs in the pool—taking the glass of champagne he offered—she watched as Harry lined up, already taking direction from the guest of honor. He caught her watching and, with a wink, made her heart skip. Eugenie nodded to the DJ who changed over to a new song and the show began; laughter and applause exploding throughout the water.

Intentions? Maddie shook her head. It was much too soon to be obsessing over Harry's alleged intentions. Wasn't it? Focusing on the entertainment, she forced her mind away from that place where she had heard what Harry had just said to her, from that place where all she could do was analyze what Harry had just said to her and she took a breath and a drink and tossed her head back in laughter. There would be other times for that. This night was about celebrating; drinking, laughing and celebrating.

Besides, just that night, she had met The Queen. Her smile widened so much that her cheeks hurt. Ella was never going to believe this.
If Maddie's weekend had been the ultimate high of the week, Monday was the ultimate low. When she woke that morning, she was chipper and smiling...still reeling from the party and all that had transpired; still laughing from the image of Harry trying to perform with his cousins, still sighing from his words.

She was at the hospital that day and her morning began with her usual rounds; checking on the patients who had been admitted over the weekend; reading over notes, visiting rooms. The morning flew by and, after a quick lunch, she would be heading down to the clinic to see a few out-patients all while remaining on call for the Emergency Room. As she pulled her lunch from the fridge, she glanced out the window; it was a nice day and she was going to eat outside. On her way through the hallways, her phone rang in her pocket. Pulling it out, she grinned.

"Ella my darling, couldn't wait till after work to talk to me?"

"Listen, Madeline, we need to talk."

"Whoa..." Maddie exhaled. "You sound serious."

"Where are you?"

"At work."

"No, like...where? Are you in public or private?"

"A hallway, Ella," Maddie smiled as a coworker walked past her. "What's happening?"

"I think you should sit down somewhere."

"Just tell me."

"Or find an office or..."

"God Damn it Ella, stop playing coy and..." Maddie groaned as her phone beeped. "That's weird. Harry's supposed to be in a meeting..."

"Is he on the other line?" Ella asked.

"He...he was. He went to voicemail. Ella, would you please just..."

"Is there any chance you let somebody take nude photos of you?" Ella spoke quickly and quietly.


"There is a gossip website that says that they have nude photos of you and..."

"WHAT?!" Maddie's lunch fell to the floor as her entire body halted.

"They haven't posted them yet, but they say they have them and..."

"How in the world would they have..." Her phone beeped again. "That's Harry. Oh God do you
"Knows? Yes!" Ella cut in. "Answer that. Call me back."

Following Ella's directions, Maddie clicked over to the other call.

"Do you know?" He skipped right past the pleasantries.

"Ella just called to tell me. Harry, you have to believe me, it's not me."

"I know," his voice was strained and she could tell he was mad.

"I would never pose for something like that, I swear!"

"I know," he was walking through a hallway to a private room.

"Do you think somebody took a picture of me without me knowing it or..."

"It's not you," he cut her off. "I guarantee it."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've fucking seen them." Scratch that. He was furious.

"How did you see them?" Her voice was hoarse as her face flushed. "Are they already out?"

"No," he pushed through the door and slammed it behind him. "They sent them to my office for comment. I'll give them a fucking..."

"Harry!" She cut him off. "Where are you?"

"I'm on my way back to London."

"But I thought you had the meeting and then the lunch at..."

"I am cancelling and heading back to London."

"Harry," she felt a wave of sadness wash over her. "Don't do that. Stay where you're at."

"And do nothing!!" He yelled into the phone; quickly shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to yell at you, I just. I can't sit here and do nothing while they run with this trash!"

"What would you be able to do here?" She sank to a bench; her eyes welling up slightly. "What could you do here that you can't do there?"

"Maddie..." He breathed; his muscles tense.

"What do I do?" Her voice was small and it broke his heart. "I'm serious. I don't know what to do."

"You call an attorney. They can get a cease and desist letter out to stop the photos until this is sorted out."
"Okay," she took a deep breath. That made sense. "Do you know an attorney? I mean...I'm new in town and I..."

"I can have the family attorney call you and he can recommend somebody. I will call him right after I hang up with you. He'll call you and then you need to talk to whomever he recommends right away. I'm not joking. This can't wait until after work."

"I figured as much," Maddie's mouth twisted into a crooked smile. "See. You just did all you can do."

"This is not even close to all I can do," there was warning in his tone.

"Have the attorney call me, go to the meeting, go to lunch and then..." She let out a long breath. "Then come home to me?"

"Maddie I'm so sorry," his voice grew soft. "I am so, so, so very sorry that this is happening to you right now. I know it'll never be enough but..."

"Please stop," she cut him off; biting her lip. "I'm trying to be calm and cool about this but if you keep that up I'm going to..."

"Got it," he gave in. "I will have the attorney call you and I will see you as soon as I hit town."

"Thank you."

"Maddie...I love you."

"I know you do," she smiled; despite herself. "I love you too."

Maddie disconnected the phone call and sat there; in the hallway on the bench. Her mind was spiraling as it all began to settle. If Ella knew, other people knew. If Harry knew, the rest of his family knew. Her stomach turned. As sick as she felt, she wanted to see these pictures; these pictures that had no way of existing short of a clear and serious invasion of her privacy. Heat rose to her face as her anger overtook her sadness. Taking a deep breath, she let her head lean back against the wall. Her reflexes remembered her time in Bendal, her training—she knew how to pull it together in the moment, hold it in until the end of the day. In that minute between Harry hanging up and the phone ringing again, she reverted back to that training. And it was the only thing that kept her from cracking. And, less than a minute after she had hung up with Harry, the phone rang.

Harry had come through with his word. The attorney he usually worked with was on the phone with three names. He would recommend all three of them very highly but wanted her to have some choice in the matter. Once she chose, he would put in a call to explain the situation and they would get things moving right away. Having no knowledge of any of them, she asked him to choose for her.

He did as she asked and within three minutes she was talking to her attorney; Christopher Michaels. He had handled private matters for celebrities and many high profile personalities. He was smart and friendly and had a cease and desist letter out within twenty minutes. Within an hour the website had pulled their claim and the entire situation was put on "pause" while legal counsel went to work. When he called her with the good news, she wanted to burst into tears; knowing she would never be able to thank him. And, according to him, she wouldn't be able to pay him either—as Harry's attorney would be covering all costs via Harry.
It wasn’t over, but it was a start. At least she would be able to go about the rest of her day without the possibility of her "nude" pictures floating around in the blogosphere. As she had waited to hear from Christopher, she had moved on to her office and when she had hung up with him, she let out a long breath and finally took a drink from her bottle of water. There was no way she was going to be able to eat but the water was refreshing; and much needed. And then there was a knock at her door. Taking a deep breath, Maddie moved to open it.

"Doctor Colvin," she smiled at her boss. "Is everything okay?" She glanced back at her phone; no missed calls.

"Can I come in?" Her boss was a lovely man; old enough to be her father. He was kind and warm and trained in an era when doctors were allowed more professional courtesies; spending more time with their clients, becoming more of a family member. He was phenomenal with the children they worked with and had this lovely gleam in his eye that reminded her of images of Santa Claus. But as he requested entrance into her office, he seemed concerned—curious; more professional than she had really ever seen him.

"Of course," Maddie nodded and stepped aside. He waited for her to close her door and take a seat before he took the chair across from her.

"Doctor Forrester," he folded his hands in his lap and looked to her with a smile that was a stark contrast to his professional demeanor. With a breath, he began, "I know we haven't known each other very long but I have enjoyed working with you. Your professionalism is above reproach, you have a great rapport with the children and their families and you have adapted to living in London quite well. I hope you know that you have become quite the asset to this department and to the hospital..."

"Why do I feel that there is a 'but' coming?" She was uneasy.

"No but," he shook his head; leaning closer to her, a move that counselors used to demonstrate closeness with their clients. "While I personally find great benefits in getting to know my coworkers and staff on a more personal level, not everyone shares that appreciation. And I want to respect that. So, I try to stay out of my staffs' lives; unless I'm invited in...or unless I have to."

"Oh?" Maddie felt her throat tighten. Oh God. Did he know about the photos? "Is this about the...

"Cameras?" He finished her sentence unexpectedly.

"The cameras?" Maddie's face registered her surprise. "I'm sorry, I..."

"I've been told that you were seeing Prince Harry," he seemed almost embarrassed to even be discussing it with her. "And while I don't care to get into the gossip mill, I just assumed when I saw the paparazzi outside that there were here hoping to get a glimpse of you or hoping that the Prince would..."

"The paparazzi are..." She shook her head. "I'm sorry, did you say they are outside?"

"Yes," he nodded towards the window. "I thought you knew. You seemed a little off and when I mentioned..." He trailed off as Maddie moved to the window; looking down to the ground two stories below.

"Oh. My. God." Her heart stopped as she took it in. There were at least twenty people gathered
around the main entrance to the hospital. She shook her head. They couldn't be there for her, could they? She glanced back at her boss as he smiled up at her in the comforting way that was well rehearsed with therapists—in the way that made her want to scream. "I don't know what to say. I don't know why they're here..." And it hit her. They had all seen the same post Ella had; promising nude photos of the Prince's girlfriend. Maddie sank back into her chair; unable to control the tears that rose to her eyes—despite her boss' presence.

"Doctor?" He reached his hand out to hers, the contact of which brought her eyes up to meet his. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she answered though her head betrayed her; shaking a slow 'no.' "It's been...a long day and..." She took a deep breath; blowing it out slowly. "I'm sorry that they are here. I'm sorry they are blocking the entrance and..." She shook her head again. "I don't know what to do? What do you want me to do?"

"Maybe you should go home for the day?" He suggested. "Come in tomorrow afternoon and we can meet and talk about what we can do."

"Tomorrow?" Maddie felt a new panic rising; one that warned of an employer not appreciating the hassle that came with employing her, one that told of the domino effect that hassle might have on her staying employed; staying in London. And her training failed her for a split second as tears pricked at her eyes.

"Everything's going to be okay, Doctor Forrester," he smiled calmly. "I just think it would be best for everyone if you took a day and we came up with a game plan tomorrow."

"Okay," Maddie nodded; forcing herself to pull it together—straining to keep her professionalism from disintegrating in front of him. "I'll just...get my stuff together and then..."

"Okay," he smiled, seeing that she needed, or more accurately wanted, to be left alone. "I'll see you tomorrow at two then?"

"Two?" Maddie sniffed and nodded. "Your office or mine?"

"Mine," he moved to the door and then, in a moment that was more fatherly than anything, he turned back to her. "Maddie; from one professional to another—are you going to be okay?"

"Ha...." She smiled in a scattered sort of way. "Yes. Yes...I usually am."

"Good," He nodded. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No," she met his eyes; grateful for the offer. "But thank you."

"Of course," he nodded and then, with one last, small smile, he slipped out her door; closing it behind him.

This was far from over.

She wanted to cry. She wanted to throw something; hit something—cause destruction. And then she wanted to curl up into a ball and cry. But she couldn't; not quite yet.

Taking three deep breaths; in and out, in and out, in and out. She wiped at her eyes and reached for a piece of hard candy—knowing that the act of sucking on something stayed off the tears at
least for the moment. She pulled out her purse, checked her make up in her compact. With a quick
swipe of her lip-gloss, she pulled out her sunglasses and closed her purse.

Feeling as though she were on a mission: get out, get home, breakdown; she pulled all her
strength, all of her nerve and she opened the door to her office. She couldn't control what was
going to happen the next day and, if they were going to ask her to leave, she didn't want this last
moment to be a moment of weakness. So she smiled at her coworkers, locked her door and, with a
wave, she made her way through the halls; down the stairs.

Before she stepped into the corridor, into the view of the cameras, she pulled her phone from her
purse and placed one imperative phone call; leaving a message.

"Ella, it's me. I'm leaving work early and I would give anything if you were able to meet me at
home. I need..." She took a deep, shuddering breath. "I need somebody to pull me back to Earth
for a minute."

She ended the call, returned her phone to her purse and then, pulling a smile from the depths of
she didn't know where, she stepped out into the corridor. With her head held high and her eyes
shielded from the glare, she walked past the cameras that were flashing wildly, she ignored the
questions—the wildly inappropriate and unfounded questions—and she went directly to her car.
Slipping behind the wheel and turning the ignition, she only hoped that her façade could hold until
she made it past the group of cameras that was most certainly waiting for her at home before the
weight of the day came falling down on her shoulders with a fury
Chapter 43

One of the things Maddie treasured the most about her friendship with Ella was that there were these moments where they didn't even need words; moments when a look conveyed the multitude of what was passing through their hearts and their minds. And, when Ella stepped into her apartment and met Maddie's eyes, it was one of those moments.

Without a word, without question, Ella pulled Maddie with her to the couch where they slumped together in one big clump of friendship; both with tears in their eyes—Ella's because of Maddie's. Maddie had changed into her pajamas—her comfy flannel pants and Harry's shirt; not caring that the smell of him made her cry. And there they sat; arms crossed over the other, feet tucked up under them. Ella kissed Maddie's forehead as she cried.

And then, when Maddie sniffed and sat up, Ella knew without words—that she was ready to talk about it.

"Well," Ella sighed as Maddie reached for tissues. "I haven't seen your naked ass online yet so..." Maddie bust out laughing; her tears pressing from her eyes as Ella joined in.

"Harry put me in contact with an attorney; he filed a cease and desist letter. They can't post them until we...figure this all out I guess."

"That's a relief," Ella sighed.

"It wasn't me. The photos...somebody must have photo-shopped them or..."

"I figured as much," Ella nodded. "Have you seen them?"

"No," she shook her head. "But Harry has."

"How's he taking all of this?"

"Well, as far as I know he hasn't killed anybody so..."

"Not so good?"

"Not really," Maddie sighed and leaned back against the couch. "I'm not sure I've heard him this pissed in the entire time I've known him—even when they pulled him out of going to Afghanistan for the second time..."

"He's on his way back?"

"He should be," Maddie glanced at the clock. "Why would somebody do this? Put my face on somebody else's body and try to...why would somebody do that?"

"I don't know."

"And then all the cameras at work..." She groaned. "At least the lawyer stopped them from publishing them but God, Ella...I have no idea what the hell is going to..." She shook her head. "I really, really don't want to obsess on this. If I obsess about this, they win and I don't like losing. And I know that once Harry gets here it's..." Ella met her friend's teary eyes and nodded; she
"Well then," she clapped her hands together. "Let's talk about something else."

"Okay," Maddie sniffed and pondered for a moment. "Tell me what's going on with you."

"Well," Ella couldn't help the smile that crept to her lips. "I've kind of started seeing someone."

"What?" Maddie turned to her; surprised. "Just last week you were single and loving it."

"That's why I said *kind of started*," Ella grinned. "His name is Matt. He's one of the helicopter pilots at the hospital. I would love for you to meet him."

"I would like that too," Maddie smiled. "I do have a fondness for helicopter pilots. Maybe the four of us could have dinner sometime."

"That would be good," Ella nodded.

"Look at you...bringing somebody home to meet the family," Maddie nudged her friend; clearly enamored with Matt.

"What can I say? He makes me laugh."

"Good. Good. That's important."

"It is..." Ella agreed.

"Oh! I met the Queen this weekend," only Maddie's eyebrows perked up as she let her friend in on the news. "I was going to tell you tonight after work but...Harry introduced me to his grandparents."

"He did?" Ella's interest was genuine; her intrigue a reflexive part of her nature. "Oh my God, Maddie. That's huge. Was it amazing?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "She is so beautiful in person. And she smells fantastic."

"Of course she does," Ella nodded as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Was she nice?"

"She really was," Maddie thought over the night and sighed heavily; leaning into Ella's arms, unable to avoid the reality of her day for much more than a moment. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Yeah," Ella took a breath. "Me neither." When the buzzer rang out into the room, Maddie squeezed Ella's hand and hurried to answer it.

"Hello?"

"It's me," he sounded tired, angry, confused; just like she felt. Hitting the buzzer, Maddie opened the door and waited. In mere moments Harry and his body man were up the stairs. When Harry saw her, he stalled; he could tell she had been crying, that she was upset and it only fueled the fire he had worked all day to tamper down. It as such conflict; wanting to comfort her all while wanting to pummel something to a bloody pulp. Maddie tore her eyes from him.
"Hi Jim," she waved her hand with a tiny smile.

"Doctor Forrester," he nodded his hello and moved to the bench in the hallway across from her door.

"Hi," Maddie's eyes lifted to meet Harry's. He was still dressed in his suit, bag in his hand; having come directly from his meeting and luncheon.

"Hi," his hand reached out to stroke her cheek and she pressed her face into it. "Can I come in?"

"Please," she stood aside as he moved past her. With a small nod to Jim, Maddie closed the door; locking it and setting the alarm. Harry dropped his bag by the door and shrugged out of his coat; draping it over the back of her chair—making himself at home. If Maddie hadn't been so caught up in the scandal of the day, she would have been touched by the sight.

"Ella," Harry forced a smile for her as she rose to her feet to greet him properly.

"How you doing?" She rubbed his shoulder as she stepped out of the hug.

"That depends," he turned to look at Maddie. "How are you doing?"

"Well," Maddie sighed and looked between them. "I'm in my pajamas...but I haven't started drinking. So...Somewhere in the middle."

"Yeah," he understood the feeling. "I'm sorry I wasn't here earlier."

"It's okay," Maddie smiled through teary eyes. "Ella's been with me."

"Yes, she has," Ella cleared her throat. "And now that Harry's here, I think it's time for me to..."

"No," Harry shook his head. "That's not necessary."

"You don't have to go," Maddie looked to her best friend.

"I actually do," Ella kissed Maddie's cheek, "I love you," and patted Harry's shoulder. "Take good care of her."

"Of course," he smiled up at her. And then, with a knowing glance at the couple, Ella slipped through the door.

Maddie, after seeing Ella out, leaned against the door and looked to Harry where he was leaning back against the arm of her oversized chair. His tie was loose, his jaw set, his shoulders tense. Maddie couldn't figure out what to do first; where to go. Her eyes fell on the bag he had with him and curiosity paved the way.

"Do you have them?" He looked up sharply. "The pictures."

"Maddie..." He shook his head.

"Don't lie to me, Harry. Do you have them here?" There was a moment of pause; he held her eyes and gulped. Nodding, he pushed away from the chair and went over to his case. Opening it up, he pulled out a large manila envelope. He stepped over to her and held it out; hating what she was
"Thank you," she breathed; taking it from him. Her fingers were cautious as she opened it, as though she could be dismantling a bomb. Pulling three photos from the envelope, she gasped; her eyes wide. "Oh my God...It's me."

"It's not you," he shook his head; absolutely certain.

"It looks like me." If she hadn't known better, she would be easily convinced. "She looks exactly like me."

"No she doesn't. Her body is different from yours. The curves aren't right and she has a mole on her left..." Harry pointed. "And you have a mole just above..." He took a breath and rubbed at the back of his neck; pacing away from her.

"Okay," she sighed. "Okay, you're right. You're..." She nodded and, strangely enough, a small laugh came out.

"You're laughing?" His forehead crinkled in confusion.

"Well...that's just...incredibly perceptive of you; noticing the moles and all..." She caught his glare and tried to control her laughter. "Sorry."

"It wasn't quite so funny when I was explaining to the communications office and my father how it was I knew this wasn't you."

"Oh God." Maddie's stomach turned.

"There we go," he waved his hand; that was more the response he had expected.

"Your father knows you've seen me naked?"

"Yes."

"What about...The Queen? Did she..."

"Not at the time."

"But now?"

"I would imagine," he let out a breath; reclaiming his spot at the arm of her chair.

"Okay, now I'm horrified. I can't believe you told them..." The images of the conversation passed through her mind like a terrible movie.

"You would rather them think that this was you?!"

"No, no," she shook her head and looked back at the photos. "These are really good. Whoever did these..."

"Is going to wish for the day before he knew how to use photo shop," Harry's hands clenched into fists.
"Hey..." Maddie stuffed the pictures back into the envelope and tossed them onto her table before she moved to him. Her arms went to his shoulders as she stepped into his space, standing between his legs. As if on reflex or instinct, his hands moved to her body; resting on her hips. He looked up to her then; eyes heavy with the responsibility he felt for this. Swallowing back her tears, Maddie dipped her head to kiss him. It was a soft, sweet kiss; one meant to ease his tense shoulders, his taut jaw. But when their lips met, the weight of the day was behind them—pulling them closer together. His hands on her hips were tight; pressing her closer to him. Her fingers moved to his neck, pulling him to her. A moan moved from her mouth involuntarily; the heat between them intensifying quickly; like a blast of hot air from a suddenly lit fire.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered against her lips.

"It's okay," she whispered back.

"No," he pulled away; his eyes growing dark. "No it's not." He sighed; his anger and frustration taking hold of his emotions as he nodded towards the street. "I saw them all out there. They are going to be all over you."

"They already are," she sighed. "You know they came to the hospital."

"What?"

"They were waiting at the entrance when my boss sent me home," Maddie felt her tears return as she remembered what had happened in her office.

"They were what?" Harry stood; forcing Maddie to take a step away from him. "God damn it!" He pulled his phone from his pocket and started dialing. But Maddie was quick and pulled it from his hand. He looked to her with great surprise. "Give it back."

"No!" She stepped back from him.

"Damn it Maddie!" He reached for the phone. "That is a private hospital! You are a private citizen and they don't need to be stalking you in the bushes!"

"I know!"

"This is bullshit! Absolute bullshit!"

"You think I don't know that?! This is happening to me! These are photos of me! Or at least they are supposed to be and..."

"And..." He tried to cut in but she rushed ahead of him.

"And I need my boyfriend right now!" Her voice rose to his level as she stood up to him. "I need him to sit down and listen to me rant about my rough day and NOT feel the need to swoop in; threatening to take people down at the knees and make it all go away!"

"They can't be there!" His face was bright red.

"I know that!" She yelled and then blinked; hating the way they were going at each other. "I...I know that. I know you're mad and I'm just as pissed as you are. It's just... I just...I need to you to be my boyfriend with a sympathetic ear right now. Not put-them-in-their-place guy."
"Maddie..." He was trying; she could see that—deep breaths and all.

"Please Harry," she reached for his hand. "I don't know how to do this if I can't talk to you. If I have to worry about you flying off every time something happens, I'll want to keep things from you and that is never going to..."

"Fine," Harry sighed; relenting. "You're right. I know you're...fuck!" He huffed. "I'm sorry. You're right. I can do that. I can..." He breathed and focused on her; moving back to his spot on the arm of her chair. "You said that your boss sent you home?" Maddie bit her lip and nodded; moving closer to him.

"He did. He told me to take a day and come back tomorrow for a meeting..." She took a deep breath. "I don't know what they're going to tell me. What if they want me to leave?"

"Why would they want you to leave?"

"Because. People bring their kids to us because they are experiencing some serious traumas, Harry. Part of the process is anonymity. I would guess these people don't want the world to know that their children are seeing me, us."

"Maddie..." He shook his head; his sadness taking hold over anger for the moment. "You really think they would let you go because of this?"

"I don't know," she shook her head and wiped at her eyes. "He was very sweet about it all, helpful really. But this is the first time I've ever encountered something like this and..." She blew air from her mouth and gestured to the envelope. "Hey, at least the world isn't looking at those tonight, you know."

"Yeah," he breathed.

"You want to hit something, don't you?" She cracked a half smile.

"I want to hit somebody," a burst of laughter came from his lips as he stood again; pulling her into his arms and kissing the top of her head. "But I'm trying to remain calm."

"You're doing well," she smiled up at him; her chin resting on his chest.

"I don't want you to feel like you can't talk to me," he brushed the hair from her forehead. "I don't want you to be afraid to tell me how you're feeling."

"I'm not sure if you've noticed, but I have no problem speaking my mind."

"I have noticed," he kissed the tip of her nose.

"So...tell me. How is this all going to play out? What happens next?"

"Well..." Harry sighed; his hands moving to rub her shoulders. "Your attorney stopped the photos and the website pulled the announcement. Next some experts are going to take a look at those photos and they should be able to prove that they've been altered and then they can't print them...or if they do you can sue the shit out of them and retire."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "That sounds wonderful. But...how is this going to play out? In the press, in the media, with...you know...all of that," she waved a hand towards the street.
"I don't know."

"Harry..."

"I honestly don't know," he shrugged. "They know that there were photos that were allegedly you. They know that the photos were stopped. I don't know why they did this. I don't...maybe they wanted a reaction from me. Maybe they want a reaction from you. Maybe...I don't know. Maybe you're getting too popular and somebody wanted to knock you down a peg or two?"

"Too popular?" Maddie laughed.

"Well, the press has been mostly good lately. They've figured out all the great things you've done. Maybe somebody decided they needed to ruffle the feathers a bit. I don't know."

"Does your..." She cleared her throat. "Does your father believe you? He doesn't think that I..."

"He believes me," He sighed and shook his head. "As much as that particular conversation pained me, he believes me."

"I would hate for your family to think that this is me."

"They won't," he assured her; this wasn't their first scandal, wasn't their first time being accused of something that was inaccurate and Sophie had already reached out to him to offer her support to Maddie. "Speaking of family; have you talked to your family yet?"

"No," she shook her head. "I wanted to calm down first, to know what I was dealing with before I called home."

"Makes sense," he nodded; his head hanging down.

"What's on your mind right now?" Maddie lifted his chin so he would look at her.

"I don't want to tell you," he took her hand in his and pressed a kiss to the top of it and gave in. "I'm thinking of all you've had to do to be here, all you had to leave and...and...God...how much you have to put up with to be here with me." Her heart ached as she watched him; full of guilt and responsibility.

"You know what...let's get out of here."

"What?" He looked up to her.

"Yeah, let's...I don't want to sit here and do this; be sad and angry and...they only get to control what they get to control. And we can't let them decide how we do this, right?"

"Okay," Harry sighed and took her hands in his. "What did you have in mind?"

"Where is your favorite place in London? When you need to get away from it all and escape in the city, where do you go?"

"I don't know..." He shook his head in thought.

"Well, figure it out. I'm going to go change and when I get back, you're taking me there."
"What?" He watched as she walked towards her room.

"You heard me!" She called from the hallway.

By the time Maddie had returned, dressed casually and comfortably, Harry had figured it out and they were leaving. Stepping outside, they were greeted with the expected cameras. Reaching the relative safety of the car, Maddie sighed and leaned into him. Having already given the driver directions, Harry sat back as the car drove into the night and away from the flashbulbs.

Maddie looked up at him in confusion when they arrived at Kensington Palace; driving swiftly through the gates towards his house. But she remained silent and followed. She followed him into his house where Bernard had to-go containers of food waiting. He grabbed a blanket and the sack and gestured for her to follow him. They walked through the grounds, around to the main building and straight inside. Maddie was weary; where were they headed? His family lived here? But they by-passed the residences, they walked up stairs and through halls and when she thought they couldn't get any higher, any further, they walked some more.

And finally, with a wink to her and a push on a door, they were outside again. Only now, they were on a roof.

"Oh my God..." She stepped out and was looking out over the lights, over the trees; over London.

"Come on," he nodded his head and she followed. Setting the sack of food aside, he laid out the blanket and kicked off his shoes. Maddie followed suit and joined him. Harry pulled containers out of the sack and handed her one.

"Pizza?" She grinned.

"I love Bernard's pizza."

"Fair enough," she smiled. "The roof of Kensington Palace?"

"There is nobody here; it's just me. The family doesn't come up here. The press can't get up here. And this view is..."

"It is," she agreed; taking a bite from her pizza. "Mmmm. Good God that's amazing."

"I told you," he grinned; watching her savor the food. "This was a good idea."

"I'm full of good ideas," she shrugged.

"You are." They settled into their spots; eating pizza, drinking the wine Bernard had put in the bag, and looking out over the city. Occasionally Harry would point something out or Maddie would ask a question but for the most part, they ate in a contented silence as they allowed their world to return closer to normal. When they finished, Harry put the containers back in the bag and they laid flat on the blanket as they looked out at the city and up at the stars.

"You are handling this incredibly well," Harry turned his head to look over at her with loving eyes and she knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Yeah, well, what choice do I have?"
"What choice do you have?" He laughed; scrubbing his hand over his face as he turned on his side; propping himself up on one elbow so he could look down at her. "God Maddie, you could choose to walk away and it would just...fade."

"Harry..." Her hand reached up to stroke his cheek.

"Nobody would blame you. And you could be done with all of this," he snatched her hand; playing with her fingers. "The press, the fans, the critics, the family, the...all of the baggage that comes with me."

"You know I hate it when you call it baggage."

"And you know I hate it when you pretend it's no big deal." Their eyes locked; Maddie was the first to blink.

"What do you want me to say? I told you a long time ago, I want to be with you, to stand next to you; no matter what they throw at me."

"What about the pictures?" His jaw hardened as he thought of it.

"I don't know Harry," Maddie moved to her side; propping herself up, mirroring his position. "Everyone that matters knows that it's not me. My excellent new attorney is working on it and in the meantime...the woman in the photo has less cellulite than I do so..." She shrugged and rolled back to her back.

"Wow. You really can find a silver lining in everything, can't you?"

"I really have to reach sometimes," they shared a small laugh.

"What about all the blogs?"

"What about them? I'm almost thirty and I'm comfortable in my skin. Some blogger talking about how fat I am or another talking about how scrawny my legs are doesn't affect me like it might have when I was twenty."

"Wally?"

"Oh Please." She laughed. "I've refused to be pushed around by big men with guns. Wally doesn't phase me."

"My family?" His voice was soft as his eyebrows lifted.

"Your family is just as...interesting...as mine, just with more crowns and titles."

"How about..."

"How about you're worth it. All of it." She leaned halfway up; her arms supporting her as she narrowed her gaze on him. "Face it Harry, if Bendal couldn't pull me from you, nothing here is going to." His heart warmed in his chest; his emotions from the day cluttering his throat.

"You know it's dangerous to talk to a man like that."

"Dangerous?" She arched an eyebrow; grinning at his throw back to the weekend.
"He might start to think you have...intentions."

"Maybe I do." She was smiling wide as she said it.

"Ha..." He pulled her to him then; relaxing back onto the blanket as she settled against his chest. She felt safe and protected and loved. And Harry felt a whole host of emotions that he had never in his life felt before. Looking out at the night sky, he took a breath, "Can I let you in on a secret?"

"Of course." Her voice was soft, not wanting to disrupt the peacefulness.

"Someday..." His chest rose and fell under her cheek.

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to ask you to be my wife." And it was so simple; so innocent—so honest. Maddie turned to look at him; searching his eyes and his face remained calm; sure. His words had hit them both; her with surprise and a sudden rush of emotions—him with absolute clarity.

"Harry..." Her voice was shaky.

"Does that scare you?" He blinked; watching her process his confession.

"No," she shook her head; tears in her eyes. "It doesn't. It..."

"Good," he sighed with relief; his hand twisting up in her hair to pull her lips down to his.

"You know..." She spoke against his mouth, pulling back slightly. "You really shouldn't say those things to a woman before you've met her mother, her family. That might change your mind. It might...."

"Shush," he kissed her again. "When can we go?"

"Go where?" Maddie pulled back. "To Colorado?"

"Did your mother move?" His fingers played with her hair.

"No."

"Then yes. To Colorado."

"Harry..." She couldn't help the way her eyes lit up at the thought. She couldn't help the excitement that grew at his suggestion.

"We can go for your birthday," he suggested; his hand cupping her neck as his lips kissed her jaw.

"But that's in two weeks. Can you really just up and leave?"

"I really can," he nodded; his lips brushing the skin of her neck. "Can you?"

"Ha!" She laughed into the night. "I won't even know until tomorrow if I'm still employed." Harry pulled back then, his memory of the day's events catching up with him. "Stop," she warned. "We came here to get away from it."
"Okay," he nodded; summoning all of his will to do as she asked. "You'll let me know tomorrow if you can get away?"

"I will," she sighed. "I will let you know tomorrow."

"Excellent," and then, with a wicked gleam and a smug grin, he pulled her body closer; rolling them so that she was underneath him. This time when his lips kissed hers; it was with hope and promise. And when Maddie kissed him back; it was with total abandon.

The next day would bring back to light all that they were trying to forget in that moment; the photos, the attorneys, the cameras, the questions. It would all be there when they returned from Harry's favorite place to escape. But, in that moment, it was just the two of them in the dark on a roof; together.
Chapter 44

The first time she woke the next morning, Maddie's eyes fluttered open to see that it was barely morning; the sun only beginning to peek out over the horizon. Harry, spooned up behind her, his arm loose around her waist, was breathing the deep, steady breath of slumber into her ear. It was as if their bodies knew, after the strain of the day before, that they needed this closeness; this contact—even in sleep. She wasn't ready to wake yet, she wanted more of this before the day and all of its realities returned. Reveling in the warmth he provided, she sighed and willed herself back to sleep. Just as her eyes grew heavy and began to close, she felt him stir. His arm tightened around her waist, pulling her closer.

"You awake?" He muttered sleepily in her ear; his breath tickling her neck.

"Mmmm..." She nodded slightly and then took a breath as he moved, only slightly, to press a warm kiss into the hollow of her neck. "Oh..."

"Good morning," his voice was rough as his hand let go of hers and moved achingly slow up her side; pushing under the t-shirt he had leant her for the improv sleep over. Something about the way they had moved through the stress of the day before, something about how they had made it to the morning still entangled in each other drew out an overwhelming want for her.

"I could get used to waking up like this," her laughter was low and ceased when his hands reached her breasts, moving over them with a teasing warmth that instantly aroused her attention.

"Good to know..." He licked up the side of her neck, nipped at her earlobe. Tightening his hold on her, he pulled her so that her body was flush with his and she felt him. Hard. Warm. Ready.

His mouth remained close to her head; sucking at her shoulder, her neck. His hand ran over the length of her body, lightly over the mole that he had committed to his memory, and pushed into the small speck of fabric that was her panties, her body arched towards his fingers; aching at his touch.

"Harry..." She breathed heavily. She was barely awake, barely able to think a coherent thought, but at the same time she was completely in tune with him with this moment. The night before had been full of negative feelings and exhaustion but after getting away, getting much needed sleep, she couldn't help but respond to him.

His right arm went underneath her head, moving around her in a warm, strong hold. His left gently drew her top leg up, resting it on his; giving him greater access to where his hand truly longed to be. He moved his hand back to her center, stroking with firm, steady fingers. There were no words, only shallow breaths and soft moans as Harry slowly and steadily roused her body awake.

Maddie took a deep breath, her hands clutching at the arm wrapped around her; her hips pushing against the hand that teased her. He pressed his body closer to hers. He was mind-numbingly hard; aching to be inside of her—needing to make love to her. Turning only her head, Maddie's lips sought his—her hand pulled his face towards hers and their mouths met in a long, slow, deep kiss. Maddie felt her breath suck right out of her and pour into him.

When he pulled his lips away from hers, she missed them instantly. And when they began to kiss down her neck again, she wanted to be closer; always closer. With hooded eyes and a sultry
voice, Maddie pleaded. "Harry..." And he knew what she wanted. Moving only to rid them both of their underwear and find protection, Harry settled back against her and drew her to him; his hands returning appreciatively to her body.

Harry lowered his head to suck at her shoulder and then, with a strangled groan, he clutched at her thigh and slipped into her from behind. Maddie moaned and gasped at the sensation she felt when he plunged into her. With one hand planted on her hip to hold her in place, he began moving within her. Maddie's hand reached back, tangling in his hair and holding his lips in her neck; aching for more. He was holding her so close, she felt like she could melt into him.

Trusting she would keep up the rhythm they established, he moved his hand from her waist; lower, to stroke at her center as he continued to push into her. Maddie smiled sleepy; wanting him to hold her closer and closer still. As she pressed back into him, moaning and gasping at every thrust, the friction was almost unbearable. Harry took long, deep breaths, struggling to maintain control. Burying his face in her neck, he kissed and sucked and licked; he moaned in encouragement and groaned in restraint. He watched as Maddie fought to control her breathing, fought to be closer to him. He watched as her breathing began to come quicker, less restrained. He grinned when she sucked her lip between her teeth and her head rolled back onto his shoulder; that was her tell—she was close.

Maddie's hand moved down her own body; stopping to rest on his; still stroking her. Sucking in a breath, she pressed his hand closer. A wave of electricity ran through him as he watched her take control of her own pleasure; pushing them both closer to the edge. And then, as she began to clench around him, her hand holding his in place; the groan that came from deep within her was all it took to send Harry over the edge. His mouth rest close to her ear, where she could hear every ragged breath that came from his lips; he thrust faster, harder, holding her tighter and closer to him. And then, in that hazy way that comes right before the explosion, Maddie uttered his name. Just as her words fell from her mouth she was exploding against him. Harry groaned into her ear; so, so close. Her eyes were heavy, her body slick, her breath coming out in gasps. Amidst her falling apart, her eyes opened, met his and she smiled; warm, welcoming, satisfied. And then, with a great intensity, he pushed into her; his lips meeting hers and he followed—blissfully—over the edge.

As their breathing subsided and their hearts calmed, Harry pressed a kiss to her shoulder and moved to brush her hair from her forehead and sweep it away from her face. There was so much to say, so many feelings he wanted to convey; about the day before, about how much it meant that she was still there, about how his confessions had been the truest thing he could have said to her. But the connection they had just made was so much more powerful than anything he would be able to articulate in that moment; so he let the words fade. Maddie brought his hand to her lips for a kiss and sighed; settling back against him. As they adjusted in the bed, Harry held her close—though not as tight—and with one final, loving kiss, they drifted back to sleep; satisfied and tired.

The second time she woke up, Maddie sensed two things. She was alone in Harry's bed and, from the warm aroma wafting into the room, he was eating breakfast somewhere. Luring her from the coziness of the bed, she stretched her arms over her head and moved to find him. Glancing at the clock, she knew he would be leaving for work soon. Knowing there were people around, she pulled on a pair of his sweat pants; laughing at how loose they were and his big fluffy robe before she left his room. Stepping into the dining room Harry sat at the table, a phone pressed to his ear; his hair wet from a shower. She took a few steps closer and watched him; loving how normal this looked.

Clearing her throat, she made her presence known. He looked up to her with a smug smile and shining eyes. He held his finger up as he finished his conversation. Standing, he tossed his phone
to the table and made his way over to her. Cupping her face in his hand he leaned in to kiss her,
"Good morning," his voice was low and intoxicating.

"It really was," she held his hand to her face for a moment; leaning into it before she released it;
tipping up on her toes to kiss him again. "Hello."

"Hello."

"Working?" She raised her eyebrows as he led her to the table with a chuckle.

"I just got off of the phone with Thomas."

"This early?" She arched an eyebrow as she settled into her chair and reached for a cup of tea.

"He's in the office already," Harry smiled at her concern. "I had to check my calendar with him
and...I'm clear to leave the Thursday before your birthday. You can stay as long as you like, but I
have to head back on Monday. But, I'll be with you for your birthday on Saturday. Of course the
security team would want to talk with your mother and..."

"Wait," Maddie sat her cup back on the table. "You were serious? About Colorado and..."

"I was serious," his eyes met hers with no hint of a joke or sarcasm. "You thought I wasn't?"

"I thought there was a chance," she laughed nervously. "Harry, yesterday was a stressful day and
last night you said a lot of things..."

"I did," he cut her off; his shoulders square, head held high. His lips twitched into a grin. "And
you said it didn't scare you."

"It doesn't." Her reply was quick as her heart thudded.

"Oh-kay," he chuckled; not completely believing her. "I wish you could see the look on your face
right now."

"It's just..." She fidgeted with her napkin. "You've only known me a year..."

"Fifteen months."

"And we've only been together...God I don't even know how long we've..."

"It depends on when you start counting," he answered; taking a bite of fruit. "I met you fifteen
months ago and I could argue that we had our first date when I came back a month later..."

"When you brought the candy?" She smiled at the memory.

"Yes," he nodded with a matching nostalgic grin. "You gave me your number and I would have
kissed you then if you would have stopped avoiding me for one damn..."

"I wasn't avoiding you," she countered with a laugh.

"Sure," he nodded. "We went on that hike and...you didn't know then?" He moved so that he was
facing her; pulling her hands into his. "I knew then. So you could say we've been...something for
about fourteen months...but for arguments' sake, I'll give you those few months over the phone...bringing us to nine months ago. We started nine months ago. I was just about six months in when I got out of my head and followed my heart...

"You flew all the way to Bendal to kiss me," her cheeks were warm as she remembered.

"I did," he nodded. "And then you went right ahead and stomped all over my moment..."

"You said it was fine!" She nudged him.

"It was fine. It was more than fine...God...Khenda could read me like a book." He shook his head. "I knew I loved you then—before then, but definitely that night. I knew that night."

"And then..." Maddie took a breath. "And then I was shot." Harry swallowed.

"Standing in front of me," she opened up her mouth in protest and he continued before she could talk. "Let's call it what it was Maddie. I don't bring it up now because I know it makes you uncomfortable but...you saved my life that night."

"I..."

"Saved my life that night." He let the weight of it sit in the room before he tightened his hold on her hands; pressing kisses to the tops of them. "Two weeks later, despite your best judgment and my warnings, you jumped in head first. And now...you've been living in London for three months? Four?"

"Almost five," she corrected; her smile timid, shy almost.

"Yes, it's been a short amount of time but you have to admit, we've been through more than a year's share of trials, no?"

"No, you're right..."

"And though you continue to be firm in standing next to me, assuring me that none of the bullshit that comes along with me is going to push you away—refusing to be budged by any of it...the moment I give you the same kind of assurances, the moment I tell you that I'm not going anywhere, you get nervous..."

"I'm not nervous," she moved closer; her hands resting on his thighs as she slipped her knees between his. "Look at me Harry. I'm not nervous. I just don't want you to say something that you don't mean or that you'll want to take back or..."

"Neither of those things is going to happen," he held her face in his hands.

"No?" Her voice was small; hopeful.

"No," he shook his head; tearing his eyes from hers with a chuckle. "But, you said we can't talk about it until I meet your mother. So..." He shrugged and turned back to his seat.

"I did say that," she sighed into a laugh and relaxed into her chair, reaching for her tea. "You would think I would learn to keep my mouth shut."

"God I hope not," he winked at her and, in the sort of ease that was so much a part of who they
were together, returned to his breakfast.
Chapter 45

The days immediately following the nude photo fiasco were long, emotional, and full of an outpouring of support from all around. Before she left Harry to return home, she had received calls from Sophie and Eugenie and after she had showered and dressed for the day, she spent half an hour on the phone with Khenda and Collins. Talking to them was exactly what she had needed before she headed back to the hospital to meet with her boss.

Sitting across from him in his office, she was mentally prepared for the worst. But instead of reprimand and talks of leaving, he surprised Maddie by telling her about the new protocol that had been worked out in response to what had happened the day before. He informed her that the hospital was private property and the press simply couldn't be there. A strongly worded statement had been delivered on behalf of the hospital and, should they show up again, security would be called. Maddie almost burst into tears when he reached out to pat her hand and offer his, and the hospital's, support with matters such as this. Though Maddie assured him she had legal counsel, she thanked him and thanked him again. And then, with a smile that took over her face, she hurried to her office—her office—where she called Harry with the news. His shout of satisfaction was followed by a sigh of relief—thankful that his life hadn't taken from her something that was so essentially a part of her.

And three days later, when Christopher Michael called to tell her that three independent professionals had studied the photos and could prove, beyond a doubt, that they were fake, Maddie pulled Harry into her bedroom to show him just how happy she was that he had known on first glance, and without a doubt, that the moles on her body were different than the moles in the photo. The website turned over all copies of the photos, which Maddie promptly destroyed in the fireplace at Ella's after a bottle of wine. They were forced to print an apology and, though there were still people—conspiracy theorists mostly—who thought the almighty hand of the British Royal Family had stepped in to prevent these photos, people began to focus their attention away from the incident altogether.

But the support continued. Maddie received a lovely handwritten note from Kate, the next time she saw Charles he had hugged her tight; wishing he could have prevented the incident. And even William reached out and invited her to lunch. Though it was to bring her in on the planning of Harry's upcoming birthday with him and Bishop, it was in public, it was photographed and it was a strong sign of support. And when she thanked him for the gesture, he left her speechless with his retort,

"Think nothing of it," he had smiled warmly. "I know that you had to sacrifice a great deal to be with my brother. And I know that the sacrifices only increase along the way...your privacy, your pride, sometimes your sense of self...but I've never seen him happier. Never in my entire life. So thank you, for that."

Maddie never told anyone what Harry had said to her that night on the roof of Kensington Palace—not even Ella. Though they didn't talk about it after that morning, the feeling continued on with them; in the way he held her, the way he touched her and Maddie had made a decision. This journey, however long or short it might be, was going to remain exclusively theirs—for as long as she could keep it that way.

As Maddie returned to work, to normal; the planning for their trip to the US was underway. Her boss had approved the time away and Harry let Thomas know to go ahead with the plans. Her mother about fell over when she told her she was coming; going immediately into planning mode.
She agreed to only let the immediate family know, to keep it as quiet as possible and to work with Harry's Security Team who would be contacting her to make sure everything was ready for their visit. Maddie implored her mother, at Harry's firm and persistent request, not to curtsey to him when they met. With the slightest bit of trepidation born from a lack of understanding about how it all worked, her mother agreed and promised to inform the family.

They were just over a week out when they went to dinner with Ella and Matt; who turned out to be a nice guy who Harry took a liking too—spending the majority of dinner asking him question upon question about his flight experience. And, when they finally split from the couple, Maddie sent Ella a picture message of she and Harry with their thumbs up—they liked him. And from the way Ella had watched him throughout dinner, Maddie could tell that Ella did too.

When the day finally arrived that they were leaving, Maddie was excited. For as nervous as she was about the moment Harry would step into her childhood home and meet the people who had known her during that awkward time when she wore braces and coke bottle glasses, she was ready. She wanted to show him her roots. He had let her into his inner sanctuary; introducing her to his family, feeling comfortable enough to lose his cool in front of her, taking her hand as they faced the world outside. And now she was eager to show him who she was, at the same vulnerable level that he had shown her.

She had packed her bags, checking and rechecking to make sure she was prepared for any number of encounters while she was home. With her mother's help, Harry's team seemed happy about staying in the large home on the fifty acres of farmland in the middle of the Colorado plains. Maddie had put together an itinerary that had been approved by her mother and Harry—in that order—and now she was ready. Harry was going to pick her up shortly and then they were headed directly to the airport. As she rechecked her purse for her kindle and her ipod, the buzzer rang out.

"Hello?" She was downright chipper.

"It's me."

"On my way."

"No no!" He stopped her. "Let me up."

"Okay..." She buzzed him up and waited. Stepping out of the elevator with Jim, Harry was holding onto something wrapped in white paper; large, thin and rectangle. "What's that?"

"You'll have to wait," he smiled as Jim checked out her place and stepped back outside; allowing them in.

"Okay," Maddie shut the door behind him. "What's that?" Her curiosity made him laugh.

"It's a present," he leaned it against her wall on the floor. "For you."

"A present?" Her eyebrows went up. "For me?"

"Yes," he laughed. "You seem shocked—which is strange since your birthday is in two days."

"But...we're going to Colorado for my birthday. I just assumed that was my gift..."

"You should never assume such things."
"Well a trip is a pretty extravagant gift."

"I think maybe you need to get used to extravagant gifts, love."

"But..." Her eyes danced in the way they always seemed to do just before Christmas; with expectation and joy and anticipation. It made Harry want to gift her something every day. "What is it?"

"Well, I know that you've been missing Bendal. I know I miss it and last week when you were talking to Khenda and Collins, I could tell that you were a little...homesick. And sometimes I hate that you can't be there, even though it means that you get to be here," he reached for her hand. "So, I had a painting commissioned..."

"You had a painting commissioned?" Maddie chuckled. "I have literally no idea how to do that...is there—sorry. Is there a listing in the yellow pages or..." Her eyes fell on the large painting resting against her wall. "What is the painting of?"

"Only one way to find out," he nodded toward it.

"I can open it now?"

"Of course." Maddie clapped her hands together and moved to the present. Harry watched with great humor as she pulled the paper meticulously from around it and when she gasped and took a step back, he moved to stand behind her; hands on her shoulders. "Harry..."

"It's the view from the summit..." He explained. "My favorite place in Bendal."

"The best the country had to offer," she repeated the words he had spoken to her when he had taken her up there for the first time.

"Yes," he nodded; dropping a kiss to her shoulder. "Save for you."

"Ohhhh," Maddie turned to face him then; her eyes bright and shining. "You're good."

"Thank you," he grinned smugly.

"No, thank you," she tilted her head up to kiss him; her arms wrapping around his neck. "I love my present. It's...breathtaking..." Her lips met his again; his arms tightening around her waist.

"I'm glad you like it," he whispered against her lips.

"Will you help me hang it when we get back?"

"I will. Now..." His hand patted her ass playfully. "Are you ready to return to the US?"

"Are you ready to meet my mother?" She arched an eyebrow as she stepped from him.

"Absolutely," he huffed and reached for her bag. "I'm great with mothers."

"I would imagine that you are," Maddie's voice was dry.

"Hey!" He feigned offense. "What's that supposed to mean?"
"Ah come on," Maddie smiled as she pulled her bag to her shoulder and moved towards the door. "Of course you're great with mothers. The voice, the charm, the propriety. They don't stand a chance! Who would guess that underneath it all is a wild, crazy heartbreaker that's going to wreck their daughters for every man that comes after him?"

"Heartbreaker?!" He laughed out loud as she opened the door. "Wait. Every man that comes after him? I thought we already discussed this. There will be no men after me..."

"Okay," she winked and stepped into the hall and smiled at his bodyman. "Jim."

"Doctor," he smiled back.

"Maddie," Harry's tone was serious as he followed them to the elevator. "I mean it."

"Okay," she sighed.

"I said..."

"And I'm agreeing with you," she smirked and waved her hand. "Now get in the elevator your highness. We have a plane to catch."

"I don't find you amusing in the least," he muttered as he stepped into the elevator.

"Oh we both know that's not true," she tucked her hand in his arm and smiled up at him; his body relaxing under her hand.

"And it's your royal highness," he corrected her with a wink. Maddie's laughter rang through the halls even as the door closed and the elevator moved.

"Thank you for the painting," she held tighter to him as they stepped out of the elevator and moved towards the outside.

"You're welcome for the painting."

"And for the trip..." She paused then, holding him so that he stopped. Her eyes looked up to him; absent of the sarcasm and banter from only moments before. "Seriously Harry. I know that this trip; the planning, the logistics and everything. It's a lot."

"It's not a lot," he shook his head.

"I appreciate it," she smiled. "I just...thank you for doing this. It means a lot to me and I...I appreciate it."

"You're welcome," he leaned to kiss her cheek. "Now," he pushed open the door to her building and stood aside. "Let's go meet your mother, so I can charm her with my voice and my...what was it? Charm? My wild heartbreaking ways?"

"Oh it's going to be a long trip," Maddie giggled as she moved towards the car. In front of a few watchful cameras, their bags were loaded and they stepped into the backseat. Their weekend in the states was just a roughly 10 hour flight away.
"Wow..." Maddie snickered as she, Harry, and the three security officers collected their luggage after landing in Colorado. "I cannot believe there were not swarms of girls running after you."

"I told you, I get along easier in the US." Harry seemed at ease; casual and relaxed.

"How is that possible? They adore you here." Even before she had known him, she knew that he was a fan favorite. Yet, as they walked through the airport there were a few people who noticed, potentially a few camera phone shots of him, but nothing like she had thought.

"They don't expect me to be here," he explained. "They tend to think I'm somebody who looks like me. It's nice actually."

"Oh..." Maddie nodded and then, out of the corner of her eye, she spied two young girls who were pointing in their direction. Leaning closer to him, she lowered her voice. "I spoke too soon. You've been spotted." As inconspicuously as possible, Harry glanced in their direction. They saw him and giggled; waving at him. Always kind, Harry nodded with a small smile and a wave; sending the girls running from them in laughter. "You're so sweet with them," Maddie smiled as they stepped away with their luggage towards a bank of elevators.

"I don't think it was me that caught their attention," he grinned at her.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't see the shirt the shorter one was wearing?" He chuckled.

"No..."

"It said 'Team Maddie'." It was amusing to him. Maddie had always been a bigger deal than him in Bendal and he couldn't help but chuckle at the surprised expression on her face as she discovered her own popularity.

"What?" Her eyes went wide as she glanced back hoping to catch a look. "Really?! I have a Team? Wow...look at me. I have a team," her smile was goofy as she pondered it. "Wait. If there's a Team Maddie', then...who is on the other team?"

"The other Team?" They all stepped into the waiting elevator.

"When Brad Pitt left Jennifer Aniston for Angelina; there was a Team Jennifer and a Team Angelina. Harry, is there another team...for somebody else?" Harry looked to her; his eyes narrowed, voice flat.

"Yes Maddie, I have time to do this with two women and keep it from the press. Definitely seems like something I would do..."

"Fine, fine...you're right..." Maddie rolled her eyes; immediately seeing the ridiculousness in her question. "I'll ask Gary's wife what they're about. She's up to date on all the gossip; she'll know. Maybe it's not even about me. Maybe there's another Maddie and I'm just not as up on things as I should be."
"I'm sure that's it," Harry laughed as the elevator opened and they stepped out.

"We're right over there," Jim spoke up; pointing to a set of doors. It was a short walk and then they were outside in the crisp, fresh air.

"Welcome to Colorado," Maddie took a deep breath as they stepped out of the airport to the two cars that were waiting to transport them to her childhood home about an hour away.

"Look at that view..." Harry nodded to the mountain range as pulled sunglasses onto his eyes; the sun shining bright in the cloudless sky.

"That..." Maddie tucked her hand in his elbow and pointed with the other. "Is Mount Evans. It's over 14,000 feet high which is what? At least 4000 meters."

"Jesus," Harry shook his head. "I bet the view from there is..."

"Spectacular," Maddie grinned. "I hiked it with my cousin Kyle after graduation."

"And you tried to pretend you weren't a hiker," his eyes danced as he thought of one of their earliest interactions. "Are we going to hike that while we're here?"

"No," she shook her head. "It's a pretty serious summit and I'm not sure that drastic of an altitude switch would be good for either of us. But...we will be in Denver all day Saturday and Saturday night. So...maybe we could go in for a drive?"

"Excellent," he smiled as they began loading their bags. "Which way are we headed today?"

"That way," Maddie pointed in the opposite direction.

"Well," Harry looked for miles and miles over flat land. "There are certainly no mountains that way."

"Nope," she grinned and stepped up to the driver's door. "Just farmland."

"Yeah..." Harry let out a long slow breath and stopped; his face twisting up as he looked at her. "Sorry, what are you doing?"

"Driving."

"Wait, hold on..." He glanced to his body man and back to her. "Who said you get to drive?"

"I asked Jim if I could drive one of the cars out to my parents' and he said it was okay."

"Jim!"

"It's nothing but open highway and she's been cleared as zero threat to your safety." His response was matter of fact. "What can I say?"

"What can you..."

"See," Maddie grinned. "We should get Jim a Team Maddie shirt," she slid into the car as they laughed.
"Of course, if you prefer, we can take the other car," Jim suggested. "Sir."

"Yeah," Maddie smiled at him. "You and your three friends can take the other car and I'll meet you there."

"Oh is that so?" He smirked and stepped to the passenger door.

"Get in the car Wales!"

"Mighty bossy, no?" He raised his eyebrows as he climbed into the passenger seat; Jim slipping in behind him. Brad and Nathan would be following them in the car behind.

"Your title means nothing here," her smile was smug as she leaned across the seat to kiss him. Starting the ignition, she sighed and pulled away from the curb. Harry couldn't help but be taken by how free and relaxed she looked; ready to see her home and her family.

Harry could tell as they grew closer and closer to Maddie's mother's home; the excitement was evident on her face, in her mannerisms. Her knee was bouncing slightly, her lip pulled into her teeth. He chuckled as he watched her.

"Hey..." His hand reached out to steady her knee. "I thought I was the only one who was supposed to be nervous."

"Hmmm," she grinned at him; glancing down at his hand on her knee. "I'm not nervous. I'm anxious and...wait. You're nervous?"

"Of course I'm nervous."

"I thought mothers loved you."

"They generally do," Harry nodded.

"Hey..." Maddie watched him for a moment. "This is not a big deal. You've met Presidents and Sultans and..."

"It's different," Harry ran a hand through his hair. "Before I meet Presidents and...Sultans? Really? You think I've met a lot of Sultans?"

"Well, maybe not a lot," Maddie shrugged. "Haven't you?"

"Not really..." He laughed; bringing his hands together in front of him. "Usually I go into those meetings having read up on the people I'm about to meet."

"Maybe you should have asked Thomas to write up a memo on my mother," Maddie's lips twitched into a smirk.

"Don't laugh," Harry's eyes narrowed playfully. "I thought about it. I really did."

"You'll be fine," she laughed. "I don't know what you're so worried about."

"No?" He raised his eyebrows. "You weren't nervous meeting my family?"
"I was ambushed with the majority of your family," she laughed. "Think about it. I woke up in the hospital and met William; hospital gown and all. Then, I came back from my doctor's appointment and made an absolute fool out of myself in front of your father and Camilla." Harry started to laugh at the reminder. "I didn't have time to really be nervous about it."

"But you did alright with my granny," his hand moved back to her knee.

"I did alright with The Queen," one hand dropped from the wheel to pat his. "And you'll do alright with my mother...what worries you the most?" He swallowed and looked out the window.

"That she googled me," Harry breathed. "That she's read up on me and has already formed an opinion."

"She has already formed an opinion," Maddie squeezed his fingers. "A great one. Don't forget that you were on the phone with her three times a day for those first few days after I was shot. Don't forget that when I was trying to decide what to do next, it was my mother who threw her full throated support to London...and that wasn't because she's a fan of Big Ben, if you know what I mean. She does have an opinion of you already, but it's...God Harry, it's a great one."

"Yeah?" He smiled, taking her hand in his.

"Mmm," Maddie nodded. "Besides, my mother doesn't google things."

"Okay," Harry laughed and relaxed a bit. Maddie studied him from the corner of her eye; certain this was the first time she had seen his ego shaken slightly. "Now you said that your uncle is going to be here?"

"Yes. My uncle Patrick, my dad's brother."

"The financial planner who lives in...Denver?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "He does but he has clients in town and stops in to check on my mother. He was going to be there for dinner anyway."

"And your cousin..." Harry's lip pulled into his mouth as he thought about it. "Gary. The farmer."

"He lives on a small plot of land not far from my mother and when my dad died, he took over management of the farm; logistically."

"And he's married."

"To Jenna."

"And they'll be at dinner tonight?"

"They will," Maddie grinned. "And that's it for today. You'll meet everyone else when we're in Denver on Saturday."

"Okay," Harry let out a breath and smiled. "I can handle four people."

"That's the spirit," Maddie smirked.
"What about the others?"

"My cousin Kyle is an architect. He lives in Denver with his girlfriend Amy. And then there's Derek. He's married to Dena. They have two little kids; Molly and Casey. And finally, my grandmother; Ruth. But I can tell you all about them before we head to the city Saturday morning."

"Or you could tell me now..."

"I can't," Maddie shook her head with a wide smile and pointed to a gated entrance just off the road. "We're here."

"We're..." Harry looked just past the gate. There was a long drive through trees and then a large house at the top of a hill. "...here." Maddie entered the code to the gate and waited for it to open before she pulled inside and pulled over.

"Okay, listen..." Putting the car into park, she turned to face him; forgetting Jim in the backseat. "You are an amazing man. You are a Captain in the British Army. You've lead men in battle. You've formed a charity to help the poorest children in the world. You spend your time pingin' between serving your country in the military and serving the people as an ambassador of...good. Harry. You are a Prince and yet, you came to the corner of the world and played in the dirt and made me fall for you; made me follow you...made me..." She took a breath and looked towards the house. "My mother told me to be where you are. My mother who, after I was shot, wanted me to move into my old room and never leave the house again...told me to move to London to be with you. She already loves you. She already thinks you're an amazing man and...and she's right." Maddie's eyes met his wide, watery eyes. He wasn't used to hearing such things. "Now come on. You got this." With a quick kiss to his lips, Maddie turned back to the wheel and began up the drive. Harry took a breath and tried his best to calm his pounding heart.

The gravel under the tires crunched as they drove; the trees offering something of a shaded path under the hot summer sun. Looking out the window, Harry took in the view. There were acres and acres of sprawling land out front; trees, wild flowers, what appeared to be a stream through the property. Looking forward, he could see the large house—more modern than the image that came to mind when one thought of a farm house. Behind it was a hint of the barn and typical farm accompaniments. In front was a good sized, well-manicured lawn and a wrap-around porch. And on the porch—he took a deep breath—was Maddie's family.

He spotted her mother instantly; she had the same eyes and the same mess of hair on her head. She was standing at the railing, waving to the cars as they approached. Despite his nerves, he couldn't help but warm at how excited Maddie's family was to see her.

"That's my mom," Maddie pointed out unnecessarily.

"She's beautiful."

"She's nervous," Maddie parked the car and turned a wide, bright smile to him. "Go easy on her okay?"

"Me?!" He laughed.

"She's never met a Prince before and you can be intimidating and..."

"Come on," Harry grinned and took her hand; enamored by her sudden need to protect her mom.
"Let's go meet your mother."

Without another thought, another word, Maddie opened the door, stepped out of the car and rushed across the gravel into the grass; stepping right into her mother's waiting arms. Harry was thankful for the sunglasses as his eyes teared up embarrassingly at the scene on the lawn. He stood off to the side with his three security officers as Maddie hugged and kissed her mother; both women wiping at tears and sighing over the other. And when Maddie took her mother's hand and turned to look at him, he took a deep breath and pulled his sunglasses from his eyes.

In meeting Maddie's mother, he wasn't sure what hit him the most; the pride in Maddie's eyes as she looked at him, the welcoming way her mother accepted him into her home or the way his heart ached at the gravity of the moment—at the history he already had with her mother, sharing news with her of Maddie's injuries, knowing it was her he had to thank for sending Maddie to him. But he didn't have time to sort it out in that moment, he just let it all hit him.

"Mom, I would like you to meet Harry Wales," Maddie's eyes twinkled as she introduced him as he had asked her to. "Harry, this is my mother; Hannah Forrester."

"It's nice to finally meet you Harry," her mother smiled as she extended a hand to the young man in front of her.

"The pleasure is all mine," Harry took her hand in both of his.

"I appreciate you bringing my daughter here for her birthday."

"It was no trouble at all. Thank you for welcoming us into your home; all of us." He gestured towards the three security officers with him.

"I'm happy to have you," she smiled to the three men. "All of you." Harry stepped back then as Jim stepped forward.

"Mrs. Forrester, this is Jim Anderson, he's the head of my Security Team."

"Mrs. Forrester," Jim stuck out his hand. "We've spoken on the phone a few times."

"Yes," she smiled; amused at the formality and propriety that was unfolding in front of her.

"Ma'am, this is Brad Fitzgerald and Nathan Woodford." The two stepped up to shake her hand and offer hellos before Maddie's mother clapped her hands together and smiled at Jim.

"Well, why don't I take you inside so that you can look around and get set up," she leaned to kiss Maddie's cheek. "You can introduce Harry to Patrick, Gary and Jenna. Oh!" She turned to them all then. "One more thing, I would rather prefer to be called Hannah, Mrs. Forrester is so..." She let off with a shrug; something Harry had seen Maddie do on numerous occasions.

"I'm sorry ma'am" Jim shook his head. "We're simply not allowed to do that; regulations."

"Fair enough," she nodded and looked to Harry.

"I'm not sure if my upbringing is going to allow me to actually do that," Harry laughed. "But I'll try."

"Please do," her eyes gleaming alongside her smirk. "Or I just may be forced to call you your
highness for the rest of your trip,” Harry's eyes flashed wide for a second before he saw Maddie's lips twitch out of the corner of her eye. She was sassing him.

"Wow..." He chuckled; shaking his head.

"It's your royal highness," Maddie corrected her mother with a matching smirk.

"Ah yes," Hannah nodded, managing not to laugh as she winked at Harry. "Well, we'll see how it goes." She patted his arm and turned to Jim. "Gentlemen, right this way." Jim and Brad followed as Nathan stayed behind with Harry who turned to Maddie with an amused expression.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" She smiled up at him as she took his hand.

"No, no," he shook his head; allowing her to pull him towards the house. "Also, it's very clear from where you get your sass."

"Hmm..." She laughed. "She's much better at it than I. You should keep on your toes."

"Thanks for the warning."

"No problem. Ready for round two?"

"Absolutely." When they reached the bottom of the stairs, they were met by the rest of the group. Maddie dropped his hand to hug them; first the older man, then the younger, and finally the young woman.

"Everyone, this is Harry. Harry, this is Patrick, Gary, and Jenna." Maddie smiled wide. "Go easy on him. He's nervous and mom's already messing with him."

"Thank you," Harry narrowed his eyes at her before stepping forward to greet them as they laughed. He could already tell; the fiery personality that he loved so much about Maddie was something that came from her family. And he was in for quite the weekend.

And it had only just begun.
Chapter 47

After rounds of introductions and an all-clear from Jim, they entered the large house that Maddie’s parents had built when she was in high school. Her family stepped aside and allowed them to unpack and settle into their rooms. The three bedrooms upstairs would be occupied by Harry and his team; one for Harry, and the other two for the three security officers to do with as they wished. Maddie would be sleeping in her old room on the main floor with her mother in the master suite in the walk out basement. Maddie had sighed internally when her mother had directed her to her old room and Harry upstairs, but complied without argument.

When they finished settling in, the group from England made their way back to the main floor where they were greeted with a festive atmosphere. There was lively music and the savory aroma of dinner. Hannah had opened up the glass doors that made up the entire back wall of the main level of the house and they had all moved outside. There was a massive deck built off the back. On it was a built in grill, a long, heavy table with chairs all around and a few grouped seating areas with outdoor couches and chairs. The home was beautiful. Hannah had a flare for design; making everything impeccable. Maddie had always been impressed; having completely missed that particular gene.

Maddie met up with Harry and his team; already settled on the deck with her family. Everyone was relaxed—drinks were being passed while Gary manned the grill. Maddie stepped up behind Harry; her hand falling to his shoulder. He looked up with a smile at her touch.

"How is everything?" Maddie looked around.

"Everything's great," Hannah grinned at the two of them and then nodded to Maddie. "Dinner's ready. Maddie, would you come and help me bring out some of the side dishes?"

"Here, let me help you," Harry moved as if to rise from his chair.

"Oh no," Hannah shook her head with a laugh. "You're a guest in this house. You stay put. Besides, it'll give Maddie and I a moment to catch up."

"Exactly," Maddie patted Harry's shoulder. "You stay put and I'll be right back. You'll be okay?"

"Of course he'll be okay," Patrick waved her off with a laugh. "What do you think we're going to do to him? Other than get him drunk and tell him stories about you as a child. Would you like a beer?" He offered a bottle to Harry.

"Yes, thank you," Harry grinned and took the beer. "I think I'll be fine." He appreciated her concern, though having now met them, he was completely at ease. "Besides, I would love to hear stories about you as a child."

"That's what I'm afraid of," she glared playfully at her uncle. Patrick offered bottles to Harry's team, though they politely declined. "And you should wait for the stories until I'm here to defend myself," she warned her uncle; though as she followed her mother into the kitchen, she could hear laughter erupt from outside. And she knew better.

"Oh lovely," Maddie groaned; as Jenna looked up from the salad she was mixing with a smile.

"You didn't think you would have him here for five days and manage to keep them from talking,
"No," Maddie groaned again, this time with a laugh. "Though I didn't think it would start on night one."

"So naïve," Jenna winked and Maddie laughed; so thankful for the close, though feisty, family she had.

"Soooo..." Maddie's voice lowered as she slid up next to her mother and Jenna at the counter. "What do you think?"

"Oh my goodness, Madeline," Hannah glanced towards the deck and lowered her voice. "He is so...charismatic."

"I know," Maddie grinned at her mother.

"He's polite and well-spoken and..."

"And he's unbelievably hot," Jenna added.

"Jenna!" Hannah's eyes went wide.

"Sorry but he is."

"He really is," Maddie chuckled softly and focused on her mother. "Are you feeling better now that you've met him?"

"Yes," she sighed. "I know you think I'm crazy because I was nervous, but he is a Prince."

"Yeah, but, he's a Prince that's dating Maddie," Jenna offered. Maddie's eyebrows lifted; smirk in place. "Sorry! What I meant is that...Maddie's not going to bring home some pompous ass. Prince or not—she's too good for that."

"Aw, thank you," Maddie wrapped her arm around Jenna's shoulders for a side hug.

"Well, Prince or not...hot or not..." Hannah glanced between the two women. "He looks at you..." She grew silent as her emotions bubbled to the surface and Maddie knew without knowing that she was thinking of her father. "He just..." Hannah swallowed a lump in her throat and smiled. "He really looks at you."

"Mom..." Maddie's voice wasn't much more than a cracked whisper.

"None of this," Hannah waved her hand in front of her face and reached for a bowl. "Come on. We need to get this stuff outside or he's going to think we're in here talking about him." And then, with bowl in hand, she turned and left Maddie and Jenna standing in her wake.

"Well..." Maddie cleared her throat and reached for a tray of food. "I'm pretty sure he knows that we're talking about him because, not only is he polite, well-spoken..."

"And hot," Jenna supplied.

"And hot," Maddie agreed. "He's also brilliant."
"Of course he is," Jenna rolled her eyes with a laugh; lifting a bowl from the counter. "Incidentally...I'm pretty sure Gary has never really looked at me."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed; knowing better than that. "Come on. Let's go." Jenna followed behind Maddie in a trail of laughter. Laughter that was overshadowed by that just outside the doors. As Maddie stepped outside, placing her bowl on the table, the laughter only increased.

"Okay," Maddie sighed into her seat next to Harry. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing," Gary shook his head and pointed at Harry. "He told us."

"Oh God..." She groaned and looked to him. "What did you tell them?" Harry smiled lovingly at her; wrapping an arm around the back of her chair.

"They asked how we met..." Harry shrugged innocently.

"And you told them..." Maddie sighed, reaching for a drink.

"That you bossed me around from the very beginning."

"And we were not surprised," Gary shook his head as a bubble of laughter rounded the table; plates being filled.

"Not in the least," Harry looked to her with a smirk. "Turns out you were an incredibly bossy child."

"I was the only girl around for years. I had to be bossy," she defended.

"Hey, I told you, I'm a fan of the bossy."

"Oh! That reminds me," Maddie turned to Jenna who sat across from her. "We were at the airport and we saw this girl wearing a shirt that said Team Maddie. It was really strange and...I'm not up on what's happening these days. You know anything about it?"

"Ha!" Jenna laughed and swallowed the food in her mouth before she continued. "Actually, I do know what you're talking about. You really want to get into it?"

"No?" Maddie eyed her. "Yes."

"Well," Jenna smiled at Harry in an apologetic way; slightly shy and a little embarrassed about how much she knew about him and his family and his reported courtship with Maddie. "It all started when magazines and newspapers started reporting about you and a mystery blonde..."

"Newspapers?" Gary nudged his wife playfully.

"Fine," she rolled her eyes. "Mostly magazines. And gossip blogs. Anyway, once it was reported that the mystery blonde was an American, people went crazy..."

"People?" Gary laughed and Hannah smacked his arm.

"Girls," Jenna nodded, knowing he was right. "Mostly girls went...crazy."

"Good crazy or bad crazy?" Maddie asked.
"I'm not sure there's a distinction in this sense," she laughed. "They love that you're dating an American and, once they had your name," Jenna gestured to Maddie and sighed. "There was this big movement...a show of support for you. For...Maddie..." Jenna rolled her eyes. "Can I just say, it's incredibly strange that it's you who I'm talking about."

"I know," Maddie smiled sweetly; she understood how surreal it could all seem.

"I think they felt like...if Harry...if you would date an American, that somehow translated to them having more of chance with you than they thought."

"Really?" He laughed. "I would think that me dating anyone would mean there was less of a chance."

"Logically, sure," Jenna grinned and shrugged. "Though you can't always factor logic into these things."

"I suppose not."

"At any rate, there's a Maddie fanbase now. You have...you have fans. You're actually quite popular in the U.S."

"Does anybody else find that incredibly weird?" Maddie chuckled as her family raised their hands; smiles in their eyes.

"Absolutely," Jenna laughed. "I mean. I've always been a fan, but it seems that the membership has grown since you...ahem...bagged a prince." Clearly Maddie and her mother weren't the only ones with sass.

"Wow..." Harry's eyes grew wide with humor as laughter rumbled around the table.

"Sorry," Jenna's eyes were apologetic though her lips turned up in a smile—as though she was testing his sense of humor, seeing if he could hang with the spirited family she had grown to love.

"Don't worry about it," he shook his head; amused by it all. "Tell me though, how do I get my hands on one of these shirts?"

"What?" Maddie laughed at him. "You're joking."

"Not at all," he shook his head. "If anyone's Team Maddie, it's me. In fact, I think I should be the Captain of the team." Even Hannah laughed at the expression on her daughter's face.

"Lovely." Maddie wasn't sure if she should be impressed or concerned.

"I can probably help you out with that," Jenna nodded to Harry; smiling at the unspoken interaction between the two of them.

"Excellent." Harry clapped his hands together.

"Jenna," Maddie eyed her.

"What do you want from me?"
"A little support would be nice."

"I'm not sure how much more supportive I can be, I already own a Team Maddie shirt." Harry nearly spit his drink as laughter escaped his mouth. The rest of the family joined in on the laughter; the banter and Harry settled into his seat—feeling at home, in his element. He shook his head with a grin; Maddie's family would fit in well alongside his friends—even give Bishop a run for his money.

Later that night—long after Patrick, Gary and Jenna had gone home, Hannah smiled at Maddie and Harry and brought an end to the conversation she was enjoying; hearing about Bendal and London and Maddie's new life. She was in awe at the new things her daughter was doing, at the people she was meeting. She wanted to know more, so much more, but she was exhausted and had a big day the next day. So, reluctantly, she excused herself—ready for bed. She leaned to kiss Maddie's cheek, patted Harry's shoulder and then, with a yawn she made her way towards the stairs, towards her suite. Maddie watched as her mother disappeared before she turned tired eyes to Harry.

"Well, Wales..." She yawned; leaning closer to him. "I think we can call today a success."

"Agreed," Harry's arm dropped from the back of the couch to hug her shoulders; pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Your family is amazing."

"No arguments from me," she shook her head and ruffled his hair. "You're not so bad yourself."

"I do what I can," he laughed through a yawn.

"Come on," Maddie scooted off the couch, pulling him behind her. "Let's get to bed. It's late; even later in England and..."

"Whoa..." Harry tugged on her arm; halting her on her way up the stairs. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To your room," Maddie gestured.

"No, no, no." Harry shook his head; dropping her hand from his, crossing his arms across his chest.

"What?" She almost laughed.

"Your mother was incredibly clear, Madeline. You sleep downstairs, I sleep upstairs."

"You're joking."

"I am not," he shook his head. Maddie studied his face; her jaw falling open. He wasn't.

"Harry!" She exhaled, stunned. "When we were at Highgrove, you were the one who..."

"That was Highgrove," he shrugged.

"What does that mean?" She mimicked his shrug.
"That this is your mother's house and if you don't see the difference than...well I'm afraid I can't help you. But there is absolutely no way you are sleeping up there with me tonight."

"I cannot believe this," Maddie shook her head in disbelief.

"Believe it," he relaxed slightly then, moving to her. "Now kiss me love, it's late and we're exhausted and I need my rest in order to keep up with your family tomorrow."

"We'll be mostly alone tomorrow," Maddie allowed him to pull her into his arms. "Mom has class most of the day and then her book club. I told her not to cancel. It'll be mostly you and I. I thought I would show you around..." She sighed. "You're really not going to let me into your room tonight?"

"No," he shook his head and kissed her. "Thank you for being disappointed about it though."

"I'm going to remember this for later," she smiled despite herself as she kissed him again.

"I have no doubt," he chuckled and then, with one final kiss, he stepped from her arms. "Good night love."

"Good night," Maddie watched with a slight pout as he moved up the stairs. She stood, slightly frustrated and incredibly happy, alone on the main floor of the house for a moment before she scooped a blanket from the back of the couch, wrapped it around herself and moved towards the stairs to her mother's room. She knocked softly and waited for her mother to allow her in before she stepped through the door.

"Hi," Maddie smiled sleepily. Hannah was already in bed with the lights off. "Can I..."

"Come on," Hannah chuckled and pulled back the covers. With a wide smile, Maddie hurried to climb into bed with her mother. No matter how old Maddie was, no matter how educated, how long she had been away, what she had seen—she would always seek and find an indescribable comfort climbing into bed with her mother. She tugged the blankets up around them and rolled to her side to look at her mother.

"So..." Maddie's voice was soft; speaking to the vulnerability she felt in that moment. "Do you like him?"

"Oh Maddie," Hannah chuckled softly; reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind her daughter's ear. "Since when did you care what I thought of who you were dating...or what you did for that matter? You have always been strong and independent and self-reliant and..."

"Mom," Maddie cut in, reaching for her mother's hand; her eyes wide and childlike—so serious her mother stopped talking. Seeing the questions she wasn't asking, seeing the feelings she couldn't quite articulate, Hannah reached out and cupped Maddie's cheek in her hand.

"Oh honey, I love him." Maddie's wide smile shone even in the dark.

"Okay," Maddie breathed; feeling relief and reassurance and confirmation of what she already knew to be true. Letting out a deep breath, she leaned to kiss her mom and slipped from her bed. As she crossed the room towards the door, Hannah sat up in bed and cleared her throat.

"I especially loved that he rebuffed your multiple attempts to sneak upstairs to his room," Maddie stopped dead in her tracks and cringed; feeling like she had just been caught sneaking in after
breaking curfew. "Good night Madeline."

"Good night mom," Maddie called out; hurrying from the room—her mother's laughter following her up the stairs.

It was around two in the morning local time when Harry woke; restless and unable to fall back asleep. It made little sense; he was tired, the bed was amazingly comfortable and the quiet, calm air was perfect for slumber. As he sat up in the bed, he looked to his side and he knew; it was her presence that he missed. Mumbling about karma, he rose from his bed and walked through his door to the one next to his—designated for the on duty agent—and knocked softly. Nathan was on that night; watching TV and eating popcorn.

"I can't sleep," Harry's voice was low. "I'm just going out onto the back deck and get some air."

"Sure," Nathan nodded and rose to his feet. Harry smiled sheepishly and made his way downstairs. Nathan eased onto the sofa, content with watching Harry through the glass doors.

Slipping outside, he pulled a sweatshirt over his head, shut the door behind him and looked out at the night sky. The stars were bright and he was sure he could see for miles.

"Trouble sleeping?" Maddie's mother startled him as she called out. Harry's eyes whipped to where she sat on an outdoor couch; feet tucked up underneath her with a blanket on her lap.

"A little bit, yes," he nodded.

"Join me?" She waved her hand at the spot next to her.

"Sure," Harry moved to sit down; smiling at her as he did. They sat that way for a moment; quiet and peaceful before Hannah took a breath and looked to him.

"You know, I realized that not once this evening did I find a moment to thank you."

"Thank me?" Harry's eyes went wide. "Whatever for?"

"For what you did in Bendal," Harry felt his heart ache as Maddie's mother's eyes filled with tears; ached at the shared memory, the shared pain. "I was so incredibly worried about her; being so far away and in so much..." She wiped at her eyes and sniffed. "And your updates and knowing you were there and that you...that you cared about her...made it infinitely easier to handle."

"I'm not sure what to say..." Harry took a breath and tried for a smile. "I was happy to do it. Well, not happy but..."

"I understand," she interrupted; her hand reaching out to pat his before reaching to the table next to the couch to a large, stone box. Opening the lid, she pulled out a box of cigars and an ashtray. "Do you mind?"

"No, of course not," Harry shook his head. "I didn't know that you smoked."

"I don't," she smiled wistfully. "Not really I don't. Only these..." She pulled two cigars out of the box and held one out to him. "Would you care for one?"
"Ha..." He chuckled; giving it only a moment's thought before he shrugged and gave in. "Why not."

"That's the spirit," quite expertly, she cut the tips and handed him a cigar and the lighter.

"Thank you," Harry lit hers and then his; easing back into the couch—wishing Bishop could be there to see him, smoking a cigar with Maddie's mother at two in the morning.

"Maddie doesn't know I do this," she confessed as she exhaled. "She would be...disappointed if she knew." Hannah was looking up at the stars as she spoke to Harry. "Her father smoked them."

"Oh?" Harry's eyebrows lifted. This was the first time she had mentioned her husband in front of him.

"It's not what..." Hannah had to swallow the lump in her throat. "He died of skin cancer, not...not lung cancer." Harry remained absolutely silent as she continued. "He used to have one of these once a week—you know on Friday night. He would pour a glass of whiskey and sit outside and smoke a cigar. After he was diagnosed, Maddie wanted him to stop but he refused..." She laughed lightly. "She gets her stubborn nature from him, you know." She looked up at him then. "So good luck with that."

"Hmmm," Harry smiled; not wanting his words to effect the moment at all.

"He told her he already had cancer so...what was the point?" She took a long drag and blew it up into the sky. "So he continued until he was too sick to come outside. And then when he died..." She looked at the cigar in her hand with a nostalgic smile. "I found this old sweater of his and it smelled like these...like him. And I missed it. So, when I found a couple of these stashed in his office, I lit one and it was...I don't know. It made it easier for just a moment. So now, I have one once a week."

"On Fridays?" Harry asked; having a deep understanding of the rituals that were kept in memory of the dead.

"Yes," she smiled at him. "I do it early in the morning or late at night, so nobody knows."

"Why are you..." Harry met her eyes. "I'm sorry, but why are you telling me this?"

"You seem like somebody who could keep a secret," she smiled warmly. Harry nodded and took a drag.

"Where's the whiskey?" Hannah's smile widened at the way he took mental notes.

"I've never really been much of a drinker. But if you would like one, I could..."

"No," Harry shook his head. "Thank you though. You know...I think Maddie would understand—your wanting to remember him. I think she would get it."

"Maybe," Hannah took one final drag and snuffed the cigar out before she turned her attention to him. "Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask me anything." The unflinching way he said that gave Hannah a moment's pause. Taking a breath, she asked.
"How is she doing over there?"

"She's doing...amazing," Harry's eyes grew soft as he thought of her. "She's working with the children at the hospital and they adore her; of course the adore her. She has this way with kids...it's fantastic to watch actually," he leaned forward; his elbows resting on his knees. "On her days off, she volunteers her time with Veteran's services; helping men and women reintegrate into their previous lives. She is..." He looked up then, realizing that maybe he should be a little embarrassed about going on like that in front of her mother. He blushed slightly as he sat back up. "Sorry. I just...I'm impressed with how well she's adapted to living in London, to being a part of this...craziness that follows me. She's remarkable; there's no way around it." Hannah watched him in silence for a moment; processing it all.

"You really care about her, don't you." It wasn't a question.

"I..." Harry adjusted in his seat. "I love her. Very much."

"I can see that," Hannah nodded.

"You know," Harry took a breath. "I realized that not once this evening did I find a moment to apologize to you."

"Apologize?" She looked to him; shocked. "What do you need to apologize for?"

"For..." He exhaled. "For dragging your daughter into a media frenzy where nothing is sacred and anything goes..."

"Stop," Hannah's hand rested firmly on his arm. "Let's not do this. Maddie is a big girl. She's strong and independent and smart and wily. She's stubborn and relentless and cannot be talked into doing anything she doesn't want to do, much less dragged. And you know that. I know you know that. I can see that you know that. So let's not do this thing where we pretend that you dragged her anywhere. I know my daughter. If anything, she held her head high and walked, willingly, right into the middle of it all." Hannah's lips curled up in a smirk. "She got that from her father too; fearlessness."

"I don't know," Harry smiled warmly at her. "I think I see quite a bit of you in her."

"That's very sweet of you. But if anything, she's inspired it in me...not the other way around," Hannah sighed, squeezed his arm and released it. "Now, I'm going back to bed. I have a full day tomorrow. It was nice sharing a smoke with you Harry." When she gathered her blanket and stood, Harry rose to his feet-out of instinct and breeding.

"Not as nice as it was with you...Hannah." There was a gleam in his eye as he forced himself to call her as she had asked.

"Oh! Well done," Hannah's eyes flashed wide as she leaned in to hug him. "Good night."

"Good night," Harry hugged her back; surprised at the lump that formed in his throat. And then she was gone; leaving him there on the deck with a half smoked cigar, millions of stars, and the undeniable urge to crawl into Maddie's bed and snuggle close.

Snuffing out the cigar, he cleared the ashtray from the table; stuffing it into the large stone box. With a deep, refreshing breath, he stepped back in the house. Had he really just smoked a cigar with Maddie's mother in the middle of the night? As he made his way towards the stairs, Nathan
close behind, Harry wasn't entirely sure he wasn't still sleeping.
When Harry woke later that morning, he was refreshed; having slept much better after his encounter with Maddie's mother on the deck. He chuckled at the memory as he rose from bed and made his way into the bathroom attached to his room. After he was showered and dressed casually for the day, he stepped out of his room. With a good morning to Jim, he made his way downstairs; Jim following behind him.

Maddie and her mother were already up; dressed and eating breakfast on the deck. Harry pulled his sunglasses onto his face—was it always this sunny in Colorado—and stepped outside. Both women looked up with matching smiles as he joined them.

"Good morning," Maddie beamed as he moved to the seat next to her.

"Good morning," he leaned to kiss her. "Good morning Hannah." Hannah's eyes met his in a silent thank you.

"Good morning Harry. Good morning Jim," she called out; waving her hand towards the fourth place setting at the table. "Join us, won't you?"

"Thank you Mrs. Forrester," he smiled and sat at the table with the three of them; with quite the breakfast spread available.

"Well kids, I hate to eat and run, but I have things to do today," Hannah wiped her hands and put her napkin next to her plate with a grin. "I'll be in class until four and then I'll be home to change and say hello and then I'm off to meet the girls."

"The girls?" Maddie laughed lightly.

"My book club," Hannah narrowed her eyes at her daughter. "Truthfully it should more accurately be called a wine club, but for appearances sake we bring books..."

Harry laughed. "Sounds amusing."

"It is," she nodded; rising to her feet.

"How long will you be with your...book club?" Maddie watched as her mom moved to hug her.

"Six till Ten," she smoothed her daughter's hair back from her forehead. "But I can always cancel, Madeline. It's very rare that you're in town and..."

"No, no, no," Maddie shook her head. "Don't change your day. I have you all weekend. Besides, I have plans for Harry."

"Ah yes," Hannah winked and patted his shoulder as she passed him. "You two have fun. I'll see
tonight."

A chorus of good-byes followed as she slipped back into her house to get on her way. Harry swallowed a bit of orange juice and turned his focus to Maddie.

"So, these plans you have for me..." He began, but her attention was elsewhere.

"Hold that thought," Maddie held up a finger as she watched her mom gather her bag and slip from the front door. "Okay." And when she was sure her mother was gone, she was out of her seat, moving away from the table.

"Where are you going?" He watched with a half a smirk as she moved around the deck, peeking into potted plants, looking under cushions. And when she moved to the stone box he remembered from the night before, his eyes flashed wide under his sunglasses.

"There it is..." Maddie sighed happily; a soft smile covering her face as she pulled the box of cigars from the box. After a moment of silence, she turned to Harry. "My dad used to smoke these and...after he died...my mom started to. I don't know when or really how it started but...I think she does it because she misses him and the smell reminds her so much of him..." Maddie took one out of the box and ran it under her nose; inhaling. "She doesn't know that I know and...I know it's silly, but I kind of like that she still does it. I like that she still misses him. Is that wrong you think?"

"No," Harry shook his head with a warm smile; his mind flashing back to the night before. "I think you're probably right."

"Yeah," Maddie smelled the cigar one more time before she put it back in the box; returning it to the hiding spot. "Okay..." She took a breath and gave him a bright smile. "Where were we?"

"Plans for today," Harry reached for her hand as she moved to stand next to his chair.

"Ah yes!" She grew excited; biting on her bottom lip. "Are you ready for this?"

"I'm not entirely sure," He chuckled at the way she bounced on her feet.

"Today, we are going to be farmers."

"I'm sorry, what?" Harry laughed.

"You heard me right. I gave my cousin Gary the day off. We're going to run the farm." Maddie took a breath. "I know you're no stranger to hard work, Wales and I thought I would show you how things work around here. We're starting with irrigating. We have to go start the water in the corn out back..."

"But..." Harry glanced out over the acres of farm land behind them. "I've never irrigated before. What if I..."

"And I never curtsied before I met you. We learn new things," she smiled smugly. "Now, finish your breakfast. You're going to need your energy. And you're going to get dirty—just in case you want to change. I'm going to go grab my boots and pull the truck around."

"You're incredibly serious, aren't you."
"Are you afraid?" She arched an eyebrow; mounting a challenge.

"Of hard work?" Harry laughed. "No way. Of messing up the farm that helps sustain your family? Absolutely."

"Ha!" Maddie tossed her head back in laughter. "You can't mess it up. I'll be with you the entire time and I know what I'm doing." With a quick kiss to his cheek, she moved towards the house.

"I thought you were a child psychologist!" He called after her.

"I am!" She paused in the doorway to call back. "But before that I was a farmer's daughter. Now finish your food and meet me out front in five minutes."

"Bossy, bossy, bossy," Harry muttered, reaching for a bite.

"You love it!" Maddie laughed as she slipped into the house. Harry chuckled as he shook his head, looking up at Jim.

"I'm going to be a farmer today."

"Very well Sir," Jim smiled; almost unable to hold back his laughter—unable to contain his amusement at the young woman who had been a part of his life for a year. Though he remained silent about his work, about his charge, he had known Harry for years—watched him grow into the man he was now. And he was happy that he had finally found the match he had with the young American. Happy to see the smile on his face, the way the weight had lifted from his shoulders.

Harry had finished his breakfast and gone to change and, when he stepped out the front door, Maddie was waiting with Jim. She had told him where they were going to be and he had agreed to take one of the cars they brought along and wait at the end of the road; feeling comfortable with the safety the property provided and with his view of Harry. Harry rounded the older pick-up truck to where the two of them were standing and about fell over. Maddie, in denim cut off at the knee, a wide brimmed sunhat and red rubber Wellies—he felt his heart jump in his chest.

"Wow..." He breathed as she stepped up to him as Jim moved into the second car. "Look at you..."

"If you're going to make fun of me now, you can just stop. There's mud and water and these are incredibly practical."

"I was not going to make fun of you," his hands moved around her waist, pulling her to him. "I was going to do this..." His lips moved against hers.

"Oh..." She sighed into him; her fingers tugging at his shirt, bringing him closer.

"If you had been dressed like this last night, I'm not sure I would have been able to refuse," he confessed.

"I had no idea you were turned on by farm clothes."

"Neither did I," he shook his head; groaning as she stepped away.
"Sorry," she sighed. "While I would love to run with this new discovery, we have a list of things to do." She reached into the back of the truck and pulled out another pair of rubber boots, in a more muted green color, and handed them to him. "I thought these would fit you. You might need them later."

"They should," Harry took them from her. "Thank you."

"Okay...you ready?"

"Yes?"

"Ha!" She laughed, pulling open the driver's door. "Did you get enough breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Put on sunblock?"

"Mmm Hmmm."

"You love me?"

"God yes."

"Then get in the truck."

With a shake of his head, Harry did as he was told. And his day as a farmer began.

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"Okay," Maddie handed him a slightly bent and curved metal irrigation tube. They were standing along the road at the end of the corn field; rows and rows of corn stretching out in front of them next to the ditch full of running water. Harry took the tube and watched as she began to demonstrate what he needed to do. "Put one hand on the end, flat like this..." He did as she did. "You're going to plunge it into the water like...it's the pressure that's going to make the water suck back in. Watch..." And he did. He watched as she started one, then two, then three irrigation tubes, laying each of them gingerly into their own row; the water trickling out and down the rows.

"Look at you..." Harry was impressed. "How long have you known how to do this?"

"Since I was...five?" She laughed at his expression. "It's your turn." Her hands rested on her hips and she waited. Harry took a deep breath and went for it. She was patient, sweet, as he tried four times before water began to flow back at him. Plopping the tube into a row, he looked up at her with a wide smile.

"I did it!"

"You did," she smiled with pride. "Nicely done."

"I'm a farmer," Harry clapped his hands together.

"Okay..." Maddie laughed. "Let's not get carried away. But it's a great start."
Harry followed along as they continued to start tubes of water and set them in rows; occasionally hopping into the truck to drive further down the road. The focus and precision that he had seen in Maddie on numerous other occasions was evident in the way she handled this task as well.

"Harry..." Maddie called from a few feet away. He dropped his tube into a row and looked up to her. "Will you please bring me the shovel from the back of the truck? I need to fix this row..."

"Sure," Harry nodded and did as she asked. Handing her the shovel, he watched as she moved across the ditch; shoveling dirt from one place to another and, when she was finished, she wedged the shovel into the ground and reached for a tube. Setting it, she watched for a moment as the water flowed, making sure the fix would hold. Satisfied, she pulled the shovel from the dirt and hopped back across the ditch. Harry watched; jaw slacked as she put the shovel back in the truck and reached for a bottle of water. He couldn't move; he was transfixed with her. Glancing up at him, she caught him looking.

"What?" She laughed nervously; returning the bottle of water to the cooler in back.

"God, I love you." It was almost as though he could feel himself falling further for her—a feat he hadn't realized was a possibility up until that point.

"You love the plaid shirt and the cut off shorts," she countered.

"I do," he nodded with a smirk. "But..."

"But you would love me even more without them..." She finished with a knowing look.

"You're turning this into something dirty," he shook his head as she moved closer to him. "And it's far from it. I'm impressed with your wide range of abilities, Madeline."

"Well thank you," she tipped her lips up to meet his. "And I'm impressed with how quickly you pick up new things."

"Good..." Harry grinned; pressing his lips to hers one more time before she stepped back.

"Okay, we just need to finish up this row and then we move onto the cows."

"Cows?" Harry's eyebrows arched.

"We have cattle to feed," she called out behind her. "We have eggs to collect and then we head to the horse barn."

"Excellent," Harry took a deep breath; reaching for a few tubes and following where she led.

They had started water on the corn, fed cattle, and collected eggs from the hen house—an experience Harry would rather never repeat again in his life—despite how humorous Maddie found it. They stopped briefly for a quick lunch at the house, changed into more appropriate boots and then they made their way to the horse barn; a place Harry felt instantly more at ease. Walking along the stalls, she introduced him to the horses as they walked and, stopping outside the last two stalls, she smirked when she asked him if he knew how to saddle a horse or if that was delegated to somebody else. With a roll of his eyes, Harry moved to prove something to her. When the horses were saddled, he climbed atop Frankie and followed Maddie who rode Gilly.
They strolled out of the barn, past the corrals, across the bridge over the stream and out onto the untouched part of the property. Maddie brought her horse to a stop and Harry moved up beside her.

"You feel okay?" She nodded to Harry and Frankie.

"Yes," Harry smiled wide; his eyes scanning over the miles of open land.

"We're going to ride the perimeter and check the fence," she informed him, her horse getting antsy underneath her. "Try to keep up." And then with a wink and a slight nudge to Gilly underneath her, the horse broke free—into the run he had been gearing up for since Maddie had saddled him. Harry watched as she rode away from him, watched as she moved easily on the horse—almost able to feel how free she felt with the wind against her face.

"Okay Frankie, it's you and me," Harry chuckled and nudged the horse underneath him. And he was off—chasing Maddie and Gilly, chasing that exhilaration they both felt as they galloped over the land. He could hear Maddie laughing as she slowed to a trot; allowing him to catch up with her.

"Oh my God!" She called out to him. "It's been years since I've done this."

"Years?" He called back. "You were home for a while after you left Bendal, weren't you?"

"Yes. But I was recovering, remember? I couldn't move my arm, much less ride a horse."

"Ah yes," Harry nodded. "You look good on that horse."

"I feel good on this horse," she grinned wide. "Come on, I want to show you something." Harry nodded and let her pull out in front of him. They moved quickly along the fence line—Maddie keeping an eye as they moved. And, when she cut off course, Harry followed behind her. They moved towards the large stream of water that ran through the property; splashing into the water, ducking into the shade. And then they rounded a corner and they were standing below a bluff; as though somebody had come along and taken a chunk from the earth. Harry's eyes went wide as he looked to the west. He could see the mountain range through the clear sky. There was a cluster of trees that grew around a place where the water pooled; where the stream had expanded out. Maddie came to a stop and hopped from her horse. Guiding Gilly to the stream, she let loose the reigns and allowed her to rest, to have a drink. Harry followed suit; patting Frankie's neck before he stepped away—trying to keep track of Maddie.

"Here," she reached back for his hand, pulling him through the trees and around a corner to a wide open meadow; full of flowers and trees and the same amazing view. Harry looked in awe; surprised to find something so lush hidden out here. Maddie pulled him with her to a spot that was shaded by an enormous old tree and she moved to the ground; kicking off her boots, letting her toes sink into the wild grass below her. Without a second thought, Harry joined her; tossing his own shoes to the side. He couldn't stop smiling as he watched her sigh and lay back; flat on the ground. She pulled her sunglasses from her eyes and looked up at the sky; at the leaves as they bristled in the breeze, at the clouds as they rolled by. Her fingers ran over Harry's arm as she smiled up at him. Rolling to his side, Harry leaned on one elbow so that he could watch her—watch her tense-less face, watch her take deep breaths of the fresh air, watch her as she processed the memories that came with this spot.

Rolling to her side, she leaned up, mimicking his position. When she spoke, her voice was laden
with nostalgia and memories; instantly bringing him in.

"I used to spend entire summers out here," she met his eyes. "I would help start the water and then head out here while my dad worked. I would bring toys and books and lunch. Sometimes I would stay all day..." She chuckled. "My mom would be so mad when I came back after dark. That was the rule; home before the sun went down. But I would just get so...lost. In my head, in what I was doing." She nodded towards a tree in the distance. "My dad built me a house in that tree..." She pointed. "You can still see part of it. And there's a tire swing over there..." She moved her finger. "Down by the water, there's a bit of a beach. Well...it's not a beach, but it's sandy and every year we would all come out, cousins and uncles and...and we'd have this big party with a bonfire and hot dogs and s'mores and..."

"S'mores?" He raised his eyebrows.

"You've...sorry..." Maddie sat up. "You've never had a s'more? It's...a graham cracker with chocolate and a marshmallow that has been toasted over a campfire and...wow. I guess I know what we're doing tonight."

"Hot dogs and s'mores?" Harry took a guess.

"See..." Maddie nudged him with her shoulder. "You pick up things incredibly easily." Her head dipped to kiss him. "Come on. Let's finish checking the fence. We have to collect the irrigation tubes and check the garden and then I think we'll be done for the day."

"Really?" Harry followed her as she stood.

"Mmm. We can shower, say hello to my mother and then...we'll be back."

"To start a fire?"

"Just a small one," she giggled. "Don't worry, Wales. I know what I'm doing."

"I can see that."

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They finished their chores, they showered and dressed and they spent a little time with Hannah before she grabbed her book and a bottle of wine and bid them good night. Maddie called her cousin Gary and Jenna and invited them over for a fire by the stream. Then the two of them, along with Jim, went into the one grocery store in town to buy the additional items they would need for the night. It was a little under three hours before a picture of them appeared on twitter; laughing and holding hands while they filled their basket—completely oblivious to the young girl with the camera phone.

They bundled up with warmer clothes, loaded up the trailer to the four wheeler and then, along with Gary and Jenna and Brad and Nathan (Jim was taking some down time) they made their way out to the meadow. As Maddie and Gary arranged the wood for a fire, Jenna stepped up to Harry with a lowered voice.

"I wanted to let you know that I brought what you asked for. They are in a bag that I gave to...Nathan." She pointed.

"Excellent," Harry clapped his hands together with a big smile. "That's amazing. Thank you
Jenna. Did Nathan pay you for them?"

"Yes he did."

"Fantastic. It's really great of you to do this for me."

"Not a problem just...when she finds out, if you could keep my name out of it..."

"Ha!" Harry laughed with her. "I'll do my best."

"Thank you."

"We got it!" Maddie called to them as bright flames flew up; lapping at the night sky. And the memories kicked off. As they settled into their chairs and ate their campfire food, Gary and Maddie reminisced about their childhood; something Harry was sure would reoccur the next day when they spent time with the rest of their family.

And he took it all in; the way they interacted, the way they loved each other, the way they poked fun, the way they supported, the way they made sure to include him and his security officers in on the revelry. They ate and drank and laughed until the fire began to dwindle and Jenna stood, beckoning Gary to take her home. Making sure the fire was out completely, they all loaded up and headed back in.

After Gary and Jenna drove away and Harry's Security team retired to their rooms, Maddie pulled Harry out onto the deck; two glasses of whiskey in her hand. Harry, his heart heavy with what her mother had told him, accepted the glass without question—knowing she was thinking about her father. It was Friday; he had always had a glass of whiskey and a cigar on Friday.

"You okay?" Harry asked; sitting next to her on the double lounger, their feet stretched out in front of them, their shoulders touching.

"Yes," she sighed; turning a smile to him. "Thank you for being such a good sport today."

"It was really no trouble at all," his finger reached out to pull a strand of hair from her face.

"Ah, come on," she nudged him lightly with her shoulder. "It was hard work and you rose to the occasion with no complaints." Her fingers intertwined with his. "My father would have been impressed." She took a sip from her glass; her eyes growing watery. "I'm so happy you came here Harry. I love that you get to know this place; that you get to know where I spent time with him."

"I love that too," he wrapped an arm around her then; pulling her closer. Maddie's head rested back against his shoulder and she looked up at the sky. A quiet peacefulness settled over them as they sat there; bodies pressed together, smiles on their faces—in a happy sort of sleepiness that came with a day well worked, well played.

Harry turned his head to press a kiss to the top of her head; inhaling the mixture of her shampoo and campfire. And his mind wandered over the day, over the irrigation lesson, over the teamwork it took to feed the cattle, over the lack of jokes she had sent his way during his panic in the hen house. He thought about their afternoon ride.

He couldn't get over this new side of her that she had shown him that day; in tune with the land, with the animals—no fear about hard work or exerting energy, though that wasn't entirely new. It was so easy to see how somebody raised in this world wouldn't blink at the hardships that came
with going to Bendal. Though her family was clearly comfortable, they were used to a long, hard day outside; cultivating the land. And that had built something inside of Maddie that made her strong and resolute; something she had carried with her to Bendal and even again to London when she was forced to face the press and the scrutiny.

Harry felt his heart swell with love for this woman who laid in his arms drinking slowly from a glass of whiskey, listening to his heart beat in his chest. He didn't know if he wanted to laugh or cry or toss his phone into the stream and never ever return to the life he had in England.

"What's on your mind?" She spoke softly as she looked up at him.

"Hmmm," He pressed his lips together and met her eyes. "I'm not sure you want to know."

"Try me," she smiled sweetly.

"Okay. I was thinking..." He shrugged nervously. "I was thinking that we really need to be sure to spend more time here; come and visit your mother...bring our kids." Maddie nearly spit her whiskey out as he spoke the last words with conviction.

"I'm sorry," she sat up slightly; turning to look at him. "Our kids?" He couldn't help the smile that played on his lips at the look on her face.

"You don't want kids?" He raised his eyes; knowing fully well that she did.

"No I..." She shook her head; trying to steady the sudden spike in her pulse. "Of course I want kids. It was the 'our' part of that sentence that threw me off." Harry nodded, setting his drink on the table next to him and turning very serious eyes to hers.

"You told me I couldn't talk like that anymore until I met your mother. Well, I met your mother, your uncle Patrick. I met Gary and Jenna. Tomorrow I'm meeting the rest of your family and Maddie...I still have every intention of tying you down."

"Harry..." She breathed, tears welling unexpectedly in her eyes.

"I'm serious. Maddie..." He took a deep breath. "In three weeks I'm going to be twenty-nine. Next year I'll be...God I'll be thirty. I know what I want. I'm not messing around here. I'm serious."

"I see that."

"Is that..." His voice caught in his throat as he studied her for a moment. "I'm sorry. Do you not see yourself with me? Do you not want..."

"No," she shook her head quickly; her fingers moving to his lips. "I do. I...of course I do. I just...I try not to let myself go down that road with you. I just never know how things are going to settle and..."

"But you do," he interrupted, a grin beginning to move to his lips as he studied her for a moment. "You should. There are things that have to happen, time that has to pass. But Maddie...I have every intention of spending my life with you..." He took a deep breath as the weight of his statement settled over her. "...and our six little babies."

"Six?!" A burst of laughter pushed through her lips as she blinked away the tears in her eyes.
"Eight?" He raised his eyebrows hopefully.

"Keep dreaming Wales." She rolled her eyes; breathing in this new reality, this new state of their relationship.

"Fine..." He shrugged and waited; watching as her mind processed it all—waiting for her response. Maddie's smile was small, her heart lodged in her throat as she looked out over the property and then to him. With a deep breath in and slow breath out, she nodded.

"We will definitely bring our children here someday." The certainty in her voice hit him like a truck.

"Yeah?" He was completely unashamed at the tears that rose in excitement.

"Yeah," she sighed; her smile stretching wide at the images it provoked in her mind—Harry running around on the farm with their children. "I can teach them how to irrigate and you can teach them how to ride and..." And Harry's lips were on hers; firm and purposeful—packed full of emotion.

It was quite something, really; finding what you always wanted, what you never thought you would find...at least without compromise. And there were no words, no words that could adequately convey that feeling to her. So he moved out of his head and lead with his heart. Pulling her to him, her lips opening under his, he couldn't be close enough. So he tightened his hold on her and only hoped she could feel his heart beating in his chest; knowing she had heard his words, understood his intentions and was still there—clutching at his shirt as she kissed him back.

Chapter End Notes

I do hope you're enjoying the story!
Maddie woke on Saturday morning to a soft knock at the door. Groaning, she rolled over; covering her head with her pillow. It was barely light out and much too early, though she should have known; should have expected. The knock at the door returned and Maddie surrendered.

"Come in!" Refusing to open her eyes; she knew who it was.

"Madeline Jay Forrester..." Hannah's voice was soft, smiling, as she stepped into the room and Maddie couldn't help the grin that pushed at her lips, despite her desire to sleep longer. She felt the bed nudge as her mother sat next to her; her hands moving lovingly over her back to move the pillow. "Guess what day it is..."

"Saturday," Maddie grumbled and Hannah chuckled and took a breath before she began singing.

"Happy Birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Maddie..." She leaned over to kiss Maddie's head. "Happy Birthday to you."

"Thank you," Maddie rolled over in bed to smile up at her mother. "But must you wake me every year at the precise time I was born just to sing to me?"

"I must," Hannah smiled at her daughter. "I thought about waking Harry to come with me but then I thought...what if he sleeps in the nude and..."

"Mother!" Maddie swatted at her mother who was laughing; knowing that would wake her up.

"And that would be terribly awkward."

"Yes, it would," Maddie sat up in her bed.

"Happy birthday darling."

"Thanks mom," Maddie hugged her mother; close and tight.

"So, it's your birthday, your rules," Hannah rose to her feet. "What would you like for breakfast?" Maddie grinned wide; having always loved the birthday rule when she was young.

"Anything?" Maddie raised an eyebrow.

"Anything."

"Birthday cake." Hannah rolled her eyes but nodded; rules were rules.

"What kind of birthday cake?"

"Ummmm..." Maddie's mouth twisted as she thought. "Red velvet with cream cheese frosting."

"As you wish," she shook her head as she moved towards the door. "Are you going back to sleep?"
"Nah," Maddie yawned but pulled back the covers. "I'm awake. I think I'll have coffee and help you make cake."

"Wonderful," Hannah waited for her daughter; wrapping her arm around her shoulders as they padded down the hallway to the kitchen. Maddie pulled up a stool at the bar at her mother's insistence and waited for the coffee to brew while her mother mixed up the cake.

The two women were still in the kitchen, drinking coffee as Hannah prepared to pour the cake into the pan, when Harry joined them. He looked fresh from bed in long flannel pants and a t-shirt and messy hair.

"What is going on in here?" He looked at the bright red batter in Hannah's bowl.

"I'm making red velvet cake," she smiled up at him.

"For breakfast?" He laughed and turned to Maddie, "Happy Birthday love."

"Thank you," Maddie's face brightened as she tipped her head up to kiss him. "Forrester house rules are that, on your birthday, you get whatever you want."

"All day?" Harry raised his eyebrows, taking a seat next to her.

"All day."

"It's going to be a long day, isn't it?" Harry looked to Hannah.

"Oh most definitely," she laughed and moved to put the cake in the oven.

"Well, what can I do? A rule's a rule, right?" Harry smiled at Maddie as a mischievous grin spread across her face.

"That's right Wales." Her mind was already at work with a list of things she wanted to do before the day ended. Having Harry there was only going to be icing on the cake.

Of course, there were plans that had already been made. The three of them, along with Jenna and Gary were going to Denver to attend a baseball game; one of Maddie's favorite pastimes with her cousins. Maddie's uncle Patrick had known the team manager for years and had asked to use a suite for the day; knowing that Maddie would be in town and the particular security concerns that might come along with Harry attending a baseball game. The rest of Maddie's family would be joining them to celebrate her birthday and take in an afternoon game. Harry's security team would all be coming along, though only Brad was on duty and they were incredibly pleased with the security the suite provided. That night Hannah would be staying at Patrick's and, simply for ease of things, Maddie and Harry would be staying at a two bedroom suite at the Ritz downtown with the remaining members of his team across the hall. They would have lunch at her grandmother's on Sunday before heading back to her mom's for their last night in Colorado. Jenna and Gary had taken Hannah with them and Harry and Maddie would be following along with their entourage.

Maddie dropped her overnight bag in the living room and hurried up the stairs to check on Harry. Knocking on the half open door, she pushed into the room; empty.

"Harry?" She called out.
"I'm in the bathroom," he called back, stepping through the open door as he pulled a ball cap onto his head. Maddie looked to him and about fell over.

"Ohhhhhhh no." She pointed at him.

"Come on," his eyes softened in that puppy dog way he had of getting what he wanted.

"No way. Nuh-uh." She shook her head. "You look..."

"Amazing." He finished for her. "Amazing is the word you're looking for."

"Harry, really?" Maddie couldn't help but laugh at him. "A Team Maddie shirt?!"

"Yes!" He exclaimed; thrilled to have one.

"How in the hell did you even get this...Oh!" Maddie gasped. "Jenna. That..."

"It wasn't Jenna," he scrunched up his face. "I wanted one and now I have one. That's all you need to know."

"And you think you're wearing that to the ballgame?"

"I know I'm wearing it to the ballgame," he smirked.

"You do know that people are going to be there, right?"

"At a Nationally televised professional baseball game?" Harry's eyes flashed wide with sarcasm. "You don't say."

"Somebody might recognize you. Somebody might take a photo of you. In a Team Maddie shirt."

"So?"

"So! You want your picture on twitter in a Team Maddie shirt?"

"Why not?" He shrugged; pulling her to him, his arms circling her waist. "If my picture's going to end up on twitter, why shouldn't it be in a Team Maddie t-shirt? I am Team Maddie! Nobody wants you with me more than I do." Despite her attempts to remain angry at him, she couldn't help the laughter that bubbled up at how incredibly adorable it was to see him mount his defense. "It's incredibly funny and ironic and I thought you would appreciate the sarcasm of it all."

"Harry..." She groaned as his lips dipped to kiss her neck. As her eyes fluttered to close, she caught something out of the corner of her eye that made her eyes flash open; her hands pushed at him.

"Hey!" He watched as she moved to the side of the bed to a bag full of shirts just like the one he was wearing.

She held it up as she looked accusingly at him. "Just how many of these did you buy?"

"I'm handing them out as gifts."
"The hell you are," she shook her head.

"Come on! Ella, Bishop...They are definitely Team Maddie."

"This is so embarrassing..." Maddie huffed; sinking onto his bed.

"Okay..." He grew serious for a moment. "If it really bothers you, I'll take it off. I don't want this..." He gestured between them. "To be any more difficult than it has to be. People are most likely going to recognize us and...there will likely be pictures. So, if the shirt is going to make it worse, I'll take it off."

"Nah," Maddie smiled; shaking her head. "You can wear the shirt. Though..." She rose to her feet, her fingers moving to his chest; tugging at his shirt to draw him closer to her. Her voice lowered as her head tipped to the side. "I would like to reserve the right to remove it from you later."

"Oh you would?" His lips drew up; his eyes gleaming.

"I would," she nodded; her face inching closer to his. "I think it's worth mentioning that we won't be staying at my mother's house tonight."

"No we won't," he shook his head, his nose brushing against hers. "And it is your birthday."

"It is," she grinned. "And you know the rules..."

"You get whatever you want on your birthday."

"I do," and then, with the slightest of tugs, his lips were against hers; a muffled chuckle escaping her lips as he kissed her. It was going to be a great day.

Maddie's afternoon was a whirlwind of activity; she cheered on her favorite team in her favorite sport, she ate nachos and drank beer, and she watched as Harry charmed every last member of her family; one right after another.

He was an instant hit walking in in his t-shirt; bringing yelps of laughter from Maddie's cousins and a smile of pride from Jenna when he pressed kisses to her cheeks thanking her for help with his conspiracy. And then Harry worked the room like a professional; meeting everyone, making jokes, taking notes. Maddie was in awe as it unfolded in front of her.

He lauded Gary for his day to day endeavors on the farm; telling the story of his venture into the henhouse with a self-deprecating swagger that Maddie guessed he kept in his back pocket for moments such as these; moments when he wanted to put everyone at ease, bring everyone around to his side. And he did—so well.

He traded frontline stories with Derek, Maddie's cousin who had served one tour in Iraq before he came home—eventually accepting an honorable discharge when his time was up, to stay closer to his newly pregnant wife. His wife, Dena, was impressed and much more surprised than Maddie, when Harry moved to the floor to play with Molly and Casey. He listened to them describe, in only the detail a 3 and 5 year old could, the adventures their respective dolls had had that day as they came to the ballpark. He laughed when Casey told her very best attempt at a knock-knock joke and, when he thought nobody was looking, he passed them each a piece of Maddie's favorite candy. Maddie wasn't sure which gesture hit her the most; the fact that he was passing candy to...
two lovely little girls or that he continued to carry her candy with him.

He sat next to her grandmother, Ruth, listening to story upon story about Maddie as a child— occasionally looking in her direction with eyes full of adoration. He laughed with her uncle, he cheered for the team, and he never failed to check in with Maddie; even as he made his rounds through the room. And Maddie wasn't ashamed to admit that she really wanted to smush his face and kiss him senseless.

But the biggest moment for Maddie was when her cousin Kyle, the closest to her of all of them, sat down next to her—after an extensive go round with Harry and Derek—patted her knee and nodded with a grin. He approved. Taking Kyle's hand in hers, she sighed with relief and leaned into his shoulder. That was just what she needed. Kyle and Maddie were born the same year. They went through school together; high school, college, graduate school. He was the closest thing she had to a sibling and his opinions had mattered most to her; second only to her parents'. He was there the night her father died; sitting silently by her side while she fell apart. He was there when she left for Bendal; taking her to the airport, shushing her concerns, and pushing her towards the security line with the tough love she needed. Though Maddie was already one hundred percent convinced about Harry—knowing Kyle liked him made it that much sweeter.

It was midway through the bottom of the seventh when their picture hit the web; sitting next to each other, Maddie in a ball cap and Harry in a Team Maddie shirt, both with beers in their hands and laughter on their faces as they cheered with the crowd for the team below. Even to the most pessimistic of people, they looked happy and adorable.

As the game wound down, Maddie endured a rousing round of Happy Birthday, blew out the candles on her second cake of the day and then her mother and uncle bid their good-byes. They were going to take Maddie's grandmother and the two little girls back to Patrick's house for the night; leaving the cousins to celebrate into the evening. There were hugs and kisses and warnings to behave and then it was just the 'kids'. Maddie and her three cousins; Dena, Jenna, Amy and, of course, Harry.

The game ended in a win for the Rockies when a player hit a home run, bringing in two additional runners at the bottom of the ninth. The entire suite was on their feet cheering and clapping; hugging and laughing. They finished their drinks and made plans for the night. Kyle knew of a place called The Lavender Lady that immediately sparked interest in Maddie and Harry. It was modeled after an old speakeasy. People would enter through what looked like a diner and would need a password to get through the hidden door. They served dinner until some point in the night when the lights lowered and the atmosphere turned into one of innocent debauchery reminiscent of prohibition times. They were in.

Assuring Maddie that it wouldn't be a problem to go out in Denver, Jim took the information down and had Nathan call ahead with their concerns and to make a reservation for the group. Though nobody had any doubt that Harry would be able to get in anywhere—even with his Team Maddie t-shirt on—he and Maddie were going to go shopping before they all met up to go out. As Maddie's cousins went to Kyle and Amy's to get ready, she and Harry, along with Jim, would head out and do some shopping.

As people had discovered Harry's presence at the game, their trip out of the ballpark brought considerably more attention than their trip in. Telling her cousins to meet them at The Ritz when they were dressed and ready to continue the party, Maddie checked her appearance in the mirror, rolled her eyes at Harry's shirt and held tight to his hand as they emerged; moving straight for the cars his team had brought around.
Twenty minutes later she received a text from Ella "Team Maddie!!!! If you don't come back with one of those shirts for me, we're officially over. Looking great Love!"

They had settled into their suite with Jim, Nathan and Brad across the hall. Maddie's cousins were all on their way up as Maddie looked out the huge windows over the city and beyond that to the mountains; having just finished putting on her new party clothes.

"Okay birthday girl," Harry called out to Maddie as he stepped out into the living area; pulling his tie into a knot. "You ready to live it up?

"What do you think?" She grinned impishly. Harry looked up from his tie and took a breath.

"I think you look amazing..." His hands reached for hers, pulling her to him.

"Thank you," she ran her hands up his shoulders as his circled her waist. "You look pretty good yourself."

"Thank you," Harry bent his head to kiss her neck. "You smell fantastic."

"Ohhhhh..." Maddie moaned; pushing his lips to her skin, immediately catching up to where his mind was at.

"How long do we have before your cousins are here?"

"Not nearly long enough," Maddie shook her head.

"How long?" Harry's hands snuck up underneath her skirt; finding her thigh high stockings attached to a garter belt. "Maddie..." He breathed as his fingers tickled the delicate skin there.

"Less than five minutes," she gasped at the contact.

"You would be shocked and amazed at what I can do in five minutes," his lips found hers with a passion born out of such a great day with an amazing woman.

"Ha!" Maddie's head tossed back in laughter as Harry's lips moved to kiss her throat. Just as she seriously contemplated giving in, there was a knock at the door. With a groan, Harry moved away from her as Jim stepped out of his room and moved to answer the door; allowing Maddie's cousins entrance into the suite.

"Look at you!" Maddie smiled wide as they moved inside. "I don't think I've seen you three looking this good in years," she waved her finger towards the three boys who laughed and rolled their eyes.

"Can I get anybody a drink?" Harry had finished his tie, put on his fedora and was standing at the bar. "Champagne?" He eyed Maddie knowingly. To a chorus of yes's, he opened two bottles as Kyle moved to help him pass out glasses. Once everyone had a glass, Maddie was the first to speak; raising hers in the air.

"To family."

"To...meeting new friends," Jenna smiled at Harry.
"To a night of debauchery," Kyle grinned.

"To Maddie," Harry's eyes grew soft as he looked to her.

A round of cheers, clinking of glasses, and the celebration had begun.

There was this agreement; a sort of understanding that businesses had when recognizable members of society came out. Since they wanted the business, wanted the ability to boast about their high society clientele, they generally went out of their way to make their visit to their establishment as smooth as possible. In return, afterwards, they were free to brag; Prince Harry partied here last night.

And so it went with The Lavender Lady. They agreed to let Harry's team come take a sweep of the place and were exceptionally helpful in gaining a last minute reservation for a large group. Of course they were more than pleased to do what they could to accommodate the Prince and the "Native daughter".

Maddie had an amazing birthday; one for the record books. And it wasn't due to one particular thing—though most of it tied back to Harry.

Harry had flaws, this she knew. Harry came with a lifestyle that was foreign to her, one that required a learning curve on her part. But flaws and all, she believed he was absolutely unparalleled. And that night was no exception.

It wasn't just that he made her cousins feel at ease around him—it was the way he seemed to feel completely at ease around them.

It wasn't just that he shared stories of getting to know her, making her cousins laugh in awe—it was the way he told them with such reverence, with such unabashed love and admiration that she felt her cheeks flush.

It wasn't just that he held doors, stood when she returned to the table, paid attention to everyone else at the table—it was the way he tangled his fingers with hers, pulled her lips to his when nobody was looking; kept in physical contact with her the entire night.

It wasn't just that he had her candy in his pocket the entire night—it was the way he held onto her lip gloss and cigarette case wallet; as if it were the most natural, domestic-like thing in the world.

It wasn't just that he offered to pick up the tab—it was the way he graciously conceded when Kyle insisted.

It wasn't just that he danced with her until two in the morning, ignoring the onlookers—it was the way he held her close, the way he kept eye contact, the way he honored her.

It wasn't just that he walked out of the club ahead of her, taking the brunt of the flashbulbs and the attention—it was that he immediately draped his coat over her lap, helping her avoid any flashes of another kind.

It wasn't just the way he offered a tipsy smile and a wave to the group of girls who called out to him in their hotel lobby while celebrating a bachelorette party—it was the way he held Maddie's
hand to his heart as he did.

It wasn't just that the second they were alone he couldn't help but kiss her—it was the way he immediately slowed down, wanting to savor the rest of the night.

It wasn't just that he noticed her vintage seamed stockings—it was the way he pulled them off of her in an agonizingly slow way that made her ache for him.

It wasn't just that he made it a point to sing Happy Birthday one more time before the night was over—it was that he was kissing his way down her body as he did it.

It wasn't just that he made her gasp for air and scream his name—it was the way he whispered hers.

It wasn't just that he helped her work up a sweat, bringing her to her peak twice before he reached his—it was that he brought her water afterwards, pulling her close for sweet, loving kisses.

It wasn't just one of those things. It was all of it; the beautiful confluence that was Harry.

And it wasn't just that he was hers—it was that she was his and he made it a point to make it a point. Having her by his side, in his life, seemed to brighten him in ways he had never known. Maddie had no idea at the time the significance of their weekend together; their time out in Denver with her cousins. She had no idea how many photos would surface as a result of her birthday. She couldn't begin to fathom the responses; the bad (Prince Harry stood for the US National Anthem!), the good (Harry embraced by Forrester Family) and the wonderfully hilarious (Team Maddie has a Team Captain-Wales). The headlines would vary, the speculation would unfurl but there was no denying the love between the two of them in the photos that made it out—no denying the connection they shared.

The next morning, they would wake entangled in the other, they would kiss and tease and shower together. They would dress and pack and make their way to Maddie's grandmother's house for lunch with the family where both of them were welcomed with open arms and laughter; the kinship of an extended family already circling around him.

It wasn't just that her family simply adored him—it was that he adored them too.

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After a long afternoon of food and drinks and the most competitive card game Harry had ever seen outside of professional play, they said good-bye to the Denver cousins and made their way back to Maddie's home. Harry made up something about needing to catch up on reading and excused himself; wanting to allow Maddie some alone time with her mother before they left for London the next morning.

Though Maddie knew he was lying, she could see it in his eyes, she took the opportunity to have some quality mother/daughter time. They sat on the back deck drinking wine and catching up; laughing with each other until late into the night. It was just past midnight when Hannah held tight to Maddie's hand as they lay on the lounger. She took a deep breath and watched her daughter's face closely as she spoke.

"You're not coming back, are you?" Maddie turned her attention from the stars to her mother in the blink of an eye.
"What? Of course I'll come back."

"I didn't mean for a visit..." Though there were slight tears in her eyes, Hannah was smiling with her whole face; her whole heart.

"Mom..."

"It's okay," she squeezed Maddie's hand. "I told you to live your life. I meant it. Is that what you're doing?" Maddie thought about her work at the hospital, her time with Veteran's Services, Harry. She nodded.

"It really is. But, if you want me to..."

"Madeline," her voice was stern; forcing Maddie's eyes to level with hers. They stared at each other for one long, tension filled beat before Hannah relaxed; smiling wide and blinking back tears. "He is a wonderful young man, Maddie. He really is. I mean...I thought so from the first phone call, but this trip he has been quite the gentleman, quite the addition to the family—you know?"

"Yeah?" Maddie raised her eyebrows, surprised at her mother's words.

"Yes," Hannah nodded. Maddie took a deep breath in and let it out slowly; leaning against her mother's shoulder. Hannah pressed a kiss to her daughter's head and then with the tears that always came with this particular topic, she brought him up. "Your father would have really liked him," her voice was low; reverent and Maddie began to cry.

"You think so?" She wiped at her eyes.

"Absolutely," Hannah moved to pull Maddie into a hug. "He would have liked how easy going he is, how quick he is to try new things, the look in his eyes when he looks at you...or when he speaks of you." She took a ragged breath. "They would have got along fantastically, Maddie. I knew him better than anyone and I know that he would have really liked Harry. Take that with you when you're in London, when you're making decisions. I'm standing right behind you—with the spirit of your father."

Without words Maddie settled closer to her mother; feeling years younger than she was. And there they sat in silence, thinking of the man they had both loved and lost, thinking of the new man in Maddie's life, of the new uncertain future that Maddie was facing. Maddie would never in her life be able to find the words to tell her mother how much her words that night had meant to her. She would never be able to articulate what it was like to know that her mother's support was behind her and that, were he there, her father's would be as well.

They sat there until a light snore came from a drifting Hannah. Maddie chuckled lightly and woke her mother; escorted her to her bed. When Hannah was tucked in, hugged, and asleep, Maddie wrapped her blanket around her shoulders and went upstairs. Bypassing the main floor, she continued on to the second floor. With a small nod to Brad who was reading in his room, she went directly to Harry's room.

She was quiet as she shut the door behind her, soft with her footsteps as she moved to his bed. When Hannah was tucked in, hugged, and asleep, Maddie tucked her blanket around her shoulders and went upstairs. Bypassing the main floor, she continued on to the second floor. With a small nod to Brad who was reading in his room, she went directly to Harry's room.

She was quiet as she shut the door behind her, soft with her footsteps as she moved to his bed. She looked down at him sleeping peacefully; his chest rising and falling with each long breath. Tossing her blanket to the side, she carefully peeled back the blankets and, without a moment of doubt, she slipped into bed next to him; moving right to his side. Snuggling close to him, inhaling his scent, taking in his warmth, she sighed into him. This was exactly what she needed; where she
needed to be. Sensing her presence, feeling her there, Harry woke slightly, adjusting in the bed.

"Maddie?" Harry squinted at her. "Is everything okay?" He glanced to the clock; concern filling his voice.

"Yes," she nodded quickly. "I just...I don't want to sleep without you tonight..." He opened his mouth to protest, to remind her of her mother's assignments. "I just want to sleep. Please..." She whispered and he heard the tone of her voice, saw the look in her eye. And he gave in.

"Okay," he smiled sleepily; moving and opening his arms, inviting her closer. "Come on..." And she did. Pressing close to him, she settled into the crook of his shoulder; wrapping her arm around his torso and holding tight. His arm moved around her shoulders and he kissed the top of her head. "I love you Madeline."

"I love you too Harry," her voice was small but packed with emotion. "Good night."

"Good night," he breathed. His fingers ran along her shoulder soothingly, his breathing evened out, his heartbeat steady as Maddie let out a breath and settled in further. Feeling safe and content and happy, Maddie allowed herself to drift to sleep.

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The next morning came much too soon and continued on at that speed. They woke to the alarm he had set the night before. When they joined Hannah in the kitchen, Maddie didn't know if her mother knew they had come from the same room. If she did, she made no mention of it. They had breakfast together; laughing over the events of the weekend, talking about what their respective days looked like. They split; returning to their rooms to dress for the day, to pack their bags and before Maddie could stomp her feet and demand that time slow down, they were standing on the same drive where Hannah had first met Harry.

They spoke words of love, they said their thank you's, they made promises to return and then, amidst tears and hugs and kisses, Hannah watched as her daughter climbed into the car next to Harry, next to the next chapter in her life, and drove away from her. She was so proud of Maddie; living her life. As the car disappeared from her sight, she turned back towards the house with a new found inspiration; more motivation to continue living hers.
Chapter 50

Friday

If Maddie's birthday was a representation of the small town, simple life she came from, Harry's was the exuberant opulence of his. As William and Bishop had planned, they would be spending the weekend, Friday through, off the coast of Greece on a large private chartered yacht. At the time Maddie had been so caught up in the nude photo catastrophe that it hadn't really set in just how crazy of a plan it was; how foreign, how elusive.

But that morning when Harry picked her up at her place in shorts, a t-shirt, and a wide smile that already told of a holiday, it started to sink in. And she kind of wished that Ella hadn't made plans to meet Matt's parents; then she would be coming too. But Harry was there and his mood was proving contagious. He was relaxed and casual as he took her bag from her and put in the trunk of the car; winking as she slid into the seat next to him letting out a long breath.

"You okay?"

"Nervous," she smiled with a shrug.

"Nervous?" Harry laughed. "You know everyone who's going to be there. You know them well. There's a captain so, you know...I won't be sailing the boat. That alone should make you feel better..." They both laughed at that. "And Jim will be there," Harry pointed to his officer.

"Hi Jim," Maddie waved.

"Doctor Forrester," he nodded his hello.

"What are you nervous about?" Harry held her hand in his. "I know you know how to swim..."

"I do," she sighed. "I don't know why I'm nervous. Maybe I'm just excited...don't worry about it," she squeezed his cheek lightly. "It'll pass."

"Okay," he agreed; leaning to kiss her. Maddie held tight to his hand as they made their way to the airport; to the waiting private chartered airplane.

It was funny; Maddie couldn't help but chuckle. All of this time she had known Harry, all of this time she had been with him; this was one of the first times when the disparity between her childhood and his hit her with full force. Their car drove right up next to the airplane that would take him and his closest family and friends off to a private, chartered yacht off the coast of Greece. For the weekend. It was a world of curtsies and bows and your royal highness. It was lush and grand and Maddie wanted to pinch herself; just to be sure she wasn't imagining things.

Boarding the plane took her breath away. It was large and luxurious and the onboard staff members were incredibly professional and helpful. Harry made his way casually around; dropping his on board bag next to a seat, tossing his hat onto a chair and moving to check out the bar.

"Drink?" He looked up to her.

"Sure," Maddie nodded, taking a deep breath; maybe it would help her relax. Just as Harry returned to her side with a glass in his hand and a kiss for her cheek, they heard Bishop's voice
calling to them from the steps to the plane. When he stepped on, they both burst into laughter.

"Nice shirt," Maddie glared first at Bishop and then at Harry. "You really had to give him one?"

"I really did," Harry moved to hug Bishop.

"I think you wore that just to mess with me," Maddie nudged Bishop as he leaned to kiss her cheeks.

"I do most things to mess with you Doctor," he winked; leaning back out the door to take a bagged guitar from his driver. "Thank you." He smiled as he brought the instrument onto the plane.

"Hold on," Maddie looked to Harry. "Bishop plays the guitar?"

"Bishop plays the guitar." Harry nodded with a grin.

"Bishop does lots of things you have yet to discover love," Bishop grinned wickedly at her as he moved to a seat.

"This is going to be an amazing trip," Maddie giggled as Harry shook his head at his best friend.

Bishop was followed by Sean, Kiki, and Leo who arrived already slightly tipsy. Finally William and Kate and Eugenie and Jack arrived. It was a small but close contention of people; Harry's other cousins unable to attend. As everyone settled in their seats, drinks were passed to a few people here and there and, with a go-ahead from William, the plane was in the air.

The weekend had begun.

In just under four hours they had arrived in Greece, taken a few cars to the coast and were walking down a loading dock towards a yacht; the likes of which Maddie had only seen on TV or the internet. The group was spirited, lively; laughing and joking—ready for a weekend of partying. Maddie held onto Harry's hand as they walked but her eyes were scanning everything around her; trying to commit it to memory—it was so beautiful; colors she had never seen before.

"Oh my God...look at the water. Look at the beach. Look at..."

"Something else, isn't it?" Harry chuckled lightly.

"Seriously. I almost feel bad for getting on a boat and leaving..." She shook her head with a grin on her face.

"Don't," Harry kissed the top of her hand before letting it go so he could step onboard. "We'll be back," with a wink he held his hand out to her. "Come on."

Reaching out, she took his hand and stepped onto the boat. Everyone initially dispersed to their rooms, settling in and preparing for their trip. Maddie was not ashamed to admit that the room she would share with Harry on that boat was nicer than where she lived in Bendal. As soon as everyone had settled into their suites and rooms, they set sail; full speed.

Intrigued, Maddie made her way as high as she could go on the boat; looking out over the sea,
over the water. Bishop, drink already in hand, moved to stand next to her; holding tight to the rail as he looked out.

"You kind of want to yell King of the World, don't you?" He teased.

"What?" She laughed at him. "No, of course not."

"Go ahead," he nodded out towards the water. "I won't judge."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed as she shook her head. Though she would never admit it to anyone for as long as she lived, Bishop was kind of, a little bit, mostly right. Bishop stayed up top with her for a while, pointing out landmarks as they passed; telling her stories of him and Harry as children. By the time they stopped in the water, the sun was inching closer to the horizon and Maddie was almost in tears from laughter. As they made their way down to the main deck where everyone was lounging around; lazy and restful, as dinner was being brought out, Harry looked up from his spot around the edge of the boat and shook his head at Bishop.

"I'm not sure I like the way this looks," he wagged his finger with a grin as he pulled her to his side. "Join me for dinner?"

"Mmm yes. I'm starving!"

"Right this way."

Sitting on the deck of the boat with Harry's arm draped loosely behind her on the railing, Maddie dinned on fresh, succulent shellfish and drank glass after glass of the most amazing wine she had tasted in a long time. Though their friends were tranquil and cozy, the conversations were lively and spirited; full of laughter and great fun.

As dinner died down, Harry took her hand and gestured for her to follow him. Climbing back up to the top deck, the young couple moved to the comfortable bench that surrounded the perimeter and took a seat. And as the sun set over the sea, casting the most beautiful colors up into the sky and across the water, Maddie couldn't help but feel slightly emotional. Sighing, she leaned into the crook of Harry's arm, seeking his warmth, his closeness.

"Having fun?" His eyes were heavy as he leaned to kiss her bare shoulder.

"Mmmm..." She nodded. "It's perfect out here."

"It is..." Harry's fingers played in her hair. "You know, I have something in my pocket for you..."

"Harry!" Maddie gasped with a giggle; glancing around quickly. "On the deck? With all of those people right below us...you know your birthday isn't even until Sunday."

"Ha!" Harry laughed. "I was actually talking about your candy...but it's good to know where your head is at."

"Oh..." Maddie laughed; her face flushing slightly. "Well then..." She cleared her throat.

"Sorry, did you..." Harry straightened up and turned to her. "Did you mean that if it were Sunday you might consider..."

"Well," Maddie's eyelids lowered seductively. "You know Forrester Birthday rules..." Her hand
ran teasingly down his chest. "Whatever you want."

"Oooooohhhhhhh..." Harry breathed, moving to kiss her. His hand ran down her side, teasing at the hem of her sundress.

"Sunday, Wales. Sunday." Maddie giggled against his mouth and then, as she heard the first strums of a guitar from below, she pulled away. "I think Bishop is going to play."

"I think you're right," he nodded and sighed. "Want to go back down?"

"Can we?" With a nod, he stood and they made their way back down to the group.

Harry took a seat in a lounger, pulling Maddie down with him. Laying back against his chest, she wrapped his arms around her and they looked to Bishop as he began to play. Maddie was impressed; incredibly so. He actually knew how to play and, as the night wore on and the stars shone bright, he entertained them with song after song. Some Maddie knew, some they all sang along to, and some were just random musings that came from Bishop. But after every one ended, Maddie would lead a light round of applause in appreciation. Long after William and Kate had called it a night, just before Sean and Kiki would stand and retire, Maddie turned in Harry’s arms so she could look up at him.

"I have a confession..." She smiled shyly as his hands ran down over her back.

"Hmmm?" Harry smiled lazily at her.

"I have a little bit of a crush on Bishop right now..." Maddie's eyes flashed in the direction of their friend who was laughing with Leo while his fingers continued to strum at the guitar.

"Shush your mouth!" He laughed at her; moving to cover her eyes with his hands. "And cover your eyes! And ears! Off with your senses..." In a fit of giggles, Maddie let him pull her tight to him; smothering her neck with kisses.

"Get a room!" Bishop called out to them.

And so they did. With hugs and kisses and good nights, they waved to their friends and went to their room. Though it was earlier than she normally went to bed, there was something about being on the water, being in the sun; the wine, the food, the laughter—it made her more tired than a normal day on land.

When Maddie stepped out of the bathroom and into their room, Harry looked up from where he sat on the edge of the bed; already dressed down for the night. A smug grin spread across his face as he took her in.

"Is that my shirt?"

"It's my shirt," she grinned; clearly tipsy as she moved to stand in front of him. "But your smell is wearing off. You need to take it back and make it smell like you again."

"Would you like me to take it back now?" His voice was rough as she cocked an eyebrow.

"...if you think that you can..." She shrugged; silently challenging him.

As he lunged for her, she only hoped that her giggles couldn't be heard all over the boat—though
Harry couldn't bring himself to care if they could.

Saturday

Maddie woke the next morning to a Harry-less bed. In his place was a piece of candy and a note:

'Come up when you wake-H'

With a long stretch and a groan, she honestly contemplated rolling over and going back to sleep; wanting to luxuriate in the peaceful slumber just a bit longer. But she was sure the others were up and she wanted the chance to enjoy the sun and the water for as long as she could. So, she rose from bed, pulled on her suit and a sundress, a haphazard ponytail and sunglasses and made her way to the deck.

There were several moments over the course of the day that would stick with Maddie; moments that would ingrain themselves in her mind with permanence. The first of which was waiting for her at the breakfast table with Kiki and Eugenie and the most elaborate spread of breakfast foods Maddie had seen.

"Good Morning," Kiki was the first to spot her as she rounded the corner.

"Good morning," Eugenie turned to her with a wide smile.

"Good morning," Maddie smiled back. "Wow...look at all of this food."

"Help yourself," Eugenie waved at the table as Maddie took a seat. "The boys are fishing off the back." Maddie craned her neck to look; instantly spotting Harry's toned shoulders and back, wearing only trunks, fedora and glasses—memories from the night before flooding her mind. Her cheeks flushed. She wondered if her body would ever stop reacting with warmth and excitement at spotting him; she hoped not. Forcing her attention back to the table, she reached for a glass of juice and a plate.

"Where's Kate?" Maddie glanced around.

"They haven't come up yet," Eugenie offered, her eyes schooled on the magazine in her hand.

"Oh," Maddie reached for a croissant and looked at the stack of magazines between Kiki and Eugenie. "What are you looking through?"

"Wedding magazines," Eugenie grinned.

"Planning?" Maddie smiled sweetly. Though Eugenie nodded, Kiki groaned.

"Hoping," slightly embarrassed; she rolled her eyes at herself—the first of the three of them to chuckle at the expectant look on her face.

As Kate and William made their way up from below, a chorus of good mornings called out; inviting her to the table, directing him to the back of the boat. With a kiss to his wife and nod to the others, he did just that. Settling in her chair, Kate glanced around the table; her face lighting up at the magazines.

"You're planning," she smiled warmly at Eugenie. "Can I look?" With an enthusiastic nod, Eugenie handed her one.
"So..." Maddie sipped her juice. "What do you have planned so far?"

"Nothing, yet," Eugenie studied a page. "Though...I do kind of like this dress..."

"Let me see," Maddie reached for the magazine. "Oh wow. You would look amazing in something like that." Kate and Kiki nodded in agreement.

"Have you set a date yet?" Kate asked, gathering orange juice and a plate of fruit.

"No," Eugenie shook her head. "We're trying to decide that right now; before or after the holidays."

"Where are you going to do it?" Kiki asked. "Windsor?"

"Maybe. Probably." Eugenie shrugged; still at the very early planning stages of the whole thing.

"You're so lucky," Kate smiled wistfully. "You get to have so much more control over things."

"Definitely more than you and William," Eugenie nodded.

"That's for sure," Kate grinned; a light laughter rounded the table. "I'm so happy the wedding planning is over; now we're just...married."

"So far it hasn't been too bad," Eugenie sighed. "Of course we haven't decided on anything so..."

"I would love to be planning a wedding right now," Kiki admitted; her mind traveling to a place where she could be. "How about I help you; live vicariously through you?"

"Absolutely," Eugenie patted her hand sweetly. "You and Sean still talking about it?"

"Oh sure," she shrugged; having had this same discussion with their group of friends multiple times. "We've talked about it. We've been talking about it for over a year. You know, if much more time passes, I just may give into Bishop's monthly drunken proposals." Maddie about spit her drink from her mouth as laughter bubbled up; the table erupting in laughter again.

Spurred on by their laughter, Harry and Bishop approached the table; wet and curious. Spotting Maddie, Harry grinned wide and bent to kiss her. "Good Morning love."

"Good Morning," she smiled against his lips; inhaling his scent.

"What's going on at this table?" Bishop scanned the surface; pulling up a magazine. "Ah yes...wedding planning."

"You set a date yet?" Harry nodded to his cousin as he popped a piece of apple into his mouth; leaning against the arm of Maddie's chair.

"Not yet," she shook her head. "What do you think? Before or after Christmas?"

"Before," Harry shrugged. "Bring in the new year with a husband. How about you?" He looked to Kiki. "When is Sean going to man up and take you off the market? Or is Bishop going to outlast him?" Harry winked to Bishop.

"I could be so lucky," Bishop leaned to kiss Kiki's cheeks as she laughed out loud.
"Oh I don't know," Kiki sighed dramatically; patting Bishop's ass as he moved away from her. "You would have to ask him."

"I will," Harry laughed and put down his glass. "Come on Bishop, let's head back..." Leaning to Maddie, he tilted her chin up and pressed his cheek to hers; lowering his voice to speak in her ear so only she could hear him. "Just a warning; marrying me means it's going to be about a thousand times more stuffy than you had ever imagined..." He kissed her. "But I'll make up for it on the honeymoon." Maddie schooled her reaction; forcing a small smile to her face as she looked up to him.

"Sounds like a deal to me."

"Good," and with one last kiss to her lips, Harry and Bishop were off. Maddie took a deep breath and focused her attention back on the table where the ladies had already returned to the magazines, debating the merits of passed hours devours versus set stations.

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It was well into the night; deep into party mode. Maddie had spent the day enjoying all of the wonderful aspects of a weekend off the coast of Greece; swimming in the water with Kiki and Bishop until her legs were exhausted, reading a novel in the shade next to Kate who did the same and Leo, who caught up with the daily newspapers, and casting a few lines next to Harry—allowing him the enjoyment of teaching her a few tricks—though she clearly knew what she was doing.

The shellfish returned for dinner in a magnificent surf and turf spread that made Maddie nearly drool when she returned from changing out of her suit into a light melon colored chiffon dress. As Harry's birthday was the next day and they would be heading back, this night was destined to be the big brouhaha that Maddie had grown to expect from this crowd and they were all dressing up just a bit more than they had been.

Along with the mouthwatering food was bottle upon bottle of champagne; steel tubs full of beer and some mint leaf concoction that Kiki had insisted upon mixing.

"Hello..." Harry's voice was low as he came up behind her, wrapping an arm around her waist and dropping a kiss to her shoulder. "You look wonderful."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed; her hand moving up to tangle in his hair. "I think you've spent too much time in the sun today."

"Not a chance," he shook his head and turned her in his arms; kissing her full on the mouth. "You know we'll be celebrating my birthday this evening."

"I do know that," she sighed. "Does that mean you want your gift tonight or tomorrow?"

"Gift?" He seemed surprised. "I thought I told you my rule about gifts."

"Rule?" Her face screwed up; her finger tapping against her chin as she pretended to think about it. "I don't remember hearing any rules."

"That's because you have selective hearing, love."
"Ah, well...what can you do..." Maddie smiled up at him. "I'm a bit of a rule breaker I suppose."

"I suppose," he nodded; his eyes growing serious for a moment. "I'm not a big fan of gifts. I don't need anything. And everything I want is..."

"I know," she placed her fingers to his lips. "But I think you'll be happy with this. Just...trust me."

With a nod, he agreed. "Later then?"

"Later," she smiled. Taking his hand in hers, she lead him down to the main deck. As soon as they were spotted, a round of applause erupted with Bishop leading a raucous round of Happy Birthday. Blushing only slightly, Harry smiled and took it with ease. Maddie held tight to his hand, pressing a kiss to his cheek as a cake was rolled out in front of him; his favorite, complete with twenty-nine blazing candles.

With a wink to Maddie, Harry took a deep breath and blew. And the party had begun.

The second moment that Maddie would carry with her had nothing to do with her; nothing at all, but it was the catalyst for the third moment—the biggest of moments. It all began with a flinch; a subconscious, kneejerk reaction that Maddie was certain she wasn't supposed to catch.

Nearly everyone was tipsy, though nobody was quite 'drunk'. They were older, they were being more careful with their intake on the boat. But they were having the uninhibited kind of fun that came along with leaving your concerns at the shore and enjoying bottles of champagne.

Sean and Bishop were fencing on the deck with makeshift fencing foils while Kiki and Harry refereed and kept score. William had gone below for a moment and Leo was using the loo. Kate sat off to the side, watching it all unfold with a bemused smile. Maddie watched as the action moved along the deck of the boat past Eugenie and Jack

Sean was gaining the advantage, backing Bishop closer and closer to the group and, as he bumped a table, sending its contents toppling to the ground, Kate flinched jumping to the side. And then Maddie saw it—the way her hand drifted to her stomach; floating there lightly before she composed herself and laughed at the boys.

"I'm sure that's a deduction in points, Bishop!" She called out to them; recovering quickly.

"It is," Harry agreed with a grin as Kiki adjusted the score she was keeping.

And Maddie's mind began to reel; piecing together so many moments over the last two days, the last few weeks; the last month. Kiki left Harry with the score sheet and moved to the bar; ready to refresh everyone's drinks.

Maddie sat in thought—so many things were falling into place. At Eugenie's engagement party she had left early due to an upset stomach. She hadn't touched the shellfish on this trip. She had seemed a little preoccupied and distant. She had been sleeping later, going to bed earlier. And now...Maddie was certain she hadn't seen a drink in her hand since they left on Friday. There had been so many signs along the way; signs that Maddie had learned to read while living in Bendal, surrounded by doctors and women who were pregnant more often than they wanted to admit.

There was no way for Maddie to know it, but she knew that Kate was meandering around the group trying to avoid the moment when Kiki would offer her a drink, still not able to decide how she wanted to handle it.
Maddie let go of Harry's hand as he watched the fencing battle continue and moved inside; going first to the bar and then over to where Kate sat off to the side, looking out over the water.

"Hi," Maddie summoned her nerves; knowing that this was bound to be awkward; right or wrong—it would be awkward.

"Hello," Kate smiled tentatively. "It's beautiful out here, isn't it?"

"It is," Maddie nodded and took a breath. "Here, drink this," Maddie passed a mixed drink to Kate.

"No thank you," she shook her head sweetly. "I'm...still getting my sea legs."

"Sure," Maddie smiled; wondering if she should just let the poor woman lie to her. Taking a deep breath, she stepped closer and lowered her voice. "It's...I'm sorry. I may be completely overstepping my bounds but...it's tonic water with crushed mint. There's no alcohol in it and the mint will help soothe your stomach and..." She watched Kate's reaction as she spoke. "It looks like a mixed drink, so nobody will think anything is...different." Kate's eyes flew to hers and Maddie could see fear there; Kate was scared that she had been discovered.

"I... " Kate's voice fell off; her throat dry with panic. Maddie reached out to put a steady hand on her arm and took half a step closer so she could lower her voice.

"Listen, we don't know each other terribly well. But...I'm a therapist, a psychologist and my whole life is just...bound by confidentiality. It comes second nature to me to keep things to myself. And even if it didn't, Harry trusts me. And so can you. I won't tell anyone...anything. And in the meantime, this will stave off the questions from everyone else." In a moment full of heat and tension, a moment that Maddie assumed was incredibly difficult, Kate blinked, took a breath and decided to take a leap of faith and trust her. Reaching to take the drink from Maddie, she smiled shakily and whispered.

"We're just. We're trying and I never know when I could be and..."

"You don't have to explain." Maddie shook her head; pulling her hand back from Kate's arm. "My lips are sealed. Nobody will hear it from me."

"Harry..." Kate glanced nervously to the other side of the boat.

"...not even Harry." Maddie assured her.

"Thank you." The way Kate looked at her, almost on the verge of tears for a split second and then, well-trained and versed, she schooled her features; smiling at Maddie. Maddie knew that this was a defining moment for them; a moment when Kate took a leap of faith and decided to let Maddie in. Taking a sip of the drink, Kate leaned closer. "You know, I've been meaning to tell you—the photos of you and Harry...they look wonderful. I mean, I know the press is a pain and you would rather those photos not be out there, but you look amazing and he is clearly head over heels for you. It could be worse."

"It could," Maddie agreed; smiling across the room as Harry seemed to be mediating between Sean and Bishop.

"If there is anything I can ever do to...help you out, to make things smoother, let me know." Kate
was sincere in her offer; truly extending a branch of friendship to Maddie. "When I was joining the family, Harry went out of his way to make me feel welcome, to not feel so crazy. So I intend on returning that favor. For you." Maddie's eyes flashed wide as she met Kate's eyes.

"But I'm not...I'm sorry. I'm not joining the family." Though Kate nodded, there was this look in her eyes, a twist to her smile.

"Not yet," she looked out to Harry as she spoke. "You're not the only one with a knack for observation. I see what's happening. I see how he is with you; he's incredibly serious and undeniably in love with you." She shrugged and met Maddie's eyes. "And I intend on returning the favor."

And there it was; this unexpectedly significant moment between the two of them; a moment where they let the other in slightly on their vulnerabilities—where they settled in with the knowledge that the other understood, more than anyone else could, what it was like to love one of these brothers with so much attention and responsibility resting on their shoulders. A moment where they were both acknowledging the passing of secrets in a circle so uniquely tight that Maddie felt her chest tighten as she accepted Kate's offer—and all that came with it.

"Thank you," Maddie smiled. "I appreciate that."

"You're welcome," Kate smiled back satisfied; happy to finally have a feminine addition to the circle.

"Laaadies..." Kiki sang as she approached them; pitcher in hand. "Can I get you a refill?"

"Oh!" Maddie grinned and held out her glass. "Yes please."

"Here you go..." Kiki topped Maddie off and looked to Kate. "You?"

"Actually, I'm still working on this one," Kate took a sip from the glass. "But it's really great Kiki."

"Thank you," Kiki winked and hurried back towards her table; none the wiser. Maddie and Kate looked at each other, sharing a conspiratorial smile and then in a gesture that stunned Maddie, Kate moved her hand over Maddie's and squeezed tight.

And that was it—the beginning of a trust, a friendship; the forming of a bond that would help both of them throughout some wonderful and some very difficult times ahead. And Maddie knew without knowing; Kate may not have been her friend, may not have been the first person she would have turned to; but she was and would continue to be, somebody she could rely on. It hadn't happened overnight, but there was no going back now—not that Maddie ever would. It was a nice feeling, she smiled to herself, to have somebody who understood.

"Madeline! Save me!" Bishop shrieked out; effectively ending the moment between the two women. Bishop and Harry were tangled together near the edge of the boat near the diving platform that was only a few feet from the surface of the water. Maddie moved towards them with Kate behind her.

"What is happening over here?" Maddie giggled at the expression on Bishop's face; feeling slightly tipsy herself.

"Bishop was cheating!" Kiki called out in a fit of laughter as Harry managed to nudge Bishop
closer to the edge.

"I was not cheating!" Bishop cried out in a high voice that was reminiscent of a young girl's. "I wasn't cheating! You have to believe me!"

"Bishop," Maddie crossed her arms and shook her head.

"Tell her the truth," Harry warned, managing to flash a smile in Maddie's direction.

"Come on Doctor, you have to believe me...look in my eyes...you can see that I'm telling the truth!" Even Bishop had to laugh at his plea.

"Hmmm..." Maddie stepped closer to the two of them. "Let me see..." She leaned in, her eyes narrowing as she met Bishop's eyes; howls of laughter rounded the boat. "Go ahead. Tell me what happened."

"Okay..." He tried to steady himself, still in Harry's arms. "We were fencing."

"Yes, I remember."

"And then I made a move which is totally legal..." His tone was directed at Harry who shook his head. "And when your boyfriend knocked points off, I protested."

"Oh..." Maddie's eyes shifted to Harry; her voice lowering. "You're throwing him over for protesting?"

"Tell her how you protested," Harry pinched at his side; Sean and Leo laughing in anticipation.

"I...I can't..." Bishop tried to control his laughter; failing miserably. His eyes met Maddie's in defeat before he turned to Harry with a wide grin. "Ah fuck it. I cheated. Throw me over."

"Okay," Harry shrugged. "Fine." And then, in a split second, three things happened.

One, Harry kissed Bishop's cheek and gave him a push.

Two, acting solely on reflex, Bishop reached out; grabbing for the closest thing to him.

And three, Maddie was tugged, dress, drink and all, into the sea with Harry's best friend.

Before Maddie's head reached the surface, Harry was in the water after them; leaving the entire rest of the group in a fit of laughter on board.

"Bishop!" Maddie yelled as she came up.

"I'm sorry!" He yelled back. "It was instinct! It was..."

"It was the worst idea you've ever had!" She splashed water at him and moved towards him.

"Whoa, whoa..." Harry swam to the two of them, grabbing Maddie's hand and pulling her close to him; suddenly the voice of reason. "We're drunk. We're in the sea. We don't need anyone drowning..."

"Yes Madeline," Bishop eyed her smugly. "We don't need anyone drowning."
"Out of my way Wales," Maddie moved to swim past him. Trying to control his laughter, Harry eyed Bishop.

"Watch it or I'll let her go."

"Come on Bishop!" Leo yelled from up top, letting down the ladder as Kiki returned with some big fluffy towels. "Get up here!" As Bishop swam back towards the boat, Harry turned his attention to the sopping wet woman in his arms.

"Maddie, love..."

"I see that smug little smirk on your face," Maddie's bottom lip pulled out in a slight pout.

"Yeah?" Harry chuckled; his hands pulling her tighter. "Care to do something about it?"

"You pushed me into the sea..." Maddie sighed; smudging his hair from his forehead.

"I pushed Bishop into the sea," he corrected. "And I came in right after you."

"Such a gentleman," she cocked her head to the side sarcastically.

"Alright," he laughed; swimming them both over to the ladder, reaching out for a rung. "Come on, let's get you out of those wet clothes." His eyes gleamed with double entendre. Maddie took a breath, ready to offer a snappy comeback but instead went for a more effective silencing tool.

"Okay."

"Okay? That's it?"

"Well," her voice dropped as she leaned to kiss him. "It is technically Sunday. Happy Birthday."

And, leaving a stunned Harry in the water, Maddie climbed up the ladder. Taking only a minute to recover, Harry was up the ladder right behind her.

"Wait for me!" He called as he hurried past the fluffy towel and his friends; now laughing at him.

"Good night!" Bishop called out; taking the drink that Sean was offering him. "And you're welcome!"

And though the party continued on deck, there was an entirely different party in the works below.

Sunday

Maddie woke before Harry, the sun barely rising outside the windows. Rolling over to her side, her eyes zeroed in on him. He was sprawled out on his back sleeping soundly. She watched him for a moment, enjoying the steady sound of him breathing. Her eyes traveled over him, taking him in. It was an amazing thing to see; Harry quiet and peaceful. He was always so...on. Always ready for anything the world threw at him. She loved that she was able to witness these moments when he was so relaxed, vulnerable even. She loved that it was her that he allowed in enough to see this. And there was a small part of her mind, a part she reminded herself she needed to get in check, that couldn't help but drift to the place where moments such as these were a part of her future. Smiling, she looked him over, enjoying the chance to watch him without him knowing.

Her eyes took in his hair; red, spiky, and slightly smashed from going to sleep wet. Her eyes
moved to his face and she grinned at the way his forehead held a slight crinkle as though he were in thought, even in sleep. Her eyes moved to his face with his slight morning scruff and his perfect, kissable mouth. Her eyes traveled further down, taking in his broad, strong shoulders; always available to her on demand. As her eyes moved further down, they fell on his chest; rising and falling with his breathing. As a reflex, her hand reached out to it, settling over his heart, feeling the heat that radiated from him. And then, as a reflex, Harry moved; shifting slightly as his hand found hers, settling on top of it, pressing it close to him. It was amazing how, even in sleep, his body reacted to her; knew she was there and responded accordingly. Wanting to be closer, she moved so that she could cuddle into his side. Her hand still sandwiched between his hand and his chest, she settled her head on his shoulder and sighed as the contentment fell over her. Somehow she didn't mind waking up with the sun if it meant she could stay right in that spot.

She loved him...so much. As she watched him sleep, the steadiness of his breathing calming her, she was taken aback by the swelling in her heart. She was over the moon in love with him. She couldn't quite put words to how much she loved him. Though it wasn't actually that long ago, it took great effort and some thought to bring up a memory from a time before she knew him; before his presence wasn't a constant in her life; when she didn't want to feel his arms around her, his lips on hers. She stifled a chuckle as she thought back to meeting him; how she hadn't even blinked before ordering him around, how appalled Ella had been when she discovered Harry unloading a truck full of food. Maddie sighed as she remembered how long it took her to give in to her feelings for him; how long it took her to get to a place where she could accept his feelings for her—to see what was happening between them. But she hadn't been ready for Harry then. But, after almost a year, after taking him home, after stepping into his world of privilege and still managing to hold onto herself, she was more than ready for a Harry now.

Giving in to the urge she had to kiss him, she moved then; leaning closer and placing a soft, light kiss to the hollow part of his neck next to his collar bone. Her lips felt warm at the touch and she felt his body stir slightly next to her. Taking a chance, she turned her head slightly to place another kiss on his shoulder. And then she was hooked. She leaned up slightly to place a kiss on the curve of his jaw. First one, then two, and just as she moved in for the third, Harry moved. His eyes fluttering so they were just barely open, he moved; rising up and turning so that he was over her, his body over hers, pulling the hand she had placed on his chest so that her arm wrapped around him, leaning down to press his lips to hers in a moment of uninhibited, unexpected passion.

Passion had been ignited in both of them nearly instantly.

His breathing was raspy as his mouth met hers. Matching his passion with her own, she immediately opened her lips under his, allowing his tongue entrance. She moaned at the desire that instantaneously overtook her body. With one hand rooted into her hair, Harry moved his other to push up under her camisole, seeking unobstructed contact. She gasped as his skin touched hers. And when he pulled away from her, only to tug her cami over her head, his sleepy eyes met hers and she was certain she stopped breathing. His eyes were dark blue like the water below them; full of passion and lust. Her hands traveled up his arms, over his shoulders and pulled at his face, bringing his lips crashing into hers. Nudging her legs with his knee, he moved to situate himself between them. His lips traveled down her neck, causing her to shiver. His hands traveled down her body, pulling at her knee, bringing her leg up and around him; causing her to tremble.

Her hands held on to his head as he kissed his way across her jaw; down her neck, across her chest and to her stomach, his hands pulling her tiny boy shorts off her legs, discarding them quickly. Teasing her in the most maddeningly delightful way possible, Harry was sucking and licking and kissing her into quite the frenzy.

As he reached her center, he slowed down to a torturous pace; breathing warmth through her sati
underwear, nudging her with his nose, making her ache for more contact as he focused his attention everywhere but where she longed for it the most. He knew what she wanted. He knew what would send her over the edge but he also knew that, sometimes, drawing out the process only made it more satisfying. While Maddie was impressed with his restraint, she wanted him now. She wanted that contact, that release that only he could give her. Her body arched closer to him, her eyes closed as her head pushed into the pillow.

"Harry..." Her voice groaned, begging him for more. He looked up to her then; his eyes peering at her; his body responding with need at the site of her in such a state. "Please..." Her eyes peeked open to look at him. Seeing the amusement in his smile, his amusement at the reactions he was drawing from her; amusement at how much she wanted him, Maddie decided it was time to teach Harry a lesson.

Summoning all of her will power, she took a deep breath and moved. Pulling his face up to hers, she brought her lips to his with force and want. She could almost feel his surprise when she pushed at him, effectively moving them both so that he was lying back on the bed and she was above him, straddling his waist. She pulled her lips from his and sat up; long and tall; pushing down onto him. And she watched his eyes grow hazy with desire as he looked her over; naked above him. His hands moved along her thighs, up her sides, along her neck, burying themselves in her hair. With a moan, he tried to draw her face back to his; longing for her lips. But she resisted. "Uh uh, Wales," she shook her head slowly. As her head turned towards one of his hands, she grabbed it and brought it to her lips for a kiss. She held his gaze as she slowly pulled his finger into her mouth; her tongue, lips, and mouth working together to elicit a strangled groan from him lips.

"Maddie..." The way her name sounded on his lips brought her great satisfaction. She pulled his finger from her mouth and then, grabbing both of his hands in hers, she drew them up and over his head, pinning them to the pillow beside him. As she leaned close to him, her hips began to move slowly; up and down; with the very intent on driving him towards the edge, she kissed his neck, just below his ear; causing him to hiss. "Oh my God..."

Maddie chuckled as she began to move her body lower on his; kissing across his chest, licking down his stomach. And when she reached the band of his boxers, she tugged them off; releasing him from their confines. She ran her nails up along his thighs, causing his hips to arch off the bed.

"Maddie..." He called out to her, reaching for her, wanting her to stop what she was doing and let him have her. But Maddie, enjoying the control she was exerting, waved his hands away and shook her head at him.

"I'm not sure you've been adequately punished for pushing me in the water last night." And then, locking her eyes with his, she held his gaze as he watched her head dip. And when she took him into her mouth, he thought he was going to lose it. Her mouth was...absolute magic. Every time she did this to him, he struggled to maintain control, to hold on to his shaky grasp on the edge of the cliff he was hanging from. As she worked her magic, she could feel him getting close and, just like that, she pulled away from him.

"You know..." He fought to catch his breath as she sat up and looked to him. "If you're going to punish me like this...it is...in no way...going to curb future misbehavior."

And when he saw her, her hair mussed, her lips swollen, her eyes hazy, he about lost it. With a satisfied and sultry smile, Maddie moved up higher towards his waist; reaching for a condom from the nightstand—which she applied with natural ease. Swinging her leg over him, she made a point of moving very slowly; very deliberately as lowered herself onto him. His hips bucked
involuntarily as she settled herself there. If she was being completely honest, every single cell in her body wanted to give him what he wanted. Every single part of her wanted to speed things up and push them both to that place they were so very close to. But he had started with the teasing and she liked to give as good as she got. With a groan, his hands reached out to her, gripping her hips, longing to increase her speed. But she was quick to grab his wrists, pulling them from her body and holding them tight to the mattress at their sides. And she continued her achingly slow pace; driving Harry absolutely mad.

"Maddie..." He breathed. "Please..." He begged with a grin. "Let me touch you. It's my birthday..." And then, because he was right, because she truly couldn't stand it much longer herself, she released his wrists. His hands were immediately on her; pulling her lips to his, running along her body as though she were an oasis.

"Oh God..." She gasped as he pushed up against her, increasing their pace, increasing the friction. And when his lips moved to her neck, she knew that the end was dangerously close. As she moved to sit upright, he followed; his arms wrapping around her holding her tight to him. And when his eyes locked with hers, the pressure that was building inside of her exploded into her heart and she suddenly understood how some people felt the overwhelming urge to cry while making love.

"I love you..." His eyes held hers as he spoke. Finding that she couldn't speak, she leaned in to kiss him; pushing all of her emotion into her lips, her mouth. And then it was just too much, tossing her head back in abandon, she held tight to his shoulders and exploded around him. Following her lead, following her desires—he would follow her anywhere—Harry's mouth dropped to her shoulder and he followed her over the edge.

They held tight to each other as their pulses settled, as their breathing evened out. Holding her face in his hands, he kissed her; long, slow, emotion filled kisses before she opened her eyes to look at him.

"Good Morning," he whispered.

"Good Morning," she whispered back; the tears in her eyes blinking away as he held her.

"I'm just going to..." He nodded towards their bathroom before he, regretfully, moved away from her. Maddie reached for the shirt she had taken from him and settled back onto her pillow; the smile a permanent fixture on her face. Pulling on his boxers, Harry ducked out of their room quick enough to grab bottles of water without being seen. And then he was crawling back into bed with her. Taking the bottle he offered, she reached up, drawing his face to hers; kissing him over and over again before she sighed and released his smug face.

"Happy Birthday Harry," Maddie's hand reached up to stroke his cheek.

"Yes it is," he turned to kiss her hand. "I actually think it's quite unfair for me to be as happy as I am right this moment."

"Hmmm..." Maddie chuckled. "Good."

"How are you, love?" His eyebrows arched. "Did you sleep well?"

"Blissfully well," she sighed and looked to the window where the rays of the sun were shining in. "Do we really have to go back?"
"Well, I do. I have training on base for two weeks," he moved to lay on his back; pulling her to rest on his chest. "You, however, can stay put as long as you like."

"Oh?" Though she wasn't sure she would want to stay without him, the thought was intriguing.

"Sure," he nodded. "You might have to fly back commercially, but I can extend the charter on the boat—you can keep her as long as you would like." She was simultaneously excited and nervous at the ease at which he made the suggestion. Taking a breath, she smirked.

"I can keep the boat..."

"Yes."

"Can I keep Bishop and his guitar?" Harry's eyes narrowed playfully as he chuckled.

"Absolutely not." His voice was happy, but final.

"Well, it was a nice thought..." She let out a breath and then, as she remembered something, her eyes flashed wide, her face brightened. "Oh! I'll be right back..." And she was out of his arms, out of the bed; moving to her bag.

"Boo..." He pouted and then, as she returned to their bed; bouncing next to him with an intricately wrapped package in her hands, he sat up, serious. "Madeline..."

"Shush," she waved her hand; tucking her hair behind her ears.

"Did you just shush me?" Harry grinned.

"I did," she sat with her legs tucked up under her; her hands holding the gift as she pulled her thoughts together. "I know you don't like gifts and I get that...mostly..." She rolled her eyes. "I understand why you have your silly rule—which I did listen to, by the way."

"Oh? Because I see a gift wrapped box right here," he pointed. "So you'll allow me my confusion."

"Maybe..." Her voice had warning to it. "Maybe you should open it first. I think you'll be quite pleased." She seemed almost...shy as she held it out to him. So, bypassing sarcasm, Harry took the gift from her hands and began to unwrap it. Maddie bit her lip as she watched him; her insecurities tugging at her confidence, questioning her decision for the first time. As he pushed the paper aside, revealing a children's book, he couldn't help the confused smile that tugged at his lips.

"A book?" Harry turned it over in his hands; his eyes moving between Maddie and the hardcover in his hands. "Shel Silverstein? I have to tell you...I don't understand."

"It's kind of a long story but it will come together..." Maddie took a breath and reached for the book; flipping through the pages. "This was one of my favorite books as a child. There's a part..." She found what she was searching for and her eyes lit up; reading, "Listen to the mustn'ts, child. Listen to the shouldn'ts, the impossibles, the won'ts. Listen to the never haves, then listen close to me... Anything can happen, child. Anything can be." She closed the book and met his eyes. "That doesn't explain anything now does it?" She laughed and he shook his head.

"Not really," he smiled and took her hand in his. "Unless you're giving me your favorite childhood book. Is that what you're doing?"
"No," she shook her head. "Well, yes. But that's not all."

"Oh-kay..." He eyed her. "But two gifts is most certainly breaking the rules."

"Patience," she warned. "I wrote something in the cover," she handed the book back to him and gestured for him to read it. Dropping her hand, he did as she requested. "It's a quote from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe."

"You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him..." Harry's voice trailed off as a lump developed unexplainably in his throat. "Maddie..."

"This is where it comes together," she pressed her hands together excitedly. "I spoke to Khenda before we left for the states to visit my family," Maddie began her explanation. "And she was telling me how the Children's Center had started this small, tiny project—putting together something of a library of books for the kids to read. They had started small but the response was just...overwhelming. The kids were so greedy for the books that they were out all of the time; kids were hiding them under their pillows and... They couldn't keep up. They didn't have enough books or resources or..." Maddie took a breath and blinked at the tears that always developed when she thought of the children she had worked with in Bendal. "Obviously there are bigger concerns in the area; food, water, health care...libraries for children in what is essentially an orphanage is not exactly high on the priority list. Nor should it be, I suppose. But it's still important you know? For the kids to have something that they enjoy, that they love that much. They can lose themselves in the books, they get a sense of pride being able to read, a sense of ownership..." Realizing she had taken a bit of a detour, she focused. "The quote...the character of a man can be seen by how well he treats those who can do nothing for him... From the moment I met you, your character was the first thing that hit me; how well you treat those who can do nothing for you..."

"Maddie..." Harry felt a flush in his cheeks as she spoke; tears in his eyes.

"The kids, the community in Bendal...me..." She laughed then. "You had nothing to gain by unloading that truck; there were no cameras, no reporters. It was just me...and yet you just...you did it. In fact, if Ella hadn't come along, I'm guessing you would have just finished unloading the truck and continued on your way. You played in the dirt with the kids, you run around with them, let them hang on you and hug you and...you offer your name and your attention to Khenda again and again to help her gain some support down there. You..." Maddie's eyes glossed over. "You have an amazing strength of character Harry..." Her fingers tangled with his. "So, to honor you, and your amazing character, on your birthday...as my gift to you...I am...funding the library project at the Children's Center in Bendal."

"You're giving the children a library..." He was stunned; speechless at her words.

"Well, I'm beginning the project. They've begun construction of some shelves in a very small space and the books are on their way; three hundred to begin with—with these great book bags for the kids to use and...and this book," she tapped her fingers on his book. "I'll add more as time goes on; maybe for Christmas," she shrugged. "It's nothing big or spectacular but it's a start..."

"It's amazing," Harry's eyes were wide, his heart full. Her gesture touching his heart in a way that he would never quite be able to articulate. "It's...it's perfect really." He tugged at her hand in his, bringing her close to him. His hands moved to her face, falling back to tangle in her hair. "This is a wonderful gift Maddie, thank you." His lips were light against hers; sweet and loving.

"You're welcome," she smiled sweetly as his mind processed it all; the emotions he was feeling at
her completely thoughtful and significant gift. "And since it's not technically for you, it's not technically breaking the rules." She was proud of herself.

"I suppose you're right," he took a breath. "You are wrong about one thing though..."

"Oh?" Her forehead knotted up. Harry nodded, moved the book to the nightstand and scooted closer to her.

"I had everything to gain from helping you with that truck."
Chapter 51

When Harry returned to London, he and Maddie were solid—stronger than they had ever been. Their time in Greece had added to the already durable glue that held them together. She had allowed herself to slip further into his world of wealth and privilege and she had found a way to stay grounded there. And Harry, touched beyond words at her gift, was so certain of her place in his life, in his future that he walked with a new air of confidence, a new feeling of peacefulness in his place in the world.

In those weeks following Harry's birthday, life was incredibly busy. Harry was gone at training and Maddie had her hands full with an influx of clients at Veteran's Services and her steady load at the hospital. It was busy, but the good kind of busy. She enjoyed this kind of busy; it gave her purpose and drive. And, as the icing on the cake, it helped the time without Harry pass by much quicker. Her weekends were devoted to catching up with Ella; shopping, lunching, staying up late and drinking wine while going on and on about their wonderful boyfriends. Maddie felt young and silly and she loved Ella for it.

That's why on that cool October night, Harry's third night back from training, when Ella stopped by as Maddie was getting dressed to go meet Harry, Maddie smiled wide and invited her friend inside; without a care in the world.

"You know, I'm getting ready to go meet Harry, but we can have some wine before I go..." Maddie started towards the kitchen. "Or hey! If you want to call Matt, the four of us can go out."

"No," Ella shook her head; watching her friend closely. "I actually came here for a reason."

"Oh?" Maddie mouth drew to the side as she looked Ella over; there was a magazine clutched to her chest and a look in her eyes that made Maddie nervous.

"You know how you asked me to be your filter, to read through things and only bring you the important stuff?"

"Yes," Maddie smiled tentatively. "And you've been doing a smashingly good job."

"Thank you," Ella allowed a tiny smile.

"Is that why you're here?" Maddie's eyes rested on the magazine that Ella held; the cover pressing against her chest. "Is that important stuff?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "I don't think so. It's...I think it's nothing."

"But..." Maddie crossed her arms.

"People are most definitely going to be talking about it and I would be remiss as a filter and a friend if I didn't tell you about it before you heard about it."

"Okay," Maddie nodded; finding a bit of humor in the whole situation. If the last year had taught her anything, it was to not get worked up about something until there was reason to get worked up about something. "Go ahead."

"Okay," Ella nodded and took a breath. "But before I show you, I just want to remind you of a
few things..." Ella seemed serious as she held the magazine close to her chest.

"Shoot."

"First, Harry adores you. You know that, right?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded; absolute. "Is this about Harry?" Ella ignored her question and continued.

"Second, I have been reading everything about you for the last...I don't know, six months and the press generally only has it right about...forty percent of the time, probably less if I took the time to make a chart and..."

"Ella..." She snapped back into focus.

"Third," she moved closer to her friend. "When that website said they had nude photos of you, Harry never believed it, not for one second."

"Nude photos?" Maddie's eyes went wide. "Are there nude photos of Harry in that magazine?"

"Right, as if I'm really that lucky." Ella allowed a burst of laughter and Maddie narrowed her eyes. "Sorry. I forget sometimes that I need to alter my celebrity crush list because your boyfriend is off limits, even if he's been on my free pass list for years."

"Harry's on your free pass list?" Maddie's attentions were diverted for a split second. "Does he know that?"

"God no! And please, don't ever tell him. Things would be awkward."

"You think?" Maddie raised her eyebrows. "Now. Are you going to tell me what's in the magazine or am I going to have to wrestle it from your hands."

"Ah yes..." Ella pulled it out from her chest timidly as she ran through her list again. "Harry adores you. Forty percent right. Never believed it."

"I got it," Maddie laughed at her friend; tugging the magazine from her hands and flipping it around. Her eyes scanned over the cover; a burst of air gasping from her mouth as she saw it. "Royal Romeo steps out on Doting Doctor..." Her voice fell to a whisper, "Like father, like son." Tearing her eyes from the magazine, she looked to Ella who was standing tall and firm and ready to rebuke whatever Maddie was going to say.

"Forty percent of the time, Maddie. That means they are wrong sixty percent of the time. That's...that's a lot; a majority."

"You're right," Maddie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You're right. How can they print something like that? I mean...without any substance or..."

"There are pictures," Ella's voice was small.

"Pictures?!" Maddie tore open the magazine.

"Not one second," Ella repeated herself as she reached out to turn to the pages. "He didn't believe they were of you for one second."
"Okay," Maddie took a breath and, giving Harry the complete benefit of the doubt, she looked at the page. There were three photos of Harry and a woman who was clearly not her. They were clearly taken at night, dark and grainy, and snapped in quick succession. Harry leaning in, then closer, and finally with his lips on hers. There was nothing identifiable about the woman. She was tall, blonde; his standard—or so the article reported. Her heart thudded as she looked closer; studying the photos closely. Ella saw the moment her friend started to come undone and she moved towards her; placing her hands on her shoulders and forcing her to look up at her.

"Maddie, listen to me. I don't buy it. I don't think it's him. Why would he do something like this? And to be so stupid to do it out in public and...it just doesn't compute, you know."

"Shh..." Maddie held up her hand; her mind spinning.

"I only wanted to show you because I think you're going to get bombarded with this and..."

"Ella please," Maddie pleaded. "I just...let me think for just..." Maddie's train of thought was interrupted by her phone ringing out into the room. Her stomach turned when she saw that it was him. "Hello?"

"I'm downstairs. Can I come up?" He was short and to the point and Maddie knew he had seen it; certain that was why he just came over instead of calling her.

"Yes," she nodded and hung up the phone. "He's here," she muttered; moving to the buzzer.

"Oh wow..." Ella reached for her purse.

"You don't have to go," Maddie shook her head as she opened the door to wait for him.

"Yes I do," she moved towards the door just as Harry and Nathan stepped up to it. The tension was thick as Maddie tried to pull it together; wanting to give him a chance to explain before she dove off this particular cliff.

"Doctor Forrester," Nathan nodded hello.

"Go ahead," Maddie stepped aside to allow him in; avoiding eye contact with Harry while she tried to calm her crazy mind.

"You've seen it, haven't you?" Harry was never one to mince words; his eyes cast down at his shoes.

"Ella brought it over," Maddie jutted her thumb towards the magazine on the table.

"Of course she did," Harry sighed heavily, nodding to Ella. "Hello Ella."

"Hello," Ella tried for a smile as she leaned to kiss Maddie's cheek. "If you need anything, call me." Maddie nodded and Ella stepped out the door, squeezing Harry's arm as she walked past him. "I'm on your side here." Without speaking or really looking to her, Harry nodded to Ella; his eyes focused on Maddie.

"Madeline..." His hand reached out to her.

"All clear," Nathan stepped past them into the hallway.
"Come in," Maddie's lips pursed into a smile. Harry nodded and moved into her place. Shutting the door behind him, Maddie took a deep breath and turned to face him; to face the moment. "So...how was your day?" She tried for small talk, but Harry wasn't interested.

"I wanted to get here before the magazine did."

"Sure," Maddie nodded.

"You've seen it?"

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"I saw the three photos and the article...if you can even call it that. Is there more?"

"No," he shook his head. "That's it."

"Then yes. I saw it."

"I can't help but notice that you haven't asked me if..."

"And I can't help but notice that you haven't come out with a denial."

"Listen..." His hands stretched out to her.

"Ella thinks that it's not you," she cut him off as she reached for the magazine. "She thinks that it's somebody who looks a lot like you, but she doesn't believe it's you."

"And you?" His voice cracked as he looked to her.

"There's this thing..." She stopped to collect herself; moving closer to him. "There's this thing that you do sometimes, just before you kiss me..." Her hand moved to his waist, circling around him to his back. "Your hand rests right here..." She let her hand fall to the spot on him that she was talking about. "And your top lip pulls in slightly..." She looked up to him then; her hands dropping away from him as she took a step back, holding the magazine out to him. She gulped and forced her eyes to meet his. "Look at these pictures; the hands, the lip...I think Ella's wrong."

"Maddie," he reached out to her as she walked away; his eyes wide and pleading.

"Hold on," she held up her hand; effectively silencing him. "I just... I know that the press likes to...invent something out of nothing. I know that the majority of what is printed is absolute bullshit. I know that. And I do not want to spend the rest of my life second guessing or double checking or..." Maddie took a deep breath. "You told me at the very beginning that you are unflinchingly honest; honest even if it hurts, you said. So...I want you to know that I am going to believe whatever it is you tell me next. I am going to trust you completely. I am going to take you at your word and I will never bring this up again I just...I need you to know that this moment right here, it sets the stage for how we handle this in the future. I need you to know that and I need you to be absolutely honest with me..." She bit her lip and looked away for a moment before turning her eyes back to him. "Is this...Is this you?" Without looking to the magazine, Harry blinked; his eyes holding hers as he spoke.

"Yes." His words echoed in her ears; in her heart. "It's me."
"Oh my God..." Her voice was barely above a whisper as doubt and mistrust washed over her in waves. And suddenly, it was like she was looking at somebody else—not the man she had known for a year and a half, not the man who had taken her home for her birthday, not the man who she was in love with. It didn't make any sense; none of it—it was completely out of tune with his character and yet he had just admitted... "What?" Maddie felt her stomach clench; her throat tighten as she looked at him, confused.

"Maddie..." He reached out to her.

"I need to sit down," she pushed past him and moved to the couch. "This is you?"

"Yes..." Maddie cringed. "You said honest if it hurts."

"Well it fucking hurts," she scowled at him. "I can't believe this. I..."

"But..." That wasn't all; that wasn't it. Before he could open his mouth, before he could step in and cut this off, the conversation was out of his hands.

"No buts!" Her voice rose as tears sprang to her eyes; her inability to figure out what she wanted to do next rendering her an emotional mess. "Jesus. I didn't actually expect you to say yes."

"Are you going to let me explain?"

"Explain what?!" She yelled. "It's you! You said it's you and you are clearly kissing somebody who is clearly not me! What the hell else is there to explain?! Who is she?"

"I don't know," he shook his head with a shrug.

"You don't know?! Harry!" Maddie's eyes were wide; crazy—the way her mind felt. Harry opened his mouth to speak, but she hurried ahead of him, not sure if she was able to handle hearing his explanation for things. "Don't! Don't speak. I don't think I can do this right now. I'm too mad and irrational and..." She knew her emotional upheaval had no intention of ceding ground to her calm, rational side anytime soon. "I think you need to go."

"Go?" He shook his head; desperately wanting to get a hold of the situation. It had already gone too far. "No way. I'm not going anywhere. Not until you let me..."

"Fine," Maddie's eyes narrowed into a glare as she moved to her feet.

"What are you doing?" His eyes were wide as he watched her. "Where are you going?"

"I think you should go before I scream for help and Nathan has to break down my door and come in here to drag you to safety!"

"Would you please calm down?" Harry glanced to the door; rising to his feet to follow her.

"Calm down?! No! I will not calm down! I..." Maddie blinked at the tears in her eyes. "I can't do
this right now Harry. I don't want to yell and scream at you. I don't want to be this crazy person! I don't want to grill you about your...mistress..."

"Mistress?" He couldn't help the laugh that pushed through his lips; though he regretted it immediately. "You are blowing this completely out of proportion."

"Oh I am, am I?"

"Yes!" His eyebrows shot up, his hands spread out in front of him.

"Why? Because you didn't sleep with her?! Oh my God..." Maddie's stomach turned. "You didn't sleep with her did you?"

"Of course not," his eyes grew serious. "Maddie if you just..."

"No," her voice was quiet, her eyes pleading as she tried not to cry. "I won't just...I can't just...I can't do this. I won't be the woman that turns the other way while you... I can't turn the other way. I'm sorry I just..."

"Please don't cry," he reached for her hand then and, in her moment of weakness, she let him take it. "Madeline, you don't understand..."

"What don't I understand?" She sniffed; hating the crazy way she felt. "This is you and another woman. You're in the park...really Harry, the park? And you're kissing her. You're kissing her the way you kiss me." Maddie took her hand from his, walking away from him then, back into her living room.

"I'm not kissing her the way I kiss you," he shook his head.

"What else is there to understand Harry? Tell me. Because...I want more than anything to hear something that's going to take away this terrible feeling that is sweeping away all of the good stuff I have been carrying around since I met you and..."

"The photo was taken a year ago." His words were quick, to the point, and threw Maddie so far off track that she almost forgot to inhale. All of the momentum that had been building came to a sudden screeching halt as she stopped in her tracks.

"What?" She exhaled.

"I was at a festival in the park a year ago. I had left you in Bendal. We were talking on the phone. It wasn't long before I flew back to kiss you to tell you that I loved you, to...I was confused and I was...I don't know. I was smashed and she was...willing and..." Harry walked towards her.

"A year ago?!" Maddie's voice rose; spinning around to face him. "You mean we weren't even together when you..."

"We weren't," he shook his head; his face open and honest. Maddie watched him for a long, solid minute while her brain tried to sort it all out.

"But the article..."

"It's wrong. It's mostly wrong. It is me. I am kissing a...stranger. But it was before you. That's the twist. It was..."
"Harry!" She smacked his arm; exasperated by the roller coaster her heart was on.

"Ouch!" He flinched; his hand moving to rub where she had hit. "Why are you hitting me now?"

"Why didn't you tell me that to begin with?"

"You wouldn't let me talk."

"That is something that you break in with! You should have started with that! Not...have you seen it? Or what do you think? You start with it was a year ago, it was before you Maddie."

"Well I know that now and I'll keep it in mind for next time."

"Next time?!" Maddie shook her head. "I don't want a next time. I can't do a next time." And Harry's heart broke.

"Maddie," his voice was soft, soothing. "This isn't the first time that the press has made something out of nothing. It is not the first time they've twisted something like this. In a world with so many uncertainties, one thing I know for sure...there will be a next time. There probably won't be old pictures and it will definitely not be true but..."

"But..." Her voice was quieter now; her eyes less crazy, more sad as she looked to him. "I don't want there to be a next time."

"I know," he breathed.

"What do we do?" Her eyes looked to him for answers as she sank back down to the couch. Though he was thankful for her use of ‘we’, he couldn't help but be concerned about her; about them.

"Nothing," he shook his head; sitting on the coffee table in front of her, his hands moving to hers.

"Nothing?" Her face twisted up; not pleased with his answer. "We can't call the magazine? Or have an attorney call or...or issue a statement or..."

"No," he shook his head again. "We can do none of those things."

"But what if people just go on thinking that you're a cheater and..."

"People are going to go on thinking that I'm a cheater." The resolve in his eyes made Maddie want to cry.

"That's not fair."

"This isn't about fair Maddie. You know that. You knew that walking into this..."

"You're really not going to address this?"

"I am really not going to address this. Not with the press, not with the public. I'm addressing it with you now. I'll address it with my family and my PR people and I'll address it with any one of our friends or your family that you want me to, but I won't be making any statements or..."
"Why not?"

"Because!" Harry took a breath; trying to calm his frustrations. "Because if I address this article, I have to start addressing them all."

"Then address them all." She knew she sounded crazy but she just couldn't seem to help herself.

"That's ridiculous!" He shook his head. "I cannot possibly address all of the articles and photos and...and what happens when I start to do that? What happens when I miss one? Everyone will think that's the one that must be true. He refuted all of the others but this one so... Maddie. That is a crazy, circuitous world of nonsense. One into which I will not be stepping."

"But people will think..."

"Then let them think it." He shrugged.

"That's it?"

"Yes. That's it."

"You're not going to stand up and say 'No! This is not who I am. I would never do this. I love Maddie and..."

"I will, to you, Maddie I swear to you," He moved from the table, kneeling in front of her, taking her hands in his. "This is not who I am. I would never do this. I love you and I will always love and I will never be unfaithful to you..."

"Harry..."

"You know that, don't you?" His eyes searched hers. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes," she nodded; she did—with every part of her.

"Then that's just going to have to be enough."

"But...when that website said they had photos of me, you jumped all over it. I got an attorney and..."

"That was different."

"How?"

"You're a private citizen Maddie. I'm not. That's the simple answer."

"What's the complex answer?"

"That my entire life has been showcased by the press, that the palace doesn't comment on the personal lives of the royal family, that meriting this with a response is below us and..." He took a breath. "And this isn't the first time a magazine has taken a shot at us."

"I know. But it's the first time it's really been you. It's the first time there have been pictures. It's the first time you admitted..."
"I should have started with it was a year ago..." Maddie nodded; wiping at her eyes and Harry rose to his feet, rubbing his hand up over his face and into his hair as he walked away from her. "You know, this is never going to work if you don't trust me." Neither of them looked to the other as he continued. "The press, they like to play me as...as the playboy. They like to make me out to be so much more smooth and suave than I really am. They like to put me in clubs that I've never been to. They like to have me kissing women I've never even met. And nothing is as good of a story as a son repeating his father's mistakes..." Maddie couldn't find her voice to speak as he continued. "They will do this again, Maddie. Maybe a week from now, maybe next year. They will do it when we're married, when we have children. They will continue to find one sensational way after another to sell a magazine. They don't have to have pictures. They have 'anonymous sources' and 'allegedly' and...it will happen again." He turned to face her then; leaning back against her wall and with the saddest eyes he asked, "is this what's going to happen every time that happens?"

"This?" She looked up at him; her eyes matching his.

"Not too long ago you said that they could throw anything at you, that you could take whatever they had lined up..."

"About me," she interrupted. "They can say whatever they want about me. This isn't about me," she waved at the magazine. "This is about you. They are tearing you apart, assassinating your character, calling you all kinds of names and..."

"Are you kidding me?" He laughed; pushing away from the wall, moving towards her. "This is about protecting me? Maddie...I can take this. I can...God..." He breathed, sitting down next to her on the couch. "I can take them inventing things about me. As long as you and I know the truth...and the people around us know the truth, I can take this. You don't need to worry about me," his hand moved to her cheek then, stroking a strand of hair from her face. "But I can't handle this," he wiped at a tear. "If you being here, being with me...if it's going to make you feel like this every time something like this happens..." His words caught in his throat; his eyes glossed over. "I can't do this forever, Maddie."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded; holding his hand to her cheek as fresh tears brewed in her eyes. "I know..." She sniffed. "I can't either."

And then, because neither of them dared speak for fear of the avalanche that might unfold, Harry's hand moved to her neck, pulling her to him. He pressed a kiss to her forehead and she settled her head onto his shoulder. And then, because neither of them dared speak for fear of the avalanche that might unfold, Harry's hand moved to her neck, pulling her to him. He pressed a kiss to her forehead and she settled her head onto his shoulder.

And the silence was absolutely deafening.
Chapter 53

Maddie had been walking for an hour and a half. She had been walking since she left Harry sitting on her couch. She had been the first to speak, the first to pull away, the first to get up from the couch. And, true to form, she needed to process. She needed to move and process. Things were nowhere near settled, nowhere near easy. But the yelling and the fighting and the tension was too much and she needed to take a break. Being the completely too good to be true man that he was, Harry had swallowed his words and his emotions and let her walk away without a fight. He was done fighting too; a teaming headache building behind his eyes, an ache settling in his stomach.

So she had pulled on her boots, wrapped up in her coat and tugged on her hat. And she was walking. She had walked out of her place, nodding to Nathan as she passed him, and out into the chilly, drizzly October night. It was still early evening but the sun had gone down and the air was crisp.

It was exactly what she needed to clear her mind.

She loved him; this she knew. This she never doubted. He was wonderful. He was amazing. And he deserved somebody who wasn't going to crash every time something like this came up. He deserved better than that. He deserved strong, fearless; unshakable.

She knew that.

That had been her at one point. That was who she was. She was resilient and unflinching. She was all of those things. Or she had been.

She knew that too.

With every step on the pavement, with every breath she took, she was making sure that she was still in fact, all of those things. She wanted to spend her life with this man. She wanted to marry him and take his name and have his babies. She wanted to shield him from harm and protect him and it was a staggering realization that she was never going to be able to do that. It hurt her in ways she had never been hurt that this was the reality. And it shocked her in ways that she had never been shocked that this hadn't sunk into her stubborn brain.

And then there was Harry.

He was mad. No, she shook her head. He wasn't mad. He was frustrated and confused and...

"Tired," she spoke the word out loud; seeing her breath in the cold air. Her eyes welled up. She was tired too.

She had been walking for an hour and a half when she finally came to a stop. She was standing outside a coffee house and, because she sought warmth, she went in. She ordered her drink and, when the lady smiled sweetly at her and asked her how she was, Maddie smiled big and answered,

"I'm wonderful, thank you." And then, because she sought solitude, she went outside to one of the small tables set up; choosing one off to the side and slightly secluded. Willing to trade the chill for the quiet, she sat down to drink her coffee.
Keeping her face calm and happy, she allowed her mind to wander. So much so that she began to tune out her surroundings. She didn't see the people coming and going, she didn't take in the scattered few customers who were at other tables or looking at the view from the corner, she didn't hear the music that drifted from the coffee house every time the door opened. And she most definitely didn't realize who was standing in front of her before his voice broke into her thoughts.

"Doctor," she recognized his voice instantly.

"Bishop," she smiled before her eyes lifted to his. He was bundled up with his own cup of coffee.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"Of course not," she waved and he sat.

"I'm guessing you saw the article," Maddie spoke softly and with a well-trained smile.

"Straight to the point, huh? I like that." Bishop nodded. "Yes. I saw it."

"Is that why you're coincidentally here at...wait..." Her brow furrowed. "How did you know I was here?" She hadn't told anyone where she was going; she didn't even know where she was going when she set out.

"You don't want to know," he shook his head and when she narrowed her eyes, he sighed and held up his phone. "Twitter."

"Twitter?" She laughed. "Wow. Of course; twitter."

"How are you doing?"

"Ha..." Maddie played with the cup in front of her as she thought; taking a breath and glancing around to check for their privacy before she looked up to him. "How do you do it Bishop?"

"Stay so smashingly handsome? I work out, eat well, and I play very hard..."

"Nice." Maddie rolled her eyes.

"Do what?" He grew more serious as the chuckles faded.

"Sit by, silently, while they come at him?"

"Ah..." Bishop took a drink from his cup and leaned forward; resting his arms on the table. "Is that what this is about? You're worried about him?"

"Of course I'm worried about him."

"You don't need to be worried about him." Bishop almost wanted to laugh at the idea. "Do you have any idea how many articles and photos have alluded to his randy ways?"

"Randy?" Maddie snickered.

"Tons," Bishop ignored her.

"That doesn't make me feel any better."
"I didn't say I was here to make you feel better."

"Why are you here?"

"Coffee," he grinned with a wink.

"Does he know you're here?"

"Absolutely not." Bishop shook his head. "He would actually probably be incredibly pissed if he knew I was here."

"Are you going to answer my question?" Maddie studied him; curious. "How do you sit by and let it happen to him?"

"Let it?" Bishop laughed again. "What would you like me to do about it Maddie? Take on the British media? International media? American media? Do you have any idea the kinds of giants we're talking about? Any idea the power of the machine that is the press? The paparazzi? Is that what you're planning on doing? Taking them on? Proving them wrong? Let me tell you something...you will lose. No contest. You lose; every time. They win; every time."

"But..."

"But nothing." He shook his head. "Come on, Doctor. You're an expert in Human Behavior, let's play this out. They write an article calling Harry a cheater and that riles you up. And you being riled up, riles him up—because while I think there are very few things in this world that are going to get him to come out swinging, you are most definitely one of them. So, you're upset and that makes him mad and what do they get? Out of this two bit piece of trash article that nobody believes anyway? They get a reaction from His Royal Highness. And now the ball is rolling. Because now they know that if they want a reaction from Harry all they have to do is..."

"I get it," Maddie held up her hand; her mind turning into professional mode for the briefest of moments. "You're right. I know you are. I know..."

"Do you?" Bishop eyed her. "Because Harry knows. And we know. You most certainly should know."

"I..."

"This is Harry's world, Maddie."

"But..."

"This is Harry's world."

"Bishop..."

"This is Harry's world."

"How many times are you going to say that?"

"Until you get it. This is his world. Ignoring everything that the press throws at him; that's his world. Letting them think that he takes home women every other night. Actually I don't even think
they think that...but letting them print it. That's his world. It's the same force that he takes with him when he shines the light on the children of Lesotho or the people of Bendal. It's the same machine. He starts tangling with it too much and..." Bishop trailed off; shaking his head. "This is his world Maddie. You either live in it or you don't."

"I know," her voice was soft as she looked down at her hands.

"I'm sorry if I'm being too harsh."

"You're not." Bishop was so right; so completely fucking right. She shook her head as she came to terms with that.

"This is how we do it," he reached out to pat her hand.

"What?"

"This is how we protect him. We make sure that the people surrounding him are among the strongest."

"Are you kicking me out?"

"No!" He laughed. "I'm bringing you in. Maddie...we surround him with a haven of strong friends; with people who love him, people who he never has to explain the articles to because we already know. We make him laugh, we make jokes. We place bets."

"Bets? What kinds of bets?"

"Well...for instance...I'll bet you five bucks that the follow up story is going to be about the dissed doctor," he pointed to her, "seeking solace with Harry's best friend..." Bishop pointed to himself and then nodded to a woman taking their photo with her phone.

"Oh God." Maddie groaned internally. He was right.

"You taking my bet?"

"What happened to me Bishop? I used to be strong," she sighed and looked to Bishop. "I used to be so confident and resilient and..." She so desperately wanted to be that safe haven for Harry.

"You still are," he cut in; relaxing his stance a bit. "You've been at this for six months Maddie, cut yourself some slack. It's daunting and difficult and it wears you down sometimes. Harry's been doing this forever; even I've been here for a long time. You are strong and confident and resilient. You're also human; protective and emotional and..."

"Hey."

"Am I wrong?"

"No. It's just...they've taken so much from him, you know. His childhood, his privacy, his...God Bishop....his mother..." Her voice was low as tears sprang to her eyes. Without batting an eye, Bishop kept on,

"And now you."
"What?"

"Listen, Harry is strong and loyal and I love him almost more than one man should probably love another and still call himself heterosexual. I cannot think of one single person on the entire planet who I would want on my side more than him. I have known him a very long time and I have been by his side when some serious shit has gone down and I can tell you, without a doubt, that he loves you more than...more than anything. He would go to the mats for you Maddie. But..." Bishop took a deep breath. "If he thinks that being with him—that this life is going to break you, going to take you down, he will walk away from you in a second." All of the air rushed from Maddie's lungs as Bishop's words sank in. "He won't be the reason you fall apart. It would kill him."

"Wow..." She exhaled and he rushed ahead.

"Oh God. That was too far, wasn't it. I'm sorry."

"No, no," Maddie shook her head. "It wasn't. It was...wow..." She sat back in her chair and looked at Bishop; startled by how on target he was. "How did you...That was incredibly insightful."

"Not just a hat rack, my friend," Bishop tapped his head. "You remind me so much of my friend Collins right now. It's the strangest thing; trippy really."

"Fantastic." Bishop smiled and continued. "You know, there was this band once that famously said All You Need is Love..."

"This band?" Maddie laughed. "You mean The Beatles?"

"You've heard of them!" He pointed at her.

"A little bit, yes."

"I'm not sure if that's true. I'm not sure that all you need is love. I mean, it helps but that can't be all you need, can it?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "I don't think it is."

"Yeah," he nodded; figuring she would agree with him. "Can I be frank with you?"

"You haven't been already?" She raised her eyebrows and waved her hand, signaling him to continue.

"Only you can decide if you can ride this storm out. You have to ask yourself; is this what I want for my life? Does he love me enough for this? Do I love him enough for this? Is this person, what he brings to my life, this love...is this going to be enough to make up for all the sacrifices I am going to have to make?" He paused for a beat. "And if you decide that the answer is yes, if you decide to stay, you're going to have to toughen up about the press. Because yes, it's annoying and yes, I would imagine that it's scary. But it's going nowhere. It's a part of him and, if you're in for the long haul, it's a part of you."

"You're right," Maddie nodded; her mind moving into reflective mode. "God Bishop, you're so right."
"And..." He reached out to take her hand in his, his eyes warm and gentle. "And we'll be here for you too. We'll know without explanation that Harry would never step out on you. We'll surround you with a space where you can laugh and make jokes and...

"And place bets?" Her eyes twinkled as she squeezed his hand. "That's very kind of you Bishop. Thank you."

"Listen, it's freezing out here. Can I see you home?" Bishop finished his coffee with one big sip.

"No," Maddie shook her head; finishing her coffee and rising to her feet. "I appreciate the offer and the talk..." She moved to hug him then. "Thank you Bishop." Pressing a kiss to his cheek, she stepped away. "You have no idea how much you've helped me tonight."

"It's still early..." He shrugged. "Want to have a drink or a dance or..."

"Ha!" She laughed; moving further away. "No. There's something I need to take care of."

"Something or someone?" Bishop grinned.

"Wait..." She turned back to him; concern washing over her face. "He's not...you don't think he hates me now, do you?"

"No," Bishop shook his head, smiling at her. "I don't think he hates you now. Did you not hear anything I just said? Do we need to do this again?"

"No, no," she shook her head with a small smile. "Good night Bishop."

"Good night Madeline." Bishop waved at her as she hurried away from him.

With a newfound warmth and mission, Maddie hurried up the street; pulling her phone from her pocket and dialing.

"Hello, it's Maddie. I'm so sorry to bother you but I was wondering if you might be able to help me with something?"
Chapter 54

Maddie took a deep breath, knowing that if she stood there any longer without knocking she was likely to be hauled away by his protection officers. Every step she had taken to this point had been fueled by Bishop's words, by her newfound resolve but now, as she was about to face the music, the anxiety was beginning to edge out her confidence.

"Pull it together Forrester," she muttered to herself. Taking a deep breath and all of her strength, she reached out and knocked on the door.

Her eyes welled up for the umpteenth time that night as she waited those five aching seconds for somebody to come to the door. She hoped it was Jim; she knew him the best, had seen him the most often and, for some crazy reason, felt a little easier about him seeing her in this state of perpetual breakdown. The opening of the door startled her and her eyes flew up.

It was him. Harry; dressed for bed and stunned to see her.

"Maddie..." He breathed through the spike in his heart rate; glancing around outside his home. "How did you..."

"Kate," she answered. "I asked her to help me get in and..."

"Ah yes," Harry chuckled dryly, despite his headache. "I figured that someday a friendship between the two of you would come around to get me." Maddie nodded and looked to the ground.

"Do you want me to leave?" She hadn't even thought that he wouldn't want her to show up like this. Who knew what had gone through his mind during the time that she was away?

"I don't," he shook his head; his eyes registering the hurt he felt. "I just don't want to fight with you anymore tonight." He let out a long, exhaustive breath. "I hate fighting with you."

"I hate fighting with you too," she blinked at the tears in her eyes.

"I know," he nodded; softening at her tears. "But nothing about what I said earlier has changed. Nothing is going to change. This is how it is and..."

"I know..." Maddie cut in; having known this wasn't going to be easy. "I..." She looked down at her hands; remembering the gift bag she had brought with her. She held it out to him. "I brought a peace offering," Harry stepped out of the doorway, reaching for the bag. Maddie watched as he opened it, a smile spreading across his serious face.

"Are these..."

"Yes," Maddie nodded; breathing a bit easier as his smile stretched.

"You know they're my favorite."

"I do know that," she nodded. "And just so you know, it's a bit more difficult for a commoner to track these down than it might be for you; being a Crown Prince and all..." She tried for levity, tried for a joke, tried for a way to keep this smile on his face. His eyes met hers and held for a
moment and she could see the moment he decided to let her in; his jaw loosened and his shoulders relaxed.

"I'm not really a Crown Prince, you know," he arched his eyebrows over his tired eyes.

"Yeah..." Maddie nodded and gulped at the lump in her throat. "Harry..." She wiped at her suddenly teary eyes. "I don't know what to say. I don't have any...I feel like my emotions have just been put into a bag and shaken up and... It's been a long day; with the magazine and the photos and then...I'm sorry. That's what I want to say. I'm sorry. I was upset and frustrated and I was wrong to ask you to...Please let me fix things with you. Please help me fix this?" She felt a new sense of scatter move into her heart as she contemplated rejection. "Or is this...is this the end of the line for you?"

"No," his voice was full of emotion as he shook his head. "Of course it's not the end of the..." Harry moved to the side; feeling bad that he hadn't done so sooner. "Come inside? Please."

"Okay," she breathed; tears of relief coming to the surface. "Thank you." Stepping into his home, she paused in the foyer as Harry shut the door behind her. Taking a deep breath, she turned to face him. "Listen I..."

"Shh..." Harry bypassed words and instead pulled her to him; wrapping his arms around her he squeezed her tight, close. Stunned, it took Maddie a beat before her arms moved around his waist; sinking into him. "I'm so glad you're here," Harry buried his face in her hair; breathing slow; refusing to let her go. He had been sick since he left her place; worried that the other shoe had finally dropped, that this had been enough, that the idea of dealing with this forever had finally settled in. When he opened the door and saw her standing there, he had just about fallen apart; shattered from the relief he felt, from the near miss at losing everything that mattered to him. His arms tightened even more as she nuzzled her face to his chest. She felt so safe, so secure; so taken care of.

"Harry..." Maddie turned her head up, her chin pressing to his chest. He nodded, knowing there were words to be said, things to be discussed. His arms loosened around her, his hands moving up her back to the sides of her head. His fingers twisted in her hair as his thumbs ran across her temples.

"I wasn't sure that you would come back to me."

"I wasn't sure you would be here when I did," she took a shaky breath. Her hand reached up to take his; pulling it from her face but holding it tight. "Harry..."

"We should talk," he smiled.

"We should."

"Do you want to stay?" He was hopeful. "I could put on tea and we could eat these in our pajamas." He lifted the bag up.

"Hmmm," she grinned at the thought. "I didn't bring my pajamas."

"Even better," he smirked. "Maybe you should leave some pajamas here. You know, for moments such as these."

"Maybe I should," she breathed easier. "I can stay."
"Fantastic," Harry looked visibly relieved. "I'm going to go put on tea..."

"You know how to put on tea?" She arched an eyebrow playfully.

"And you..." He ignored her. "You can go up to my room and put on anything you like."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He nodded. Maddie watched him for a moment; letting her hand run down his arm, stopping to squeeze his hand before she turned to head up the stairs.

Maddie wasn't sure to what exactly to credit her more relaxed and comfortable feeling; the procurement of Harry's sweatpants and a t-shirt or the fact that he had invited her in, asked her to stay. Either way, when she rejoined him in the kitchen, she already felt much better than she had knocking on the door; more hopeful. Standing in the doorway to the kitchen, she watched as he stood over the tea kettle; cups already out on the informal table.

"He cooks..." She spoke softly as she stepped into the room. He looked up to her; his face brightening.

"He boils water," he corrected, looking her over. "Those look enormous on you."

"They are. But they have a drawstring," she smiled. "I strongly considered your polo socks and a button down, but I thought that might distract us both from the talk we need to have."

"It most definitely would," he nodded with a smirk. "Smart thinking. Maybe later?"

"Absolutely later." Their eyes held for a moment, bringing them back to each other before the kettle whistled out into the room.

"Tea?"

"Please." Maddie followed Harry to the table where he poured two glasses. Sitting down in a chair, she took the glass from him and smiled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Harry sat in the chair opposite of her and reached for one of his treats; pushing the plate to her.

"Not yet, thank you." She shook her head and took a breath. Here goes nothing, she thought. "I ran into Bishop tonight."

"Oh?" Harry's brow furrowed. "Where?"

"I was having coffee and he...I don't know; something about twitter." She shrugged. "It doesn't matter. He said something though, quite a few things, but something that really hit me."

"What was that?"

"He said..." Maddie took a deep breath. "He said that you would walk away from me in a second if you thought this was going to break me." Harry was stunned speechless for the briefest of
moments as she launched them right into the discussion. Leaning forward, he rested his arms on the table; his eyes growing serious.

"Sometimes Bishop thinks he's helping when he really isn't," she could see the anger rising with the red in his cheeks.

"He is," her hand reached across the table to rest on his. "He did. He helped me...understand things a little bit better. He helped me see it in the right perspective. I just," she swallowed a sip of tea and focused on him. "Would you? Walk away?"

"Maddie..." He breathed.

"Even when it hurts..." She reminded him; her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"If I thought my life was going to destroy yours?" Harry blinked. "Yes. It wouldn't be easy and it would most definitely not be what I wanted but...if I thought that in ten years you were going to be a fragment of who you are today, because of this? Yes. I would."

"This isn't going to break me, Harry."

"I know that."

"I don't know that you do. I think that when I left you to go for a walk, you left thinking that I wasn't going to make it, that I was going to realize I couldn't do this, that I couldn't handle this and...I think you've been sitting here contemplating walking away."

"I..."

"And maybe that's what I get for walking away without explanation," she hurried on before he could argue with her, before he could agree with her. "When I said earlier that I wasn't sure you would be here when I came back," she took a breath. "What I really should have said was...I wasn't sure I deserved to have you be here when I did."

"Hey..."

"I really dropped the ball on this one Harry. I told you I could take it and then when it hits, I walked out the door without explanation or..."

"No. Stop for just... Maddie you...you've uprooted your entire life. You've moved to London; you're living in a new place, you have a new job, you've had to buy new clothes because God knows it's colder here than it ever was in Bendal. You've jumped into this fish bowl where people follow you around with cameras, write stories about you, and show up at the worst possible moments..." He took a breath. "When I said I couldn't do this forever, I meant it. I can't watch you fall apart every time..." He took a moment. "But I didn't mean that I was walking out the door. I wasn't contemplating walking away. I think the least I can do is allow you a few moments of..."

"Craziness?"

"Your words, not mine," he smiled. Maddie's smile matched his as she nodded.

"The thing is, when I was walking around I wasn't falling apart. I was...I was pulling it together. When I said I can't do this forever, I meant it. But my walk wasn't about deciding if I was staying or going. I decided a long time ago that I was staying. My walk was about what I needed to do,
how things needed to change so that I could...walk in this world a little easier."

"Really?" Harry breathed; tears springing to his eyes as his fears from earlier surfaced.

"Really," she nodded. "You know, I think maybe you and I could be a little better with the communication."

"Ha!" Harry laughed; leaning back in his chair. "I suppose you're right."

"I need to stop letting stuff like this get to me. But you need to stop thinking that every time I'm processing, I'm thinking of leaving. Because I'm not. I'm not thinking about leaving."

"Okay." "I'm not thinking about leaving."

"Okay." "Harry..."

"I get it."

"Do you? I really want you to. If we both worry incessantly about the other then when things happen, I'm not going to want to tell you how I feel about it because I won't want you to think I'm breaking and..."

"I get it," he reached across the table for her hand.

"Maybe it's time for the kid gloves to come off?" Maddie held his hand in hers.

"What do you mean?"

"This is whole thing, the press, the way you handle the press...it's a part of my life now, part of who I am. I just don't quite know how to negotiate it. This, today...it wasn't my finest moment. I know that. But this isn't something that comes naturally to me and I find that...terribly frustrating." She let out a deep breath. "I need your help."

"My help?"

"Yes," she grinned. "When we were in Colorado, I taught you how to be a farmer. Now, you can teach me how to..."

"Be my girlfriend?" Harry laughed.

"No," she shook her head. "I know how to do that. I need to know how to be...a royal girlfriend." Even Maddie couldn't help but roll her eyes at her choice of words.

"Ah."

"There is a difference between the two roles, you know."

"I suppose you're right," he agreed. She had a point. He had always felt that he had multiple roles in his life. "So you want me to teach you...to be a farmer."
"Yes," she chuckled. "And we can think of today like...your trip into the hen house."

"Had to bring that up did you?" He shook his head with a wide grin.

"Well, it wasn't the most graceful and it wasn't your favorite part. But it didn't send you running away, refusing to try. It didn't make you not want to do it," she shrugged and held his eyes. "I want to do it. I want to handle stuff like this better. I want to get my strength back and I want to not worry about the hits you take on a daily basis. I want to let this stuff roll off my back...I just need help. I need you. What do you say? Will you help me?"

"How could I say no to that? To you?" His hand reached up to stroke her cheek.

"I might not always get it right, but I want to," she leaned into his hand. They sat there for a moment, just like that; connected to each other in a literal and metaphorical sense. "Just don't forget, you've had years to develop through this craziness into the man you are today. Years and years; and a whole lot of family and staff. I have only you. And Bishop."

"Just me," he shook his head. "I'm going to kill Bishop."

"Don't. He's been so good to me."

"I'm sure he has."

"He has. If it weren't for him, I would probably still be walking around London and not sitting here with you now."

"Yeah..." He was smiling as he asked her, "why is it again that you're still sitting here again?"

"Because...because fuck them; that's why." Maddie threw her hands in the air; shocking Harry. He opened his mouth and nothing came out but an amused laugh.

"Because I'm not going to let this get to me. Because I'm not going to let them control me. Because tomorrow when they run the story about me seeking solace with your best friend, I want to be able to laugh at it. Because I don't want to hide. Because I can't take them down..." She grew a little sad. "I can't control what they write about you. I can't control what they've taken from you. But I can make damn sure that I am not one of those things." She took a deep breath. "I can't promise I'll be perfect at it or that it won't get to me time and again but..."

"But fuck them?" Harry smirked.

"Exactly." She pushed her tea cup across the table towards him. "Do you have anything stronger than tea Your Royal Highness?"

"Ha..." He shook his head at her and rose to his feet. "Beer or wine?"

"Beer."

"Coming right up." It was only moments before Harry returned with two opened bottles.

"Thank you," she took a long drink and sighed.
"I think we're getting better at this communication thing."

"It's a process," Maddie sighed; a moment of silence settling over them before Harry's head cocked to the side contemplatively.

"Also what did you say before about seeking solace with my best friend?" Maddie laughed at the look on his face.

"I'll tell you tomorrow," she reached out for his hand. "How are you doing right now?"

"Better. Much better."

"Do you forgive me?" Her eyes flashed vulnerable for a moment.

"There is absolutely nothing to forgive here."

"I'm sorry anyway."

"I'm sorry too."

"I promise I won't ever ask you to go to the press for me again," Maddie met his eyes.

"I promise that I will lead with the important details first," Harry offered with a light chuckle.

"I promise that I will always come back to you after I'm done processing," she let him kiss the tips of her fingers.

"And I promise that I will do my best to help you navigate this new role of yours."

"It's a lot of promises we're making tonight..." Maddie finished her beer and smiled sleepily at him across the table.

"Can I make one more?" Harry arched one eyebrow.

"Sure," Maddie nodded.

Settling his empty beer bottle on the table next to him, he stood up; his chair pushing out behind him.

With his hands resting on the table, he leaned across to her; his lips seeking and finding hers. It was the first time they had kissed since the fight, the first time that day, and it held so much in it; emotion, passion, forgiveness. Maddie felt tears draw to her eyes just as he pulled back. Opening his eyes, he didn't blink once before he said, "as long as you want me, you will be the only person I kiss, Madeline. You never, ever have to doubt that. As long as you want me..." And then, because she was always going to want him, because she just might break into tears otherwise, she moved her head slightly; bringing their lips back together.
Chapter 55

Maddie and Harry eventually moved on from the cheating scandal. Amazingly, the bloggers rose quickly to Harry's defense; having recognized the photos from a year earlier—chastising the magazine on the web for trying to push them off as new. Maddie learned a lot those first few days following the magazine fiasco. First, she was able to witness the power and research capabilities of Harry's slightly obsessive fans. And second, Bishop was right. So, while Maddie handed over five dollars to Bishop because a picture of the two of them had absolutely hit the web, the idea that Harry had cheated on Maddie in the park was all but faded from the meme.

As October gave way to November and the remains of the mild weather gave way to the cold, the two of them settled into their routine. And the press was back to reporting their every move; drinks with his normal crew, reports of late nights at Leo's club, and one picture of Maddie trying on Union Jack mittens just to make Harry laugh—a picture that was so adorable Harry honestly contemplated calling the magazine for a copy. Though he refrained.

It was a particularly chilly night when Maddie and Harry met up with Matt and Ella to celebrate Ella's birthday. With reservations at one of the more popular eateries in the city, they were all dressed up and ready for a fun night together. The waiter had taken their orders and was back pouring champagne into their glasses as Harry cleared his throat and smiled at the three of them.

"In honor of Ella's birthday, I would like to make a traditional Irish toast."

"Aw," Ella's head tipped to the side. "That's sweet."

"I'm glad you think so." With a twinkle in his eye, Harry lifted his glass. "Ella love, May you die in bed at 95, shot by a jealous spouse."

"Harry!" Maddie nudged him.

"You know me so well," Ella laughed.

"Happy birthday," Harry clinked his glass to Ella's as Matt and Maddie joined in.

"Happy Birthday!"

"Thank you," Ella smiled wide as she drank from her glass; eyeing Harry across the table. "That was perfect."

"So Maddie," Matt looked to her. "Ella was telling me about the day the two of you met."

"Oh God," Maddie groaned as Ella burst into laughter.

"Wait," Harry looked between them. "I don't think I've ever heard this story."

"And I don't think you ever want to," Maddie shook her head.

"Oh I think you do," Ella nodded at him.

"I'm going to defer to Ella's judgment on this one," Ella leaned forward; motioning for Harry to do the same.
"Ella," Maddie warned.

"Oh hush," Ella waved her hand. "It's my birthday, remember."

"Fine," Maddie sighed dramatically and took a big drink from her glass before smiling hazily. "Go ahead."

"Way to be a good sport," Harry winked at her; his hand patting her knee under the table, where it rested as he turned to Ella, "let's hear it."

"So," Ella swallowed a sip; her eyes dancing with humor. "I was actually in Bendal before Maddie and, when she was scheduled to come, there was this...infestation in one of the buildings and she had no place to stay."

"Infestation?" Matt raised his eyebrows.

"You don't want to know," Maddie shook her head with a light shudder.

"So," Ella continued, meeting Maddie's eyes for a shared smile. "I had this small..."

"Tiny," Maddie cut in.

"Tiny two bedroom place and, being the magnanimous person that I am, I offered up my second bedroom. And then Maddie arrived."

"My first day was..." Maddie looked to Ella for the right word.

"Traumatic?" Ella offered, drinking from her glass.

"Long," Maddie smiled. "Long and sweaty and... I barely had time be introduced to Ella. So, I was exhausted when I got back and I went to my room and unpacked one of my two little bags and I took a shower before we were going to have a late dinner and get to know each other. When I got out, I lit a candle."

"To get rid of the smell imbedded in your nostrils," Ella suggested with a nostalgic laugh; remembering some of their happier times in Bendal.

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "So there I was in this robe, my hair wrapped up in a towel and I don't really know what I was doing. I was reaching for something when..."

"All of a sudden, I'm down the hall in the living area and I hear Maddie just...screaming...ELLA! ELLA! Help! Help!"

"Help?" Matt's eyebrows went up.

"She was on fire," Ella snickered.

"What?" Harry's eyes swept to Maddie who was laughing.

"When I reached for...whatever it was, my sleeve touched the flame on the candle and started on fire. And when I saw that, I was surprised and lifted my arm up too quickly which lit the towel in my hair on fire and..."
"You lit yourself on fire?" Harry looked to her, a smile creeping through the serious expression on his face.

"I did," Maddie nodded. "But thankfully Ella was there. She came running down the hall and..."

"And there she was in a robe and a towel and there was fire and, acting on instinct..."

"She tears the towel out of my head, strips the robe off of me and is stomping on them and just like that...the fire was out,"

"And Maddie was naked," Ella clapped her hands together.

"What?" Harry laughed.

"Well, I tore the robe and the towel off of her..."

"And I had just gotten out of the shower..."

"So she was naked. But not on fire anymore." All four laughed.

"And there we were just...looking at each other," Maddie winked across the table at Ella.

"Maddie says ‘thank you so much,’” Ella reached to hold Maddie's hand. "I tell her that dinner will be ready in five minutes and...."

"We've been friends ever since," Maddie finished.

"Well," Ella shrugged with a cheeky grin. "Once you've seen Maddie naked, you can't help but love her."

"I'll drink to that," Harry chuckled, reaching his glass out to clink with Ella's—who was laughing along with him.

"Hey!" Maddie nudged him.

"Come here," Harry leaned to kiss Maddie.

"Well..." Maddie smiled and raised her glass to her friend one more time, "to the first—of many times—Ella saved my life."

"To Ella," Harry lifted his glass.

"To Ella," Matt followed suit.

"Aw, you guys..." Ella blushed slightly but lifted her glass.

With a clink of glass and warm smiles all around, the waiter returned with their food; dinner had begun.

When dinner ended, Maddie led the three of them—along with Harry's Security Officer Brad—
back to her place where she had Ella's requested dessert ready and waiting.

"Banana cake?" Harry made a face as he looked at the creation on Maddie's dining table.

"With cream cheese frosting," Ella grinned wide; running her finger along the side, licking frosting from it greedily. "It's Maddie's specialty."

"How do you have a specialty that I don't know about?" Harry looked to his girlfriend who was adding candles to the cake.

"I have lots of other specialties that only you know about," Maddie smiled wickedly at him. "It's okay if you don't know about this one."

"Ohhh..." Harry chuckled; his eyes narrowing at her suggestively. "I like that answer."

"I would like it if you two could hold it together until I leave," Ella tried to glare at him but failed miserably. Matt just shook his head and laughed.

"I'm sorry love," Harry leaned to kiss Ella's cheeks. "I'll try my best. Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Hmmm..." Ella tapped her lips, silently ruminating over how at home Harry made himself in Maddie's place. "More champagne?"

"Coming up!" He clapped his hands together and moved to the kitchen. Though the argument could be made that every last one of them had consumed more than their fair share of champagne at dinner, it was a party and nobody was driving. Locating a bottle quite easily, he popped the cork and reached for some glasses.

By the time he returned to the group, Maddie was lighting the last of the candles.

One round of Happy Birthday, two bottles of champagne and three and half pieces of cake (altogether) later, the four of them were scattered around Maddie's living room; tipsy and giggly. With her head in Harry's lap, Maddie stretched out on one of her couches while Harry played with the fingers on one of her hands. On the opposite couch was Matt and Ella; cuddled together. All of their glasses had been refreshed and music was playing throughout the room.

"Let's play a game," Ella suggested; Harry looked up interested.

"What kind of game?" He asked

"Truth or dare?" Ella suggested with a smirk.

"No way," Matt groaned.

"Next." Maddie agreed; waving her hand.

"Aw come on," Ella pleaded.

"Okay," Maddie pulled herself up slightly to look at her friend. "Ella, truth—who is on your 'free pass' list?" Ella about spit up her champagne.

"Okay. Different game." She held her hands out, palms up, in surrender to Maddie.
"There you go," Maddie shrugged, laying back down in Harry's lap. "How about cards?"

"Now we're talking," Matt perked up.

"I could play some cards," Harry grinned, tapping the tip of Maddie's nose with his finger.

"I'll go grab some," Maddie allowed Harry to pull her back up off his lap. "You guys get set up at the table and I'll be right back." She felt Harry slap at her ass as she walked away, heading to her room to get a deck of cards.

She was only gone for a few minutes and, when she returned to the room, the other three had cleared everything from the table with the exception of their drinks and were waiting excitedly for her to return.

"Okay, what game are we playing?" She took her seat. "Hearts?"

"Cribbage?" Matt suggested.

"Whist," Ella decided.

"Whist it is," Maddie pointed at her best friend, shuffling the cards over and over again.

"Huh, that's weird," Harry muttered to himself; pulling his vibrating phone from his pocket with confusion etched across his forehead. "I'm sorry, I'm going to have to take this." He smiled apologetically around the table as he rose to his feet.

"Go ahead," Ella waved. "I have to powder my nose anyway."

"I'll be right back," Harry's hand ran along Maddie's shoulder, squeezing gently as he stepped away from her into the living area. Maddie smiled at Matt while she began to deal; her eye watching Harry as he held the phone to his ear.

He paced; walking the length of her living room several times, slowly and methodically. And then there was this moment, he was walking and suddenly came to a stop. Turning completely around, his eyes met hers and she knew; something was wrong. He turned away from her just as quickly, but she caught it. In less than a minute, he had disconnected the call and stood still and stoic in her living room, looking up at the painting he had given her for her birthday that hung over her couch for a beat before turning to face them. Stuffing his phone back into his pocket, he rejoined them. Moving next to her chair his eyes stared off into space, as if he were contemplating his next move.

"Harry? Is everything okay?" Maddie reached her hand out to take his; feeling the instinctual need to comfort him. She watched his Adam's Apple bob up and down as he swallowed a couple of times.

"That was my father. There was an earthquake. A 6.5 on the Richter scale."

"Oh my God," Ella gasped from behind Harry. "That's..."

"Bad," Matt supplied and Harry nodded. "Substantial structural damage, foundation shifting...if it's in a populated area, massive casualties..."

"Oh my God," Maddie shook her head at the thought; her eyes looking back up to where Harry
stood; tugging on his hand. "Harry, where was it?" With a deep, heavy sigh, Harry lowered down so that he was squatting next to her chair; his hands holding hers, his eyes meeting hers with great gravity. Instinctually, she sucked in a breath just a split second before he told her.

"Bendal."
The room, once lively with celebration, sobered instantly. Maddie felt her stomach turn as she met Harry's eyes; her hand flying to her throat.

"Oh my God," Ella whispered as Matt moved to her side.

"Khenda? Collins?" Maddie's face drained of all color as she said the two words that everyone was thinking. Harry's eyes were heavy as he blinked; his hand flexing on her knee.

"I don't know."

"Oh my God..." Ella repeated, her eyes welled with tears.

"I'm trying to..." Harry swallowed the lump in his throat. "Destruction is pretty expansive and I can't get through to a cell phone and..."

"I'm sure the towers are down," Matt offered, his hand resting on Ella's shoulder.

"Harry..." Maddie's eyes searched his; looking for answers she knew she wouldn't be able to find there.

"My father is making phone calls right now—trying to reach them through back channels and I'm going to try a few others, but..." He fought back the tears that threatened to rise to his eyes; knowing that if he went over the edge, they were all going with him. "But, I know nothing right now. Okay?"

"Okay," Maddie nodded; taking a deep breath and trying to pull it together.

"Okay?" Harry turned to look at Ella who nodded her understanding.

And then, as if on cue, the three of them forced their minds to switch to a different mode; crisis management. Though every single one of them was right at the line of panic, they were professional enough, experienced enough to back it off—at least for the moment, at least until they knew for sure.

"Maybe..." Ella cleared her throat. "Maybe I can get through to another doctor or nurse? I've kept in touch with a lot of people over the years..." She moved then, searching for her purse to find her phone.

"I can try the main office. I met with somebody there not too long ago..." Maddie squeezed Harry's hands in her lap and moved to stand up.

Harry rose to his feet and, watching Maddie move, watching Ella move, he pulled his phone from his pocket, took a moment to collect his thoughts and dialed. Matt watched, feeling helpless as they mobilized. Ella sat next to him at the table, tapping her pen as she flipped through her planner, dialing. Maddie pulled her laptop out and powered it up while scrolling through her phone logs to call Marquita, the agent she had met with when she was coming off her furlough.

It was ten agonizingly long minutes, ten minutes filled with the worst kind of anticipation. If Maddie had been able to step back and look at the moment, she would have found it incredibly
interesting, the way they all flew into action; working together but separate from each other. She would have also been able to see the way Harry bit at his fingernails nervously as he leaned against the back of her couch. She would have noticed the way Ella tapped incessantly with her pen; clicking and clicking against the table. And she would have been able to stop herself from nearly biting a hole in her own bottom lip.

It was ten, terribly slow minutes before Harry stood up straight and shouted out, "I got it!"

Abandoning the computer, dropping the pen, Maddie and Ella rushed to his side. He held his phone tight to his ear, covering the other with his other hand; answering only in nods and uh-huhs. His hand moved to cover the receiver as he caught them up,

"As per protocol, Khenda is to call and check in with a systems Administrator; reporting not only known casualties but known survivors. The Administrator knows they have some casualties, some doctors and...and some community members for sure, but he's checking to see if she's called in..." Harry trailed off, avoiding both of their eyes until the man on the other end returned. "Yes. I'm still here. L..." Harry's words stopped, his breathing halted; tears springing to his eyes. "She did? Khenda checked in..." His eyes flew to Maddie's and she saw it, the tiny crack in his interior that, had he lost her, just may have shattered. Next to her Ella let out a breath of relief as Maddie's hand moved to take Harry's free hand.

"And Collins?" Maddie raised her eyebrows.

"What about Collins?" Harry spoke into the phone. There was a moment's pause before he nodded, a moment where he schooled his features, a moment that may have been missed by a casual observer. But Maddie caught it and she felt a sob in her throat. Harry held tight to her fingers as he disconnected the call.

"Well?" Ella raised her eyebrows, having missed what Maddie caught.

"There's no word on Collins yet," his gaze was locked on Maddie's. "He was out with one of the doctor's doing a home visit when it happened."

"Of course," Maddie felt tears spill onto her cheeks as she dropped his hand and turned away from them. She had gone on many such visits with him when she had been there.

"They don't know," Harry reiterated. "They haven't heard one way or another. I'm sure that communications have dropped off as a result of the earthquake and they just haven't heard from him."

"You know," Matt spoke up. "If he was further out of town, he may have had a better chance at..." He looked down at his hands. "Sometimes being in the city, surrounded by poorly made buildings is worse than being in the country in smaller homes."

"See," Harry moved towards Maddie, letting his hand fall on her shoulder. "He wasn't reported as a casualty Maddie. They just don't know yet."

"So now what?" She turned wide, dark eyes to him. "We just..."

"We wait," he cupped her cheek. "The Administrator said he would call me as soon as he heard one way or another. We just have to wait."

"I'm not very good at waiting," Maddie tried for a smile, but her lips just twisted up.
"I know," his hand rubbed down her neck, massaging her shoulder as it moved.

"We could finish the card game?" Matt offered half-heartedly.

"No, not tonight," Ella smiled up at him for trying. "I'm too...you know...for cards."

Matt nodded as the room grew quiet; everybody's minds were somewhere else. The cards, the cake, the champagne; it had all flew from their minds after Harry's phone call.

"You know," Ella sighed. "I think maybe I'm going to head home..."

"You could stay here," Maddie looked to Ella. "You could sleep with me." Ella smiled at the thought; remembering the nights in Bendal when they would crawl in each other's beds.

"What about Harry?" Ella nodded her head to the man who stood, lost in thought.

"He'll be there too," Maddie shrugged as a very tiny chuckle passed around the group.

"Wow," Ella exhaled. "It's a rough night when nobody comments on that one."

"Yes it is," Maddie's eyes glossed over as she moved to hug Ella. "I love you."

"I love you too," she held tight to her friend; burying her head in her shoulder for a long moment before she pulled away. Turning to Harry, "you'll call me when you hear?"

"The absolute moment we hear," he nodded; holding her close. As he released her, she and Matt gathered their things and made their way out of Maddie's home. Maddie shut the door behind them and turned to face him; slumping as she leaned back against the door.

"I have a terrible feeling in my gut," she whispered to him; her eyes cast down at the floor.

"Yeah," Harry breathed. "I think that's from the four bottles of champagne..."

"Ha," Maddie felt a bubble of air burst through her lips as she wiped at her eyes.

"Maddie, look at me..." His voice was firm as he stepped closer to her. With a deep breath, she did as he requested. "We know nothing right now. Nothing. We can't freak out until there is a reason to freak out."

"I hate it when you're right, you know?"

"I do know," he smiled and held his hand out to her. "Come on. Let's go to bed."

"I'll never be able to sleep." But she pushed away from the door, taking his hand.

"Then we'll lay in the dark."

"I should be with her," Maddie's voice spoke into the dark room. They had dressed for bed hours ago; readying for their sleepless night as though there was nothing different about their routine. She didn't have to look over at him to know he was awake—that he would be awake as long as
she was awake.

"Ella?" His voice was low, sleepy.

"Khenda."

"Love..." Harry started.

"She's all alone and waiting. She's..." Maddie's voice choked. "We can't sleep and we're thousands of miles away in a safe place and she's...God I don't even know if their house is still standing or if she has a bed and...and Collins."

"I know..." Harry's fingers, already intertwined with hers, tightened their hold on her hand.

"I should be with her. She shouldn't be alone while she waits. Nobody should be alone while they wait..." Her tears rolled, hot and plenty from the corners of her eyes to the pillow under her head.

"What would you say to her?" He asked; channeling all of his training and experience on the front lines into holding it together; don't panic until there is something to panic about. "If you were with her...what would you say?"

"Nothing," Maddie shook her head. "I would just be there." With a nod, Harry brought her hand to his lips for a kiss.

And the room grew silent; absolutely full of silence. Harry swallowed the lump in his throat, swallowed the memories that were threatening at the surface—those hours when he was waiting to hear about Maddie, to see the surgeon come from the OR, to find out if it had been too much, too late. Those hours when he didn't know if he'd kiss her again, if he'd hold her, if he'd ever get the chance to get a chance with her. He swallowed back the knowledge that a woman he adored, a woman he considered family, was sitting in the worst kind of purgatory.

He had no words of comfort for Maddie, nothing that would make any difference. And he wasn't one to try to placate her with disingenuous niceties. He had met her, had fallen for her in a world where everything was real and everything was up in the air. And neither of them had room in this moment for a bullshit, everything will be fine, answer.

So he held onto her and did as she desperately wanted to do for Khenda.

He was just there.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

There's this moment; a moment when somebody is past exhausted, when they've pushed their energies and capabilities to the end; a moment where the body steps in and simply takes over the controls. A person can only put off sleep, can only avoid slumber for so long. There almost always comes a point when the body shuts down; forcing the eyes closed, forcing the lungs to slow—trying to pull the mind into a restful place, allowing the body time to renew and refresh.

For Maddie that point came at 4:42 in the morning. She knew she had to work the next day, knew she needed her wits about her. But her stomach had protested, her heart had fought; she couldn't bring herself to rest when she knew that Khenda wasn't resting. But at 4:42 in the morning, her body took over; her eyelids thudding closed; welding shut. And finally, next to Harry, who had given in around 3:30, she drifted off to a shallow sort of sleep that was unlikely to provide her
with any real rest.

And at 5:35, they were pulled from their sleep, jarred awake by the intense and alarming ring from Harry's phone. Maddie sat straight up; alert and shocked as Harry moved, fumbling with the items on her side table as he located his phone.

"Hello?" He sat up, turning away from her, his legs hanging off the edge of the bed. Maddie could hear only his side of the conversation; her heart thudded as everything from the night before welled in her chest. "This is he. Yes. Yes." And then there it was; silence. Maddie watched Harry's back, the outline of his shoulders in the dark room lit only slightly by the cloud covered moon outside. She watched as he nodded, watched as his shoulders slumped. She heard him inhale shakily before he spoke in a choked voice, a voice that spoke volumes. "Thank you. I appreciate the call. Good night." His phone fell from his fingers to the stand.

"Harry?" Maddie croaked. And then he said the words that would be ingrained in her brain for a very, very long time.

"He's fine."

"What?!" Maddie gasped, her hand moving to her chest; pressing to her flesh as though it would calm her pounding heart.

"He's..." Harry turned to her, tears in his eyes, relief etched on his face. "He called in himself ten minutes ago. He was out on a home visit and was barely affected by..." Harry's words fell flat as Maddie snatched her own phone from the stand and dialed. Holding her fingers to her lips in attempt to keep the release of the pent up tears at bay for just a moment longer, she waited for Ella to answer.

"He's fine," she blurted out; forgoing all formalities. "Harry just got off the phone with the Administrator. He called in himself. He's fine. He's fine...." Her eyes met Harry's as her tears slipped out. "He's fine. Yes. Yes." Maddie started laughing, talking to Harry, "Ella wants to know if she can come get in bed with us now."

"Ha!" Harry clapped his hands together. "I'm not sure I can handle the both of you, but I will try my hardest."

"I love you too Ella," Maddie grinned at Harry across her bed. "Yes. I'll call you tomorrow. Good night." Letting out the longest, slowest, breath of relief, Maddie let her phone rest on her stand.

As Maddie moved to him, climbing over her bed to jump into his arms, Harry felt enormous relief; relief that Collins was okay, relief that Khenda wasn't facing the worst news a person could hear, and relief that the tension filled waiting had been replaced with celebration. As the two of them toppled onto her bed in fits of kisses muffled with laughter, he had no idea that this sense of relief was only going to last a day before it was snatched away from him.
The day following the earthquake was draining, to say the least. Harry had meetings lined up one after another and Maddie was at the hospital all day; and they were exhausted. Having had very little sleep, having put their emotions through the metaphorical wringer, they were both exhausted.

So, at the end of the day, when Maddie arrived at Harry’s looking like one big gust of wind could topple her over, Harry wasn’t the least bit surprised.

"Have you eaten?" He shut the door behind her, taking her coat.

"I honestly don't remember," a tired smile pulled at her lips.

"Bernard made pizza."

"I love Bernard," Maddie sighed, kicking off her heels. "I want to take him home with me."

"Yes well, he's incredibly loyal to the family and you can't have him," he pulled at her fingers, leading her to the kitchen. "But I will share my pizza with you."

"You do love me."

"I really do." While Maddie loaded her plate, Harry retrieved two bottles of beer from his fridge and they sat down at the table in the kitchen.

"How were your meetings?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, an attempt at conversation.

"I don't know," he shook his head with a faded smile. "I think they were fine. Not my finest day."

"No," Maddie chuckled; relating completely. "It could have been worse, though."

"Yes. It absolutely could have." The call could have gone in the absolute other direction; they were both keenly aware of that. Maddie watched him for a moment, judging his mood, taking in his disposition.

"Harry," her voice was soft as she put her pizza down. His eyes rose to hers; his attention on her. "There's something I need to tell you."

"Oh-kay," he scanned her tired eyes for a clue but found none. He took a drink from his bottle and wiped his hands on a napkin. "Go ahead."

"Well, last night, when we were making phone calls, I got through to Marquita. You remember the lady from Doctors Without Borders who gave me my job options once my furlough was over?"

"Yeah."

"And..." Maddie took a breath. "She said that they are pulling together a Crisis Intervention team; a team of doctors, nurses, mental health professionals. They are going to Bendal the day after tomorrow for two weeks and..." She could see the moment it washed over him; realization. His jaw tensed. His hand moved to rub at the back of his neck as he slumped back in his chair; his eyes trained on her.
"God, please tell me you're not going to Bendal." Maddie's lips closed tightly as she held his gaze. "Maddie..."

"I can't tell you that," she was soft with him; anticipating exactly what was about to unfold. He shook his head slowly, wanting to dismiss what she had just said, wanting to just pull it from the conversation. "Harry..."

"It's incredibly dangerous there right now, Maddie."

"I know."

"There is high level destruction to buildings and highways, there has been an upheaval of..."

"I know," she cut in. "I know all of these things. I've seen the news. I've read the report from the main office. But the airport is standing and functional. DWB has connected with people there and can secure..."

"Maddie..." He groaned; his hands moving over his face.

"I cannot sit here and do nothing. I just...I can't."

"You could be hurt or..." He ran his hands into his hair, his eyes finding hers.

"Yes," she nodded. "I could. Or I can help with the intervention. I can help with reconstruction efforts. I can be there with Khenda and Collins."

"Maddie..."

"Harry," she cut him off; her eyes welling with tears. Harry took a breath, his heart aching at the conviction he saw in her; the conviction that he had always adored about her. He looked away then, his eyes staring off to the side, his teeth biting at his lip. Maddie waited and watched as he processed it all.

"I can't go with you," he spoke out into the room.

"I know that."

"I can't," he turned to face her. "The security involved and the...there is no way anyone here would let me go with you."

"I didn't ask you to go with me." He nodded and looked down at his hands, fidgeting with his plate of pizza. She was right, she hadn't asked him to go with her—this was hers alone. She had been willing and able to put herself out there long before he was in the picture—he knew that. There was a long moment of silence, a tension filled moment through which Maddie held her breath; waiting for his response. This time when he looked up, when his eyes met hers, they were pleading.

"Please stay here," his voice was so low and quiet that she wanted to hug him close. But instead she swallowed the lump in her throat and shook her head.

"I can't."
"Maddie..."

"That's not who you're in love with Harry—the girl who sits by and watches it happen. You're in love with the girl who steps in."

"I know that." He hated how well he knew that.

"I'm stepping in. I've already made the decision. They asked me to go and I've spoken with Dr. Colvin at the hospital and Gerald at St. Joe's. And honestly this might be the last time I'm able to..." Her eyes met his and she stalled.

"The last time you're able to..."

"I...I don't know Harry. You keep talking about..." She shook her head. "You've alluded to the future and my place in it. And I just...I'm guessing that once that allusion becomes a reality that...I'm done stepping in to things like this. Am I wrong?"

Harry ran his hand through his hair. "The answer to that is...incredibly complicated."

"But it really isn't. You can't go there now, you just told me that you couldn't go, that nobody would allow you to..."

"Fine. Fine, you're right. Do you want to talk about this now?"

"No," she shook her head and reached across the table, pulling his hand into hers. "I don't want to talk about that now. Harry, when the time comes, I'll accept what comes with..." She met his eyes then; pleading with him to understand where she was coming from. "But right now I can still go; I can still do this. And..." She sucked in a breath, pulled at her strength and sat tall, "And I'm going to. Please don't be mad..."

"I'm not mad. I'm concerned. It's dangerous down there."

"It's always dangerous down there."

"It's been almost a year since you were shot and..."

"And you're worried it's going to happen again?" She laughed. "I think the odds are in my favor on that one."

"Don't joke," his eyes grew hard. "You were unconscious in my arms and your blood was soaked into my clothes. Don't joke about this." Harry stood, his chair screeching against the floor as he moved. He needed to move; needed a minute to steady his breathing.

"I'm sorry," she whispered; gulping at the lump in her throat. Rising to her feet, she went to where he stood, looking out a window at the grounds outside. She wrapped her arms around his waist from behind; pressing her face to his strong back. "I shouldn't make jokes. But, there was an earthquake...in a place we both love. They need help putting things back together and they need somebody to talk to about what they are witnessing." She couldn't keep away the tears that stung her eyes when she thought of it. "I'm going to go do that. I promise you that I will follow all of the rules they outline. I will pay attention to all perimeters they set up and I will not do anything above and beyond..."

"It is all above and beyond down there..." His hand moved to stroke her arm that was wrapped
around him. Maddie nodded against his back, knowing he was right. With a long, deep breath, Harry turned around in her arms; wrapping his around her in return. His eyes were a mix of emotions; fear, helplessness, defeat and a great deal of pride. Maddie tightened her hold on him and continued.

"I will be careful. I will do what I need to do and I will come home to you," she met his eyes; steady and sure. "But I am going."

Because he wasn't sure he could find anymore words without crying; from exhaustion, from emotion, from the strain of the last twenty-four hours, Harry simply nodded. Pressing his lips to the top of her head, he tightened his hold on her—wishing he could tighten it enough to keep her there with him. The relief he had captured that morning slipped away from him; replaced by something else entirely.
Harry liked to think that there was very little in the world that he couldn't handle, very little that his proper upbringing in view of the world hadn't prepared him for—even less that his military training hadn't caught. But as he stood at the airport, lost in the crowd of people sending their loved ones off to help with the destruction, he was finding that he was less prepared to handle these particular emotions that came with sending Maddie off to what he had always considered far too close to a warzone for his own comfort level.

He stood off to the side; hiding under a ball cap, biting his nails as he watched Maddie and, quite surprisingly, Ella check in with the flight staff and DWB personnel. Since the flight was exclusively for DWB staff and emergency aid workers, the area was off limits to those not on the flight or not saying good-bye to somebody on the flight—allowing Harry even more space to remain unseen in his state of hyper-edgy.

"Hey," Ella smiled at him as she finished her paperwork and moved back to where he stood. "Thank you for bringing me to the airport."

"Of course," Harry nodded with a small smile. "Where is Matt by the way? I thought he would be here to see you off."

"Working," Ella smiled.

"Sure, sure," Harry shrugged with a smug grin in place. "You know, Bishop would have been here."

"Oh..." Ella grinned with a roll of her eyes. "We're on with that again?"

"I'm just saying..." He spread his hands out.

"I know what you're saying," she shook her head. "We said our good-byes this morning."

"Fair enough," he glanced over to where Maddie was finishing up. "I have to tell you, I was shocked when Maddie told me you were going. I thought you swore off the entire continent."

"Yes well, I can't have them all down there; Khenda, Collins, Maddie..." Ella let the shakiness in her body come out in her voice, not having a bit of interest in hiding her feelings. "I have a tumultuous relationship with my actual family and the three of them...Maddie likes to pretend that I've been saving her life for the last few years but in reality it's been her saving mine. I can't let her go down there to be with them without me." She looked him over; reading his anxiety. "You going to be okay back at the palace?"

"No," he shook his head. "But I don't get a say in these things."

"That must drive you crazy," her lips pulled up in half a smirk.

"It really does," he breathed; his mind turning businesslike. "You know how to get ahold of me, right?" His voice was low as he turned to face her. "If you need anything."

"Like helicopters?" Ella raised her eyebrows; straddling the line between playful and dead serious.
"Like helicopters."

"You know the cavalry doesn't roll out for her."

"The cavalry rolls out for whomever I tell the cavalry to roll out for," though they both knew he was exaggerating, his eyes were somber.

"Okay boyfriend, at ease," Ella's voice was full of love and understanding as Maddie moved to join them. "I'm just going to give you two a minute." Her hand lingered on Harry's arm, squeezing as she moved to step away from them.

"Ella," he grabbed for her hand, pulling her to him in a hug. With a flash of shock, Ella hugged him back, blushing slightly as he kissed her cheek. "The cavalry rolls for you too, you know. Be careful out there, okay?"

"Well, with a face like this, how can I refuse?" Her fingers pinched his cheek lightly as she stepped out of his arms and looked to Maddie. "I'll just be..."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded with a smile, watching till Ella stepped away before turning to him. "You know she's going to talk my ear off about that for the entire trip to Africa."

"Consider it your payback," he raised his eyebrows, taking a step closer to her.

"Payback for what?" She matched his step with one of her own.

"Leaving me here in London while you go save the world."

"I'm not going to save the world," Maddie shook her head softly.

"Yeah..." He breathed and, with slight jerk of his chin, gestured for her to step into his arms. And she went; willingly, happily. Sinking into his embrace, she pressed her nose to his sweater; inhaling—committing to memory.

He wanted to remind her to be careful, remind her to watch where she was walking, what she was passing, what was above her. He wanted to tell her to keep an eye out for anything that look suspect, to trust her gut, to—when faced with the fight or flight dilemma—to go with flight. He wanted to make one last ditch effort at keeping her there with him, to cry and beg and throw a fit in front of her colleagues until she agreed to stay by his side.

Instead he tightened his hold on her, cupped her face in his hands and kissed her; full on the lips regardless of who was watching or what they may be documenting this moment on. He had reminded her of all of those things about a hundred times during the last twenty-four hours and now was not the time for that.

Now was the time for the I love you he whispered in her ear, the tickle his breath left on her skin, the way it made her eyes tear up. Now was the time for the way her fingers roughed up the hair at the back of his neck, the way her eyes met his—full of promises; promises to be safe, promises to return, promises to be in one piece. Now was the time for her to kiss him again; lips firm and warm as her I love you too passed between them into his mouth.

"I have to go..." She pulled away from him then, worried that much more time in his arms would be the straw that tipped the scale—forcing her to stay next to him. The group was beginning to disperse; doctors and nurses lining up. Harry lent a quick glance to the others before turning
reluctant eyes back to her.

"Step in, love," though his heart was full of concern and worry for her safety, everything else about him was full of pride—loving that part about her that felt the need to not just stand by. "And step back out."

"I will," she took another step away, her fingers lingering in his. They called out for her flight and she shrugged as her eyes turned up to the ceiling. "I love you. I do. But I..."

"It's time for you to go, I know." He drew her fingers to his lips for one more kiss. "Good-bye Madeline." She smiled sweetly and pulled her hand from his.

"I'll see you soon Wales." And then, with a turn of her heel and one final wave of her hand, Maddie was gone—following Ella to the walkway.

Harry stood, weighted to his spot for the longest time. He watched as the last person loaded the plane, watched as they shut and locked the door behind them. Only when the plane had taxied away did he turn to leave.

Only when he was certain she wasn't going to come running back into the airport.

Resigned to spending the next fourteen days on edge with worry, Harry made his way, relatively unnoticed back through the airport to his waiting car and the next fourteen days of his life.
Arriving in Bendal had brought forward all of the emotions that Maddie had expected; anxiety, concern, upset, and an intense sort of relief that flooded her heart when they were finally reunited with their reason for boarding the plane in the first place.

Their first day had been one of adjustment; getting acquainted with the protocol, understanding the security measures, and learning their assignments. As Maddie had suspected, she and Ella were being sent out to the complex—most likely due to their previous involvement in Bendal. What Maddie had known before they came was that the complex had taken quite a hit and that the community surrounding it had suffered great losses and injuries. She had assumed they would be heading in that direction and, as they received the news, she reached out to squeeze Ella's hand in comfort.

It was late afternoon and they had finally finished the last bit of debriefing and were finally able to get out to the work they had come there to do.

The tension that Ella had built up inside of her, nervous at returning to the scene of so much anguish, washed away the instant they ran into their Bendal family. No sooner had they step foot off the van, no sooner had they taken in the destruction and devastation, they were pulled into bone crushing, lung squeezing hugs. Maddie's eyes welled with long fought tears and she wasn't sure if the arms around her belonged to Collins or Khenda or even Ella for that matter.

"My God...I cannot believe you two are here," Khenda cried openly, one hand holding tight to Ella while the other traveled over Maddie's hair; her maternal instincts in overload.

"You didn't really think we would stay away, did you?" Maddie chuckled through her tears.

"No," Khenda shook her head. "Though I did think Harry would pull a little harder to keep you there."

"Oh he pulled," Ella laughed, leaning into Collins; feeling better than she had ever expected to feel standing back in Bendal. "He just lost that particular tug of war."

"You all know that I don't take well to being told what to do," Maddie smiled wide. "Now I love him dearly but if you expected things to be different with Harry, then..."

"Na, we know better," Collins moved to kiss her forehead. "I hate to admit it, but it's really good to see you, Doc."

"You have no idea how good it is to see you," Maddie's tears increased as she hugged him. "We were so worried about you."

"You're not the only one," Khenda spoke up, her eyes narrowing at him as they shared the look that couples share; the look that speaks volumes of their history, their devotion, their love for the other.

"Okay, okay," he rolled his eyes dramatically. "There will be plenty of time for this tonight..."

"Tonight?" Ella's face scrunched up.
"You're staying with us," Khenda's voice was such that both of them knew there would be no further discussion. "We're not passing up the chance to spend time with the two of you while you're here."

"Your place made it out okay?" Maddie raised her eyebrows.

"Amazingly, yes," Collins nodded. "We were untouched by the quake. The complex, on the other hand..." All eyes moved to take in the disaster area. The devastation filled her lungs like the hot sticky air of Bendal.

"Yeah..." Maddie breathed. The reality sat in; weighing on all of them.

"You want to direct me to the infirmary tent?" Ella released her hold on Khenda's hand. It was time for them to get to work.

"I'll take you. I'm headed that way," Collins nodded, releasing his hold on Maddie. "We'll meet right here at the end of the day."

"I'll take you to the makeshift family center," Khenda spoke to Maddie. "We've instructed people to gather there if they need to talk to anyone or aren't sure what to do."

"Great."

"Be careful, okay," Collins' eyes traveled to all three of them. "Things are still pretty unstable down here. And I'm not just talking about the buildings. The people are..."

"We'll be careful," Khenda smiled at him as his protective nature took over. "We'll see you tonight. Right here."

"Right here," he leaned to kiss her; his hand lingering on her arm for a beat longer than it used too, his eyes meeting hers a beat longer than they had before their world had come tumbling down around them.

As they stepped apart, Collins lead Ella off towards the infirmary tent and Khenda and Maddie made their way in the other direction to the family center; all of them passing by the unsteady building that remained from the complex, all of them feeling the weight of what was to follow.

It was long past dark before they called it a day and even then the call was forced upon them. While Ella had seen patient after patient, cleaning wounds, stitching cuts, administering shots and antibiotics, Maddie had been bombarded with the grieving and the unsure and more than a handful of distraught staff members. They had all grown accustomed to poverty and despair—human disasters, but for most of them, this was the first time they had dealt with the fallout of a natural disaster, the first time they had dealt with the loss of a colleague. And, while Collins and Khenda were fine, the staff had lost two doctors and one nurse to the earthquake and it was hitting them quite hard.

So, when Khenda came into Maddie's corner and told her they were done for the day, Maddie was faced with the same conflict she had always been faced with when it came to this work in this place. She wanted to stay, wanted to see more people, wanted to be there to hear what they needed her to hear. AND she knew that in order to stay on top of her game, to stay ready to handle what the next day threw at her, she needed to take down time. So, reluctantly, she closed up her files and rose to her feet. Their first day was over and they were heading back to Khenda and Collins' place.
Ella was sprawled out over the couch, drink in hand, when Maddie emerged from the room, freshy showered and dressed comfortably. Collins had prepared plates of food and pitchers of drinks for them to enjoy as they all came down from their day.

"I forgot how hot it was down here," Ella groaned; holding her perspiring glass to the skin on her neck.

"You're just accustomed to the chilly London air now," Collins smiled; taking a seat on the couch across from her.

"You hear that?" Khenda snickered. "He's calling you a wuss." The laughter that settled as Maddie took her place next to Ella and Khenda took hers next to Collins was comfortable; warm and familiar as they ate and drank and revived themselves.

"So..." A crack of a smile came from Collins as he looked to Ella and Maddie. "How are things in Merry ol' England?"

Maddie looked to Ella who sighed into her grin, "Merry ol' England is wonderful."

"Maddie told us you're a flight nurse," Khenda nodded at Ella. "Is it everything you thought it would be?"

"It's amazing," Ella nodded. "Every time we go up is amazing. It gives me the same kind of rush I got here, though now I get to come down from it. I love it."

"Good for you," Khenda was so proud of how the both of them had left and grown into their new lives, their new roles.

"It doesn't hurt that she's in love with the pilot," Maddie offered her friend up for the mocking that was sure to ensue.

"The pilot?" Collins was quick to pick up the ball and run with it. "What's his name?"

"It's Matt," Ella rolled her eyes. "And I never said I was in love with him."

"Oh!" Khenda laughed. "That's even better."

"You're not in love with him?" Maddie's head tipped to the side as she studied her friend.

"I don't know," Ella shrugged, her mouth twisting into a smile. "I care for him but...but if any of us is in love with a helicopter pilot it would be..."

"Madeline!" Khenda clapped her hands, giddy that they were going to move on to a relationship that she had seen from the very beginning.

"It's true," Maddie sighed, unable to help the flush in her cheeks or the grin on her face. "I am in love with a helicopter pilot."

"How is he?" Khenda asked, tucking her legs up under her and linking her arm through Collins'. 
"He's great. He's really, really great. Well...he's kind of in the middle of a pout because I'm here, but other than that, he's wonderful."

"I am so happy the two of you worked out," Khenda beamed.

"Me too," Maddie sighed. "I suppose I should thank you for that."

"I would think!" Khenda laughed.

"Speaking of Harry," Collins glanced at his watch. "Should you try to call him? Let him know you made it okay?"

"He's not expecting to hear from me," Maddie shook her head. "The towers were down when we tried to locate the two of you. There's really no way for me too..."

"Actually," Ella spoke up, groaning as she moved from the couch. "There is." Ruffling through her bag she pulled out a phone Harry had given her before they left and held it up in the air.

"What's that?" Maddie squinted.

"A satellite phone."

"From where?" Her voice flattened.

"I don't know," Ella turned the phone over in her hands. "Some store?"

"I meant from whom?" Maddie's eyes narrowed.

"Who do you think?" Ella laughed. "He slipped it to me while you were locking up your place. He wanted to be sure that if we needed anything..."

"Give me that," Maddie snatched the phone from Ella and moved towards the hallway. "I am going to kill him." She could hear the three of them laughing behind her as she turned the phone one and dialed.

Harry was out with Bishop, Sean and Leo when his phone vibrated in his pocket. When he looked at the number, he about knocked over the table trying to stand up. Leaving his friends and his drink behind, he hurried towards a door, towards quiet. Pushing out into the cold, snowy night, he pressed it to his ear.

"You sneaky little..." Maddie started before he even had the chance to speak.

"Now, before you get mad..." Harry cut in, a smirk in place.

"You should have said that five minutes ago," Maddie cut him off, trying to keep the smile from her face.

"...I wanted Ella to have a way to call Matt if she needed anything."

"Henry Charles Albert David..."
"Oh come on!" He laughed. "This is really worth bringing out all four names? You left me in London to go to a country that just had an earthquake, a country that is already unstable. I had absolutely no say in you going and I have to sit here and worry about you until you come home. The least you could afford me is the ability to know that you're okay."

"You're right."

"I'm..." He stumbled. "I'm sorry. I'm what?"

"You're right," she sighed. "The least I could afford you is that. And had you spoken to me about it, had you asked me about it, I would have been happy to take your sneaky little phone..."

"Ah I see what's..."

"Instead, you went behind my back and handed it off to Ella."

"I did," he nodded, seeing his mistake. "I...I was worried you would put up a fight. I was worried we would have a battle and the last thing I wanted to do before you left was..." He groaned. "I made a mistake."  

"You did."

"I'm sorry."

"I forgive you."

"That was..." Harry chuckled. "That was fast and incredibly easy. I was expecting a bit more of a..."

"Yes, well," Maddie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I saw Collins today, with my own eyes. And Khenda and...it's just a mess down here. The complex is..." She trailed off, choking up. She took a moment to steady her breathing. "I miss you. I missed you the second I got on the airplane and I miss you more now that I'm here...and I'm not going to fight with you while I'm here."

"Wow..." Harry breathed. "You really know how to hit a guy, Madeline."

"Sorry," she laughed.

"Na..." He shook his head. "It's okay. I miss you too. Fourteen days?"

"Thirteen now..." She sniffed and pulled it together. "So, now that I have your little phone, what is it you're expecting? A daily check in?"

"No," he shook his head. "No. I know you're busy. I know you have a lot on your plate. If you could just call me once or twice, let me know you're still among the walking."

"I could."

"And if anything happens..."

"Yeah," Maddie smiled.
"Collins is really okay?" He really wished he could be there with her, standing next to her; hugging Collins and Khenda for himself.

"He's poking fun at Ella right now."

"Good." Harry looked out at the snow that covered the city. "Give my love to him and Khenda."

"I will."

"And you," his voice dropped. "All of my love to you."

"Hmm..." She felt warm. "Thank you."

"I miss you terribly, love."

"Thirteen days," she reminded him. "Will you be at the airport?"

"Isn't that what boyfriends do?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "Though sometimes my boyfriend has to attend meetings or go to luncheons or..."

"He'll be there," he assured her. "I'll be there."

"I'll be in desperate need of a long, hot bath."

"At your service," she could hear the seductive smile on his lips.

"I love that way that sounds coming out of your mouth," she teased.

"Noted," he laughed. "Be careful down there Maddie."

"I'm always careful down here Harry."

"I know," he sighed. "Sleep well. Tomorrow's another big day."

"I will. Tell the boys hello for me."

"I will," he shook his head, loving that she knew what he was up to without knowing. "Good night love."

"Good night Wales." And then, with far more regret and sadness than she had ever felt doing so, she disconnected the call with Harry. Setting the phone on the bedside table, she took a deep breath. "Thirteen days."
Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: There is a bit in here that is in French. I used Google Translate for that and it doesn't really matter what is being said in the moment as you will discover it soon enough.

There's also a little time jumping. We start on Day Thirteen, then jump back in time and work our way to Thirteen again.

I hope that makes sense!

Day Thirteen

Harry was alive with excitement as he finished up at the event; shook hands, said his good-byes. It was Day Thirteen of Fourteen. At this exact time the next day he would be looking in her eyes, holding her close, making gentle fun of the way she took the phone she had jumped on him over and used it to check in with him every single day she had been there.

He couldn't wait to see her and it showed. He was smiling wide, walking briskly as he made his way from the venue towards the car. Stopping to shake hands and say hello. He was almost finished when it happened, almost done waving to the crowds when Thomas stepped forward with Harry's cell phone in hand with a light nudge. Harry glanced down and back up at Thomas; thinking maybe he had lost his mind. Harry had never taken a phone call when he was out like this; shaking hands, walking the rope line. He shook his head slightly, not once losing his focus.

But Thomas was insistent, his hand resting on Harry's arm, forcing his attention.

"Sir," his voice was stern and when Harry met his eyes, he saw a genuineness there that spoke volumes. Thomas had been with Harry for a long time, with the family even longer. He would never put this out there if it weren't important.

Still, an annoyance went with him as he smiled apologetically at the people in front of him. "This couldn't have waited until we were in the car?" He muttered to Thomas who shook his head.

"No sir."

"Fine." Taking the phone from his hand, Harry stepped off to the side as much as he could to prevent himself from being seen on the telephone at an official function. Moving away from the view of the crowd, he rounded a corner and, as he pressed the phone to his ear, he heard the news that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Day Three

"Bloody hell..." Harry called out into his dark room as he rolled towards his nightstand, tangling up in the sheets. His hand slapped at the stand, searching for his ringing phone. His eyes squinted at the clock. "Who in the hell is calling at three in the..." His heart thudded in his ear as he
answered the phone; panicked. "Maddie?"

"I'm okay." Knowing him, knowing his disposition, she went first for comfort and assurance and he was eternally grateful for that. "I'm okay. Everyone is okay." He heard her take a breath as every single molecule in his body relaxed.

"You're okay," he breathed.

"I'm okay."

"Okay," he eased back into his bed, taking the phone with him. "What's going on?"

"Promise..." Her voice was soft, whispy. "Promise not to make fun of me."

"I promise," he agreed; his heart warming at every word she spoke.

"I... wanted to hear your voice." Harry was thankful for the dark room as an embarrassingly wide grin stretched across his face. She could hear him over the phone, the way his breath drew in, the way he chuckled to himself. "It's only my second day here and already I want to crawl into bed with you and..."

"Third," he corrected her, unsure why he felt the need to do so. "It's your third day."

"Yes," she breathed with a smile. "I guess it is. I'm sorry Harry. I didn't mean to wake you. I shouldn't have called this late, I just..."

"What would you like me to say?" He raised his eyebrows sleepily.

"Sorry?"

"You..." He laughed lightly. "You said you wanted to hear my voice and I'm willing to help you out with that. I just need to know what you want me to say."

"You're..." Maddie's eyes teared up instantly. "You're willing to help me out with that? Just like that? In the middle of the night? You're not going to make fun or..."

"I'm not going to make fun," he shook his head. "Madeline, you very rarely need me. And right now, you need me. There's no way I'm going to make fun of you. Though, I will say this, it's a good thing that sneaky bastard slipped that phone to Ella before you left."

"It is," Maddie laughed; comforted by such simplicity. Her day had been horrible; long and sweaty and full of despair and, though she had tried on her own for hours, she was finding that sleeping without Harry was looking to be a trend from her past.

"Do you want me to find a phone book or..." They both chuckled at that.

"No," Maddie shook her head. "Just tell me about your day. Would you do that? Tell me what you did today?"

"Absolutely," he nodded, sinking into his pillow. "Just give me a second..."

"Hey Harry?"
"Hmm?"

"I always need you."

Harry took a moment to catch himself, a moment to collect his thoughts and then, with a wide smile and full heart, he began what would become a nightly event; him talking aimlessly and her listening. And damn it all if she wasn't falling for him further and further with every word.

Day Seven

"Harry! Harry!" Harry turned towards the voices and offered a small wave. The press was lined up as Harry exited the school gymnasium with his brother. In their father's place, they were attending an afternoon recital for a local school and to say that the children were beyond ecstatic to see the two of them was an understatement. By the time they were leaving, the children weren't the only ones excited. There were throngs of people, young and old, waiting to catch a glimpse of them.

Unable to resist a chance to interact with little ones, the two brothers veered off path for just a moment; to say hello to some kids who had been playing at the park across the way. Kids were always the first to break protocol, the first not to care that Harry was a Your Royal Highness, going straight for his first name or, at times, even a Hey You! And he loved it.

So, when a bright, happy little girl who seemed to be bouncing as he said hello asked him, "Where's Maddie?" He couldn't help but smile at her and, despite the reporter that Harry knew was within earshot, answer.

"She's...she's off making the world a better place."

"Is she helping kids?" The girl beamed at the fact that he was talking to her. "My Mum says she helps kids."

"She is helping kids," Harry nodded; pride oozing from him as he spoke.

"Will she be back?"

"Ha! If I'm lucky," Harry laughed as William caught up with him; clapping his hand on his back in a brotherly way.

"He's always been a pretty lucky guy." And then, with wide smiles and a wave, the two of them were ushered back towards the car. "Well," William spoke under his breath. "I'm guessing you knew the press was right there."

"Of course I did," Harry responded equally as hushed. They had long ago learned how to spot them, always keeping their peripheral in mind.

"Talking publically about Maddie?" William raised his eyebrows as they slipped into the awaiting car. "Things must be serious."

"Well, like you said," Harry shrugged with a smirk. "I've always been a pretty lucky guy."

Day Ten

The time in Bendal had been such a roller coaster for Maddie and Ella. There were times when
things seemed to fly by; their twelve hours out in the community zipping by in a flash. Then there
were days when the misery simply wouldn't end; when they weren't quite sure if they were going
to make it to the end of the two weeks, the end of the day, the end of the hour. And they were
almost always split up; Maddie pulled to meet with victims of the quake or of the subsequent
rioting and pillaging, Ella staffing the infirmary tent treating the wounded.

On day ten, Khenda went with Ella to the tent while Collins took Maddie out in the truck to meet
with some of the people who were unable to make it into the community. Even though they were
going out to work, there was an odd sort of comfort that fell over them, a familiarity with the
moment that often came with going home. They laughed, they made jokes; they caught up. And,
when they were finally back in the truck heading home from a long, sweaty day, Collins pulled
out his best rendition of a big brother and brought up Harry.

"So..." He flashed a glance her way.

"So?" Maddie sighed; letting the air whip in through the window and around her.

"When was the last time you talked to Harry?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie stared out the window, a blush rising to her cheeks. "Last night."

"You've been talking to him every night, haven't you?" He grinned from ear to ear as he caught
the smile that was her admission.

"So what if I have?" She shrugged, trying to play it off. "Are you going to razz me about it?"

"Not at all," Collins shook his head. "No need to be embarrassed around me. You ever see me
hide my devotion to Khenda?"

"No."

"No," he smiled. "You don't need to get all blushy like you're trying to hide something."

"I know," she smiled at him. "I guess I just used to being in London, surround by
photographers and people who are dying to print the next salacious tale. I play it closer to the vest
than I really ever have."

"That makes sense," Collins nodded.

"But it doesn't mean that I don't absolutely adore him," she spoke softly, her mind wandering
through images of him. "It doesn't mean that I don't love him."

"Oh, hey," Collins nudged her. "I know you love him. Are you kidding? You left everything to
go to London and have your entire life paraded out in the daily rags. You only do that if you love
somebody...or if you're really sick and crazy."

"Maybe I'm sick and crazy," she grinned at him.

"Maybe you are," he chuckled.

"I have been talking to him every night," she sighed an answer to his earlier question. "I know I
made a big deal out of the phone but...I couldn't help it. Once I had a way to speak to him...why
wouldn't I speak to him, you know?"
"I do," he nodded.

"He's really great, Collins," her voice was low, her smile soft. "He's been so amazing with all of it; adjusting to London, to my new...life. And when I told him I was coming here...I know he put up a fight about it but I could see it in his eyes..." She felt teary, emotional.

"See what?"

"Pride," she smiled, her head resting back against the seat as she turned to look at Collins. "He's proud of me, he's proud that I'm down here. You know he loves this place, loves the people. I think he would be here with us if he could. But he can't. His life is too complicated for this."

"Yeah," Collins nodded. He knew Harry enough to know all of those things. He watched Maddie for a moment, watched as her mind wandered over Harry; watched as a peaceful happiness settled over her features. "Someday that's going to be you, huh? Unable to travel without security because your husband is..."

"Shhh..." Maddie hushed him immediately, despite the grin on her face. "You can't just say things like that."

"Oh yeah?" He laughed at her, pulling the truck up outside the home he shared with Khenda. "That mile wide smile on your face says otherwise."

"Yes, well," Maddie opened her door and stepped out with a slight groan. Collins came around to her side, watching her as she paused in thought. "There may be a small amount of truth to what you say..."

"There may be," he laughed. "Come on Doc. Let's get inside, check on those two, get you some food and then you can check in with your man at home."

"I wish hearing you say that didn't make me sigh..."

"But it does," he finished her thought as they ascended the stairs.

"But it does." She grinned.

"No need to hide your devotion here," he held open the door for her, waited till she passed to follow behind and shut it. "Khenda my darling! Are you and Ella home?" Maddie snickered at him as she took off her work boots; pulling her hat from her head. "Khenda!"

"Hey," Khenda's voice was in direct contrast to Collins' drawing both of their attention as she rounded the corner to greet them.

"What's wrong?" Collins looked her over with a quick glance. "Ella?"

"What happened to Ella?" Maddie's pulse quickened.

"She's fine," Khenda reached a steady hand out to Maddie's shoulder. "She had a terrible day. I think the heat and the patients and...she's really feeling it today."

"Where is she?" Maddie dropped her bag onto the floor.
"She's in bed. I was in with her when I heard you two come in."

"I'm heading that way," Maddie reached out to pat Collins on his shoulder and went straight for the hallway.

"I'll make some tea and meet you down there?" Collins raised his eyebrows to Khenda.

"You're the absolute best," she sighed into a smile; leaning to kiss him. "Thank you."

And just like that, the three women were gathered in the bed; snuggled close to the friend who needed them the most at the moment. This wasn't the first time they had rallied around one of their own, nursing the wounded heart back from the atrocities they bore witness too. There were very few words; more hugging and kissing, stroking of hair and holding of hands. As soon as Maddie had hit the bed, Ella had turned in to her, resting her head on her shoulder as Maddie wrapped her arm around her; kissing her forehead. Khenda took her place on the other side, scooping Ella's hand back into one of hers while she reached out with the other to smooth back Maddie's hair.

It was there that Collins found them, just like that, when he made his way in with tea and cakes and a smile of understanding.

"You brought tea?" Ella sat up; tears in her eyes, in her voice. "How fucking perfect are you?" And, without missing a beat, Collins moved into the room.

"Pretty fucking perfect," he responded. And the room erupted in laughter. He winked at Khenda and leaned to kiss Ella's cheeks. "You going to pull through darling?"

"Yes," she sniffed and wiped at her eyes; taking tea from him. "I usually do, right?"

"Sure," Collins nodded, handing tea to the other two women before sitting on the edge of the bed.

"You want to talk about it?" Maddie met Ella's eyes.

"Yeah..." Ella pushed a great big breath from her lungs and inhaled. "There was a mother who brought in her three little kids today; I mean, no older than four. She was convinced that her husband had..." Ella cracked a defensive smile as tears pushed from her eyes. "She was concerned that after quake, with all of the devastation, that her husband had...poisoned the kids; thinking he could let them...go peacefully instead of in hunger or thirst or..." Ella's train of thought ran off as she began to cry again. Maddie felt tears in her own eyes as Ella pushed the tea to Collins and returned to her spot on Maddie's shoulder. "She was right. He had. I helped them but the dad came in and was yelling and screaming and...he wanted me to just let them go and..." And the story was over for Ella. She couldn't process it any longer.

"The kids are okay," Khenda finished. "But it was..."

"Terrible," Ella finished. "It was just absolutely terrible."

"I'm so sorry," Maddie whispered into her hair as she hugged her. "I'm so sorry that was your day Ella." As Maddie comforted her best friend, Khenda looked to Collins who was watching with abject horror.

"See, Khenda, this is..." He shook his head and looked away; clearly upset by the story. "This is exactly what I was talking about. This place is..."
"Hey," Khenda reached her hand out to his arm. "It's okay."

"No, it's not okay," Collins shook his head, the conversation between them private and personal as he moved to their first language. "C'est exactement pourquoi je veux partir en France."

"Encore une fois avec la France?!" Khenda rolled her eyes; allowing the tiniest of glances to the other two in the room.

"S'il vous plaît ne pas prendre à la légère cette Khenda! Je m'inquiète pour toi tout le temps ici et maintenant ..." Ella perked up slightly, looking to Maddie confused as Khenda and Collins moved into an entirely different moment right there in front of them.

"Are they..." Ella squinted. "Are they speaking French?"

"I think so," Maddie whispered, just as confused by what was happening; though the arguing continued. "Do you know any French?"

"A little bit," Ella sat up. "Mostly medical terms though. You?"

"No," Maddie shook her head; moving closer to Ella. "Harry does though."

"Great. Why don't you go get the phone I...."

"God damn it Collins!" Khenda yelled, rising to her feet. "Je suis enceinte, pas impuissant!"
Maddie flinched in surprise as Ella's eyes grew wide as saucers.

"Oh my God!" She pointed. "I know that word. I...."

"Oh my God..." Khenda groaned as it registered that Ella and Maddie were there.

"Khenda!" Ella moved to her knees, her face twitching into a smile. "You're pregnant."

"Oh!" Maddie gasped, her hand clasping over her mouth.

"You are!" Ella grinned. "I know pregnant in about seventeen languages and French is one of them and..." Her eyes moved to Collins who, underneath all of the fighting and craziness, couldn't control the smile on his face. "Collins."

"Yes?" He tried to avoid the stares as Khenda remained unfazed.

"Were you just yelling at a pregnant woman?" Ella's voice was accusatory though her face remained excited.

"I..." He looked to Khenda; eyes soft and pleading and, with a deep sigh and roll of her eyes, she caved.

"Yes. He was just yelling at a pregnant woman."

And the room erupted.

Ella and Maddie were on their feet, jumping on the bed as they clapped their hands. Collins stood to pull Khenda to him, protective and loving; making the other women ooh and aww. As Maddie and Ella rushed to congratulate them, rushed to hug them, the torment from the day slipped away
from the room without another thought. Love had a way of doing that.

Day Eleven

"Mmm..." Harry's voice was muted as he answered the phone, just after midnight. "You're a little late tonight," she could hear him smiling.

"I'm so sorry darling," she crooned; her grin taking over her face.

"Darling?" He chuckled; waking up enough to speak to her.

"Can I call you darling? Or...Sunshine. How about sunshine?"

"Sunshine?"

"Or puppy!"

"Not puppy." They shared a laugh at his quick retort.

"Sunshine it is."

"Have you been drinking?" Something about the levity in her voice made him happy, more at ease.

"Only a very little," she sighed. "I had a sip of champagne...or a few glasses. But that's not what this is. This isn't me drunk. This is entirely celebratory."

"Oh?" He was confused. "You're in Bendal on a Crisis Intervention team after an Earthquake. What exactly are we celebrating?"

"I don't want to tell you." She bit her lip with an unshakable smile.

"You don't?" He laughed.

"No," she shook her head. "I want to tell you in person. I want to see the look on your face when I tell you."

"Then why did you bring it up?"

"I couldn't help it," she shrugged. "You think I'm drunk and I'm not and...it's big and wonderful and it makes me giddy and happy and...Oh Harry. I love you."

"I love you too."

"No I..." She sighed back into her pillow; her eyes welling with tears that were part sad but mostly joyous. "I love you. So much. I...I can't even talk to Collins about you without blushing. I can't even get out your name without feeling all tingly and...oh I hate it. I hate the kind of power you have over me. But I love it all the same. Am I making any sense at all right now?" Her efforts at explaining her heart and her mind seemed lost as she looked out into the dark. She didn't really have a name for the emotion she felt when she thought of him—need, love, want—it was so foreign to her; to miss him like this, to need him—or anyone—like this. It was a strange moment in her life; realizing how much of her heart was his.
"Come home to me Maddie," Harry's voice was strained with the loss he had felt at her absence. "Make up some excuse and come home to me right now. I want to celebrate with you too."

"If I could..." Her heart flittered at the thought.

"You can."

"I only have three more days. Three more days and I'll be with you."

"And you'll tell me why you're celebrating?" He let up; knowing she was struggling.

"I will," she laughed. "I will tell you all about it and then...well, you're probably going to want to make love to me."

"Probably?" He couldn't deny the stir in his stomach as he thought of her.

"Probably," Maddie repeated with a sigh, allowing a moment of silence between them. "Are you too tired tonight? To tell me about your day? To let me hear your voice? Because if you're too tired then..."

"I'm not too tired," he cut her off, shaking his head. "I'm not too tired at all."

"Okay," she beamed; settling into her bed and closing her eyes. "Okay. I'm ready."

"So...for breakfast..."

Day Thirteen

Maddie was alive with excitement as she hopped from the truck and made her way towards the Infirmary Tent. She and Collins had finished up early and now they were going to meet up with Ella and Khenda and see what they could do to help out around the complex. Maddie had a pep in her walk as she moved and everyone knew why.

It was Day Thirteen of Fourteen. At this exact time the next day she would be with him; in his arms, against his lips. She couldn't wait. This trip to Bendal had been about many, many things; asserting herself, staying true to her roots, claiming her independence—away from the media that surrounded her new life. It started out being about reconnecting with who she had been and it ended up being about longing for who she was now.

"Hey there stranger!" Ella's voice called out as she approached Maddie, on her way from the tent Maddie was heading to. "Back early?"

"Crazy, I know," Maddie laughed with a nod. "Where are you headed?"

"Can you keep a secret?" Ella looped her arm through Maddie's and turned her around so she was walking with her.

"Sure," she shrugged.

"I'm headed there," she pointed forward. Shielding her eyes from the sun, Maddie focused.

"The complex?" She whispered.
"Yes."

"No." Maddie halted.

"Yes," Ella tugged at her friend. "There are a few vials of antibiotics in there and I need them out here..."

"It's been roped off for a reason. It suffered damage when the quake hit. Ella..." Maddie rattled off the reasons why this was a bad idea. "You haven't been able to look at that place after what happened last year and now..."

"I know," Ella took a deep breath. "Listen. I know exactly where the vials are. It will take me about ten steps, twenty seconds to get them and then I'll be out. And isn't this what you're supposed to be about? Facing your fears head on?"

"Sure," Maddie nodded and then shook her head. "But not when it's dangerous."

"Ten steps. Twenty seconds." Ella dropped her hold on Maddie. "I'm going in." She took two steps away from her friend before Maddie reached out and grabbed her arm. "Madeline..."

"I'm coming with you," she glared as Ella opened her mouth to protest. "You haven't been able to look at this place because of what happened to me. Now, if you think I'm going to let you go in there and have some sort of panic attack, you're wrong."

"Fine," Ella sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Just let me..." Maddie spotted Collins walking their way, en route to the tent. "Hey Papa!" She yelled; bringing snickers from Ella. "We're going to run in here really quick..."

"No way," he shook his head.

"Yes way," Ella nodded.

"We're going to be fast. In and out," Maddie explained, pulling her bag over her shoulder and holding it out to him. "Watch this for me?"

"I think this is possibly the worst idea you have ever had," he shook his head but took the bag. "You need to stay out of that building. I don't know how much clearer I can..."

"We need antibiotics. In and out," Ella repeated, leaning to kiss his cheek before hurrying away from him; Maddie right behind her.

"I'm telling you no! Do you even hear me?" He yelled out to her.

"I hear you!" Ella yelled.

"Sorry!" Maddie smiled apologetically and turned on her heels; following behind Ella as they slipped through the doors to the complex; leaving a more than miffed Collins standing outside in the hot sun.

"Wow..." Ella breathed; her eyes adjusting to the lack of light. "It's so creepy in here; quiet and..." Her smile dropped as she looked just beyond Maddie, just over her shoulder to the spot of all the chaos.
"Hey," Maddie spoke softly, moving to take Ella's hand. "Come on. Don't look there. You said you knew exactly where they antibiotics were. Are they over there?"

"No."

"Okay then. Let's move. You said we only needed twenty seconds and this is eating into that time," she tugged at Ella's hand; moving her towards the hall, wanting to keep her mind off of what had happened.

"Yeah..." She breathed. "Yeah. Okay. You're right." And then, hand in hand, the two of them turned to the hospital side.

It began with a rattle; a shake that was almost undetectable, something that could have been explained away as an illusion. But, being on edge, being on high alert, both women felt it. Maddie's eyes met Ella's in confusion.

"What in the hell was..." Maddie began; her words cut off as their world began to move.

All at once, the earth was shaking under their feet. There was a creek, a loud groan of a sound that came out of nowhere as a light dust began to fall from the sky. Maddie would never be absolutely sure what it was that ultimately pushed her to move, the movement under her feet, the chunks of ceiling that fell from above. She would never be sure what it was that forced her to move, but she did. Holding tight to Ella's hand, they ran. It was sloppy and unsteady as the floor buckled underneath them, but they ran; pulling each other under the reception desk hoping against hope that it would be enough to keep them safe as the world came tumbling down around them.

To Be Continued
Chapter 61

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"This couldn't have waited until we were in the car?" Harry muttered to Thomas who shook his head.

"No sir."

"Fine." Taking the phone from his hand, Harry stepped off to the side as much as he could to prevent himself from being seen on the telephone at an official function. Moving away from the view of the crowd, he rounded a corner and, as he pressed the phone to his ear. "This is Harry."

It was his father; of course it was his father. Very few people would have the weight to push Thomas to hand Harry the phone when he was working. Even fewer would be on the other end waiting to deliver the news of what had just occurred in Bendal; crushing Harry in a blink of an eye.

"An earthquake, an aftershock." His entire face drained of color, his body of heat, as he took it in and let it register. It wasn't as powerful as the first one, but it had caused some buildings that were barely standing to crumble. Harry flinched; physically and emotionally.

His mind wasn't prepared for this. His mind had been ready to see her the next day, to hold her tight and close and hear about her trip—to reconnect and move forward. His mind wasn't prepared for the jolt to his system that came with this.

His voice broke as he asked. "Is she..." His heart was nowhere near prepared to handle this.

His shoulders slumped as he heard the answer. No one knew. It had just happened. There were no reports to be given. His father simply did not want him to hear about it on the radio, see it on a passing TV or—God forbid—be asked about it by a reporter while he was coming out. With a nod and the inclination to vomit, Harry passed his phone back to Thomas, fighting to breathe normally. Though he could hear Thomas talking, it was muted; all of his focus was on trying to control the spiral he was about to jump into.

Harry knew himself well enough to know that he had approximately two minutes of "together" left in him. Two minutes left of standing tall, two minutes left of his normal composure before total breakdown. Looking to Thomas with terrified eyes, his instructions came out as a plea.

"I need to be someplace else. Right now." Understanding in a way only Thomas could, he took the young man by the arm and led him back inside. As he directed him through doors, asking their hostess for a place to make a private phone call, he could feel Harry waver under his hand. He could feel the way his step faltered, the way his muscles tensed.
Maybe it was less than two minutes.

"Oh my GOD!" Ella was yelling as the world rumbled around them. "Ohmygod. Ohmygod. Ohmygod...." She was scattered, panicked; her fingers digging into the flesh on Maddie's arms. The two women were huddled together, their knees touching, under the desk that seemed to be completely covered in debris. Though the shaking had stopped, the settling was working its way through the building. And Maddie was quite certain they were buried underneath brick and mortar and drywall.

"Ella," Maddie's voice wavered as she fought to remain calm. She could feel a giant slab of something wedged up against the desk, blocking them in. "Ella..."

"I can't see! I can't...I can barely hear and....oh my God Maddie..." Maddie could feel her friend tremble. "I can't breathe...I can't..."

"Okay, listen to me," Maddie's hands moved in the dark; finding Ella's face and holding it firm. "Look at me..."

"I can't see you!" There were tears in her shaky voice.

"Look straight ahead. I'm right in front of you," Maddie held Ella's face forward and reached for her hand, bringing it to her own face. "Here, you can feel me. I'm right here. Now, take a deep breath, Ella. In through your nose and out through your mouth...a big burst, like this..." Maddie demonstrated. "Okay, your turn. Come on..." Ella did as she was instructed. "Again. In through the nose, out through the mouth." Maddie and Ella repeated the breath three times before Ella calmed; her face nodding in Maddie's hands.

"What happened?" Her voice was shaky as her lip trembled.

"I think there was another quake," Maddie allowed herself to relax now that Ella was; taking inventory of what was around them. "Or an aftershock or...I don't know. Are you hurt? Did you get hit with anything or..."

"I think I cut my arm," Ella's hands moved from Maddie as she moved to check her arm. "Fuck!"

"I think I cut my arm," She hissed.

"What?!"

"I definitely cut my arm. It's...it's bleeding quite a bit," Ella's mind shifted to nurse duty for a moment, bringing her thought process back in order. "I don't suppose you have a bandage or a rag or..."

"No," Maddie shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. "I...I have my shirt! Hold on. I have a tank top underneath." In the dark, cramped space, Maddie managed to pull her t-shirt up and over her head.

"I'm going to need your help. I can't wrap my own arm and..."

"I got it," Maddie nodded, realizing how silly it was for her to do so given the darkness. But she moved anyway; wrapping her t-shirt around Ella's arm and twisting it into a knot. "Will that
"I think it's going to have to," Ella took a deep breath and the space grew silent as it sank in; just how dire the situation was. They looked around, felt around; realizing how cramped the space was, how dusty the air was, and just how trapped they really were. When Ella spoke again, her voice was whisper quiet and afraid. "Maddie...are we going to die in here?"

Walking quickly, Harry stepped into the conference room they were offered, his staff moving to draw the blinds, to secure the space as Harry held his hand out to Thomas for his phone. With shaky fingers, Harry dialed the number to the satellite phone—knowing there would be no answer, knowing that if she were in a place where she could answer, she would have called already. She would never have left him hanging like this—it was too serious. Laying the phone down on the table in defeat, Harry pulled off his suit coat—suddenly feeling hot and crowded. He loosened his tie and leaned over, his hands resting on the back of the chair.

"Sir..." Thomas began; wanting to do whatever he could to help him out in this moment.

"Could you..." Harry cleared his throat; his eyes welling up in fear and frustration. "Could you give me the room please? And...and find somebody who knows what the hell is going on down there!"

Collins had spent almost his entire adult life in the helping profession; in one way or another. He had almost always lived in communities that were in dire need of attention and assistance. That sort of work, that sort of life came with the expectation that, at times, he would feel helpless. Though he never believed he was helpless, he was more than familiar with the feeling.

So, in that moment, standing outside the complex as the Earth shook and the building shattered and fell—with Maddie and Ella inside—the feeling of helplessness took his breath away. It was like nothing he had ever felt before. His eyes were trained on the crumbling debris in front of him. He watched, unable to look away as it unfolded almost in slow motion.

And then, like the bang from a gun, the world stopped moving and reality came crashing back to him. The chaos unfurled. People were running and screaming, alarms were sounding. But it was all muted, as though he had on ear muffs until finally, he heard his name.

"Collins!" It was Khenda; he would know her voice anywhere. His head snapped towards her as she came running up the path from the tent and tears filled his eyes. "Oh my God...Collins..." She hurried straight into his arms and, though his mind was slow, his body was quick to react to her. His arms wrapped around her protectively, his hand glinting over her still flat stomach. This part of his family was okay.

"Are you okay?" He looked her over; oblivious to all that was occurring around them. Khenda nodded, wiping at her eyes. She was fine. Collins kissed her quickly and then his focus shifted. Releasing her from his arms he turned back to the building; talking as he began to move. "I need you to stay right here," he told her as she held onto his arm. "I'm going to grab a few of the guys to help me. But I need you to stay right here. Out in the open. Where I can see you. Do you understand?"

"Ye...Yes," Khenda answered shakily. "But...where are you going?"
"In there," he nodded to the building, squeezing her hand before he dropped it.

"What? No. Absolutely not."

"I have to go get some of the guys. I have to move that concrete and..."

"Why in the hell..."

"Because..." He took a breath, really wishing he didn't have to tell her. "Just before the quake, less than a minute before the quake...Ella and..." Collins' voice croaked. "Ella and Maddie went in there."

"Wha..." Khenda blinked; her mind filling with a horror that clenched her heart. "What?"

"Khenda..."

"I'll go grab some guys. You...see if you can hear them or..." She shook her head briskly, driving away the tears, trying to force her mind into work mode. "Just be careful."

"Always," Collins nodded and then, with a new mission in mind, he dropped Maddie's bag to the ground and ran towards the rubble.

"Doc!" He yelled out; his eyes scanning the mountainous heap. "Ella!"

"No." Maddie's voice was quick, firm; certain. "No. We are not going to die in here."

"But..."

"No buts," she shook her head. "No buts. Collins is out there. He saw us come in. He knows we're in here. And he knows where we were headed. There is no way he leaves us in here."

"Okay," though Ella agreed, her tone was less than sure.

"Okay." Maddie took another deep breath; straining to hear something, anything from the outside. The stark silence worried her. Surely there was chaos outside, surely there was screaming. But if she couldn't hear the outside, would they ever be able to hear them inside? "Maybe we should talk about something else for a minute. Just...you know..."

"Yeah," Ella swallowed the lump in her throat; her mind scattering in thought. "Is there any chance you brought that satellite phone in here with you?"

"No," Maddie shook her head, her mind leaping to Harry. "I left it in my bag with..."

"Collins," Ella finished in a whisper. "That's what I thought. You know...he is going to be pissed that you came in here."

"Collins?"

"Harry. He's going to be so mad at me for bringing you in here."
"Stop," Maddie smiled through the tears in her eyes; her heart aching at the thought of what he might be going through in that moment.

"He is."

"Well, there are some things that Harry doesn't need to know. This will be one of them." Maddie tried for levity; tottering along the fine line between laughter and breakdown.

"What else is on the list?" Ella raised her eyebrows. "Of things Harry doesn't need to know?"

"Um..." Maddie sniffed; trying to pull her mind together. "How many times you and I have fallen asleep drunk and in each other's arms."

"I think he actually might like to know that," Ella chuckled softly, causing great pain in her cut. Her hand clenched tightly around Maddie's.

"It's going to be okay...." Maddie reached out to smooth her hair.

"Does he..." Ella let out a short breath. "Does he know about the time you made all of the staff sing Row Your Boat in rounds?" She flinched again. "Jesus Maddie. My arm really hurts."

"I know," Maddie rubbed the back of her hand with her thumb. "I know it hurts. Just...look up at me and..." Maddie's mind was scattered. "He doesn't know that I made the staff do that, though I don't think he would be surprised."

"Yeah," Ella laughed. "He knows you well, doesn't he?"

"He really does," Maddie managed a smile through her tears.

"You're..." Ella sucked in. "You're going to marry him, aren't you."

"Yes." She was absolutely certain. "I mean...I want to. I want to marry him."

"I want to get married..." Ella's eyes grew soft.

"Yeah?" Maddie smiled. "To Matt?"

"No," Ella shook her head softly. "Not to Matt."

"No? He seems sweet and he makes you laugh and..."

"That's why you marry somebody?" Ella laughed. "Because they seem sweet and make you laugh?"

"No," Maddie laughed. "No. You're right. Sorry. It must be the dust..."

"Or the concrete?" Ella let out a strangled laugh.

"Or the cramped space..." Maddie added as a silence fell over them for a moment.

"Maddie..." Ella was crying again. "You know I love you. Right?"

"I love you too," Maddie held tight to her friend. "Let's not..."
And then it happened.

"Oh my God!" Ella gasped, pulling on Maddie's hand. "Oh my God. Did you..."

"Yes!" Maddie wanted to jump up and down as she heard it again.

Collins' voice was calling out to them from above; like an angel of relief.

"COLLINS!!!" Both women started yelling at the same time; banging on the wood around them—over their heads. "COLLINS!!! WE'RE HERE!!!"

And by some miracle, by the grace of whatever spirit was looking down on them that day, he heard them. "I've got you!" He yelled back. "Just sit tight and we'll get you out of there!" From relief, from fear, from a place that one only goes to when faced with the potential end of your life, Ella began to cry; to shake.

"Hey," Maddie's hands moved to her face, forcing her to look at her. "Ella! Hey! Listen to me. In through the nose, out through the mouth." Though it took her longer than the first time, Ella responded. "Collins knows where we are. They are removing the stuff on top of us and then we'll be out of here." Her voice was purposefully low, forcing Ella to pay closer attention to her instead of what was happening around her. "Look at me. We just have to sit here, together, and remain calm."

And then they heard the loudest creak, an enormous groan and the debris above them shifted—drawing screams from both of them as Maddie flinched and Ella began to cry.

"Oh my God...Maddie..." She was starting to panic; her body shaking under Maddie's hands.

"Shhh...." Maddie scooted closer, as close as she could in the confined space. "Shhh. Listen to me. Listen, Ella. They are moving stuff above us, they are moving stuff so we can get out ..."

"Stop," Ella tugged on her hand. "Please just...I know what's happening right now Madeline. I've worked way too many emergencies to not know what's happening, what you're doing...just...stop trying to..."

"There will be a great big wedding," Maddie cut her friend off, trying to force the focus away from her train of thought, from her spiral. "Harry and I...it will be a great big wedding, won't it?"

"I..." Ella stammered; her panic tripping up on the switch in topics, just as Maddie had planned.

"Come on, you're my royalty follower. Will we have to have a great big wedding?" Maddie nudged her friend. Taking a breath, just as Maddie had coached her, Ella's mind shifted to something else.

"Yes," she cleared her throat. "Probably at the Abbey or Saint Paul's or..." Ella was cut off by a loud banging sound followed by a confetti of dust and debris and, finally, a blindingly bright light.

They were free.

"Oh my God..." Maddie gasped as the air hit her lungs, as the sunlight struck her eyes. Pressing them closed, she tried her best to hold it together—all of the emotions she had pushed aside to help Ella suddenly rushing forward like a tsunami tide.
They were free.

"Doc," Collins' voice called to her and she opened her eyes; looking directly at Ella.

They were both covered in dirt; their hair, their faces, their clothes. Ella's arm was bleeding a lot, the trail of blood smudged on Maddie's hands, on their arms, their faces. But there, in the middle of it all, were Ella's bright, shining eyes; open and alive. Maddie's eyes ran over with tears.

"Doc?" Collins called out to her again; tearing Maddie's eyes upward to look at him; like a savior sent from heaven. If he weren't having a baby with a woman she adored, if she weren't head over heels for a Prince, she would have kissed him on the mouth.

"I'm okay," Maddie spoke through her tears. "Ella's cut pretty bad. Get her out of here and over to the tent. I'm...I'm fine..." Her voice croaked on the word because, even though she was not cut like Ella, even though she had no broken bones she was aware of yet—she was far from fine.

As the others around Collins continued to pull stuff away from their sanctuary, he leaned over and held his hand out to Ella. And there was this moment, when the two friends locked eyes, when Ella wasn't sure if she could take his hand and leave Maddie there. Her eyes flashed wide and scattered.

"It's okay," Maddie nodded encouragement. "I am right behind you."

"Ella, darling," Collins was soft and sweet with her. "Give me your hand. The only way out is up...with me." Ella nodded, leaned to kiss Maddie's cheek and held her hand up to Collins.

And Maddie was alone for the briefest of moments. Just enough time for her legs to stretch a bit, just enough time for her mind to let go of protection mode and start to unravel at the reality of what had happened, just enough time to...

"Doc," Collins called down to her; snapping her attention up to him. Extending his hand, he fought to control his emotions. "Come on. Let's get you out of here." With a nod, because she had no voice, she held her hand up to him and just like that, she was out and on her feet.

She barely had time to look around her, to see that the entire building had collapsed around them, to see Khenda off to the side with her hand clamped over her mouth as she cried—following Ella and a doctor to a safe spot. She barely had time to take a deep, engulfing breath before Collins had her wrapped up in his arms.

"I told you to stay out of that building. I told you to..." He wavered; his heart and mind recovering from the terrible place he had been for the last ten minutes.

"I know," she nodded, her crying increasing. "I...I..." She took deep breaths to no avail. Feeling the aftereffects of the small space, the entrapment, Maddie pushed at his chest. She needed room. "Please...I need to breathe. I need some space. I need..." Collins dropped his arms immediately, knowing instantly what was happening. He had seen it before. She moved away from him then, wanting, needing to move off the pile of rubble.

"Here," he grabbed her arm. "Let me help you down..." Though he could see her need to flee, he also knew that stuff underneath them wasn't stable, that her legs were most likely not very strong. He helped her only to the bottom, only to the edge, before he let her loose and let her go.
"I'm okay," she called out. "I just need some space..." Rushing away from them, she moved; quickly and with great purpose, to a wide open space, away from buildings and people and everything.

And her world, her heart, her mind, her soul, came tumbling down. With her face in her hands, she cried.

She wept.

She bawled.

She sobbed.

It was loud, it was ugly, and it was beyond her control. So she let it come; the thought that this could have been it, that this could have been the end for her or Ella, or both. The thought that somewhere in Colorado, her mother may not have even heard of the earthquake, the thought that somewhere in England, Harry absolutely had. It was a lot to take on, a lot to process—and her body had its own way of handling it.

It was a while before she calmed, a while before the crying jag began to settle. She wiped at her eyes, pushing tears from her cheeks. She took deep, clarifying breaths; trying to calm her adrenaline. As her sobs subsided, she turned around to find Collins; a few feet away, but standing tall and ready.

"I'm okay," her voice was hoarse, but steady.

"I know," he nodded; eyes heavy with all that had happened. "Ella's okay too. She has a pretty serious gash on her arm. But they are stitching it up and she'll be just fine."

"Okay," Maddie smiled a tiny smile; not moving one inch. "Thank you."

"Yeah," Collins nodded. "Listen. I'm going to lecture you. You know I'm going to lecture you; about being safe, about listening to me, about following the protocol that was put in place for a reason..." He stopped himself as his voice rose, not wanting to yell at her in that moment. "I am going to do all of those things. But first..." He took a step towards her and held out his hand. "But first I think there's a man somewhere going absolutely mad with worry and I think you have a phone call to make."

And there, in the palm of his hand, was the satellite phone.
Chapter 62

Saying good-bye to Khenda and Collins was a cluster of emotions. Though she hated the thought of leaving behind anyone she cared about in such a shattered place, Maddie was simply unable to hide the wholeness that came with returning to Harry's side.

"Any chance we could convince you to stay?" Collins teased; hugging her close after they unloaded at the airport.

"Not one single chance." Her voice was clear, firm; steady. "I am getting on that plane and I am going straight to him."

"Good answer," he grinned; kissing her cheeks. "We love you Doc."

"I love you too," she kissed him back. "Take care of Mama and baby, okay."

"No doubt," he smiled wide; already enamored with his growing family. Maddie moved to hug Khenda while Ella stepped into Collins' arms.

"You really should think about France," Maddie spoke into Khenda's ear. "Go where Collins goes, remember?"

"Ha!" Khenda laughed; recalling the time she sent Maddie away with similar advice.

"It also doesn't hurt that you would be miles closer to me."

"Yes, well, we'll keep you updated."

"Thank you," Maddie sighed as she stepped away from them. It was time to leave Bendal yet again. She couldn't help but notice that, as she took Ella's hand and moved towards the terminal, towards the plane...this time, when leaving Bendal, she felt not like she was leaving her home, but that she was on her way back to it.

"I am unbelievably excited," Ella clapped her hands together as their descent into London began. The flight attendants had done their final check and were seated; they were almost there. "It's ridiculous really because I don't even know if Matt's going to pick me up or if I'm going to take a cab or..."

"You're not going to take a cab," Maddie rolled her eyes as she watched through the window as the ground grew closer and closer. She turned to Ella with a smirk on her face. "You really think Harry and I leave you at the airport to catch a cab?"

"No?" Ella raised her eyebrows.

"No." Maddie reached out to take her hand; inhaling deep, exhaling slowly.

"Nervous?" Ella nudged her lightly.

"A little."
"Why?" Ella’s voice lowered; reading genuine anxiety in her friend’s eyes.

"I don’t know," Maddie sighed. "Maybe it’s because I haven’t seen him in two weeks. Maybe it’s because when I talked to him on the phone after the quake all either of us did was cry..." She blinked back tears as she remembered. "Maybe I’m nervous he’s going to see the bruises I have on my arms and freak out. Or it could be because I have this new, strange, glue-like attachment to him ...I don’t know." Ella chuckled. "I don’t know. It’s just...when Collins pulled me out of the...pile, all I could think about was him. It was a bit unsettling, but I just wanted to be next to him; close to him. I wanted him to leave London and fly to Bendal to get me."

"I’m sure he would have," Ella laughed. "Did you ask?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "Because he would have. He would have come down there and taken me home." It was such an outlandish thing to say, but Maddie was beyond convinced that she was right. Harry wouldn’t think twice.

"Wow...see..." Ella leaned back in her seat. "That's the guy you marry. The one who will fly to a poverty stricken, twice shaken country at the drop of a hat, just to bring you home. That is the guy."

"That is the guy," Maddie agreed. Her eyes turned to the window as the plane bumped to the ground and came to a screeching halt. It wasn’t long before the plane was navigated to the gate, the seatbelt light flashing off and people were rising from their seats.

"Ready to go see that guy?" Ella snickered as she stood, reaching into the overhead bin to pull out their bags.

"You have no idea," Maddie sighed; watching as the other passengers lined up, making their way off the plane. "Why did we sit near the back again?"

"We were the first on the plane," Ella shrugged. "And it was quieter."

"Mmm..." Maddie smiled sleepily; leaning against her seat. Maybe it was better to wait it out.
"You really think Matt's not out there?"

"Ha!" Ella shrugged again. "I suppose he probably is." Maddie watched her friend for a moment, studied her expression—unsure about how Ella felt about Matt.

"You know..." She began, but was cut off by the flight attendant, a young man with a big smile, as he approached them from the front of the plane.

"Excuse me ladies, are you..." He read the paper in his hand. "Ella Marshall and Maddie Forrester?"

"Yes..." Ella was instantly leery.

"Fantastic!" He smiled. "Doctor Forrester?" Ella pointed to Maddie. "Great. There's been a bit of a problem with you paperwork. We're sorting it out, but in the meantime, would you mind staying on the plane for a moment?" The two looked at each other, confused.

"A problem with my paperwork? What paperwork?" Maddie raised her eyebrows to Ella who shrugged. "Is everything okay?"
"Yes ma'am. It will just take a minute," the young man nodded and looked to Ella. "And you must be Ms. Marshall?"

"Yes."

"This is for you," he held out a folded piece of paper; nice, sturdy cardstock. Even more confused, she opened it and read to herself.

"Welcome home.

Matt and a car are out here waiting for you. Give me a minute with Maddie?

Thanks love

~H"

A wide, warm grin spread across Ella's face.

"What is it?" Maddie leaned over, trying to take a look.

"Hmm..." She debated. Deciding to keep the secret, she shook her head and leaned to kiss Maddie. "Matt is out there waiting for me. You stay here and do whatever you need to do. I'll see you tomorrow for spa day?"

"What? I mean...yes. I'll see you tomorrow. But you're just going to...go?"

"Yes," Ella nodded; her smile deepening. "I'm going to go home and eat great food, take a hot shower and figure out what I'm going to do with Matt. You...you are going to do whatever they need you to do and then you're going to go meet up with Harry. And tomorrow we'll have a day of it."

"Okay," Maddie sighed, still confused. "I love you Ella."

"I love you too," Ella kissed her again. And, with one final contact of the eyes, Ella was moving away from her as the man moved around.

"It will all be cleared up in just a moment ma'am," he smiled at her; following the people as they left; clearing the aisles, checking for people and trash. Maddie stood there; propped back against the seat, her bag in the chair, her mind wandering. What was she doing on this plane? What could they possibly need from her? And what in the world could be wrong with her paperwork?

Maddie looked up, watching as the last passenger exited the plane. Soon, the pilot and co-pilot left, leaving only the two member flight crew. But when they smiled back at her and stepped to leave the plane, Maddie was absolutely confused.

"Wait! I..." She called out, slightly panicked as she took two steps. But, when she saw Jim step around the corner, her feet stalled and her heart thudded; she figured it out. There was nothing wrong with her paperwork.

This was him.
Jim, her personal favorite Security Officer, glanced around the cockpit area, into the bathrooms up front, before he moved past her. His eyes swept across the empty seats as he looked around back before passing by her again.

"Doctor Forester," he nodded with a smile. "It's good to see you again."

"Thank you Jim," she grinned; her body alive with anticipation. Jim moved back towards the galley of the plane and without another glance in her direction, disappeared towards the exit.

She knew exactly what was happening. But it didn't make the impact any less. When Harry stepped into view, her heart leapt in her chest and she felt tears prick at her eyes. All of the air rushed out of her lungs and all of her warmth into her heart.

"You really know how to make an entrance..." The corner of Maddie's mouth twitched up on its way to a smile.

"You really know how to make a man miss you." Harry took slow steps towards her.

"Yeah..." Her eyes welled up with tears and suddenly, there were no words. In actuality, there were so many words that there was room for none. She didn't know what to say, where to start. Thankfully, her body acted on instinct and before he could make a smart remark, before he could chastise her for making him worry, she was down the aisle and in his arms. Her feet left the floor and her soul felt at home.

"You spoil me..." Maddie sighed into the bathtub full of hot water and bubbles. Once they had emerged from the plane, Harry had taken her hand protectively in his and had taken her back to his place—where he promptly fed her the pizza Bernard had made before he left, drew a bath, helped her wash her hair, and opened a bottle of champagne. He was doting, he was attentive; he was spoiling her rotten.

"Get used to it," Harry smiled down at her, his finger reaching out to pull a strand of wet hair from her forehead; his lips following behind.

"Mmmm..." Maddie grinned as he took a seat on the floor next to the tub facing her. "You were right. Coming to your place was genius."

"You like the tub."

"I love the tub. I love it. I am thinking of starting a love affair with your tub," she ran her hands along the slick surface.

"Ha!" He laughed. "Well...stick with me and the tub is yours anytime you want it."

"Sounds like a deal to me," she held her hand out to seal the deal. Taking her bubble soaked hand in his, Harry pulled it to his lips; kissing the top. As his eyes moved up her arm, he discovered her bruises, her wounds.

"Madeline..." He breathed; pulling her arm from the tub, looking her over with a shake of his head. He had known she was in the building. He had known it had crumbled around her. But for some reason, seeing the evidence of it in front of him, on her body, sucked away his breath for a
"I'm okay," Maddie smiled tiredly. "I am. It's just...a little ceiling or wall I'm guessing. You should see the gash in Ella's arm." She watched as a range of emotions passed over his face before stopping on something close to gratitude and relief.

"You stood a little too close to disaster for me, love."

"For me too," her eyes were solemn when meeting his; not a trace of humor there. She knew this time had pushed him to the edge. "Don't worry. I'm no longer standing next to disaster. I'm right here with you Sunshine."

"We're really going to go with sunshine?" His eyes danced in the soft light.

"For a little bit. Do you mind?" Her eyebrows lifted lightly.

"No," he shook his head with a smile; feeling so calm, so at peace now that she was there with him that she could likely talk him into anything. "Would you like more champagne?"

"I would like more of you," she reached out, her wet fingers running into his hair.

"You have all of me..." He turned his face to kiss her hand; his voice low and heavy.

"Join me?" Her hand moved to the collar of his shirt, tugging at it lightly. Without hesitation, he nodded and rose from the floor. His hand grabbed for hers as he leaned closer, kissing her warm, wet lips. He was soft with her; slow—as though he was committing the moment to memory, mapping out the curves of her lips. Maddie let out a soft groan when he pulled away; her eyes lighting up as he tugged his shirt up and over his head, the rest of his clothes finding home in a pool on the floor. "That was easy," she giggled as he stepped into the water; bubbles splashing up around them.

"I'm easy," he smiled, sinking into the tub opposite her. His legs slid next to hers, skin slick from the water; her body perking at the sensation. Sitting up, Maddie moved closer to the middle of the tub, closer to him. Harry's hands were strong, guiding her legs around his waist, pulling her body closer to his. Her hands moved up his arms, over his shoulders, and around his neck; hugging him closer—their chests within inches of the other, their noses almost touching. Though Maddie could feel him, could tell that he wanted her as much as she wanted him, the intimacy she felt in that moment was more than just sexual—it was more than just desire. His eyes were open wide as he looked into hers; drawing for a deep connection, a place of understanding. It had been a long day for Maddie; traveling, the barrage of paparazzi at the airport, the settling down, washing herself clean from her time away—literally and metaphorically. Her mind, her body, and her soul had been wrapped up in coming down from that experience, in finding normal again. And now; clean, fed, quenched—now they were meeting on a different level.

"Hi..." Maddie whispered; her cheeks rosy from the heat, from his closeness.

"Hi," his fingers traced a path along her spine; causing her to arch closer to him in such a way that brought groans from both of them. "Can I..." He cleared his throat, wanting to retain focus for just one moment longer. "I have a favor to ask of you."

"A favor?" She smiled; her fingers playing with the hair at the back of his neck.

"I..." He took a deep breath, gathering his courage; his nerve. "I hope you know how much I love
your spirit and your independence and your stubborn nature. That I would never want to change those things about you..."

"I do," she breathed, her heart swelling.

"And I hope you know that I would never want you to be the kind of woman who would bow to my demands or let me walk all over you..."

"Yes..." Her eyes narrowed in confusion.

"Good," he nodded; moving to cup her face in his hands; his eyes holding hers with this intense gaze that made her lungs hitch. And when he spoke, his voice was pleading. "Please. Please, don't ever leave me like that again, Madeline. Ever." Maddie's eyes welled up as she watched his face change, twist into something that showed fear, concern and a whole lot of love. Though there was a part of her that wanted to be defiant, a part of her that wanted to balk at his request, the part of her that wanted to kiss away any hint of worry from his face won out. Blinking at the tears in her eyes, her hand reached up, a finger stroking his cheek.

"Okay," it was choked, but she said it; nodding. "Okay. I won't ever leave you like that again." Closing the small distance between them, Maddie sought his lips in comfort, in love, in lust. The words had all been said and now, now was the time to let their bodies reunite and love each other. God she had missed him.

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"Collins and Khenda are having a baby?!” Harry's voice went high in surprise.

"They are," Maddie nodded with a wide grin; taking a bite from a strawberry. It was the next morning and they hadn't been awake long before Harry had called up a breakfast spread that would rival most restaurants. Sitting cross-legged on his bed, in his button down shirt, Maddie sipped coffee and picked at the food as she brought him up to date on the news from Bendal. The night with Harry had left her feeling rested, well loved, and refreshed. Her skin still felt warm with blush when she thought of him with her in the tub.

"That is amazing news," Harry shook his head, his heart full of love for his friends. His eyes were bright and his face seemed to shine.

"There you go," Maddie nodded at him. "That's the exact look I didn't want to miss over the phone." He winked at her and swallowed a bite.

"They are going to be wonderful parents."

"They are!" Maddie agreed wholeheartedly.

"And they are really thinking of moving to France?"

"Sure," she shrugged. "It's safer and Khenda lived there for some time when she was younger. And I've heard it's beautiful."

"You've never been?" Harry's forehead crinkled as he watched her.

"No," she shook her head. "I've never been."
"We'll have to fix that."

"You have?" She asked and then rolled her eyes; catching herself. "Never mind. Of course you've been to France."

"I have," he chuckled.

"And? Did you love it?"

"Hmmm," he leaned across the food on the bed to kiss her. "I think I'll love it more when I'm there with you."

"Smooth," she laughed. "Always so smooth."

"How long before you have to be back to work?" He grinned.

"What is today?"

"Wednesday."

"I have to be back on Monday. So...five days, counting today."

"What does your day look like?" His hand reached out; a finger running along her leg, over her knee, up her thigh.

"Well," Maddie shifted slightly under his touch. "My boyfriend has to go to work..."

"For only a few hours," he cut in, his hand disappearing up underneath the bottom of the shirt she was wearing.

"Hmmm..." She moaned; her face flushing as he teased her. "A few hours during which I am going to take Ella for a manicure and a pedicure and a long lunch...Harry..." She gasped as his hand traveled even higher; moving against the thin slip of fabric that was between his hand and her body.

"Can I have you for dinner?" He arched an eyebrow, leaning over to kiss her knee.

"You can have me for dinner," she breathed as his lips followed along the journey his fingers had just taken, moving up her thigh.

"Can I have you right now?" His breath was hot against her skin; sending a tremble throughout her body.

Though she was certain that her squeal of laughter could be heard by anyone near the cottage, as Harry moved up under her shirt with purpose in his fingers and warmth in his lips, she simply couldn't find it in herself to care.

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"I love your bed..." Maddie stretched out languorously, calling out to him as he emerged from the bathroom; freshly showered with a towel around his waist.
"Oh?" He grinned, running another towel over his wet head. "I almost lost you to the tub last night. Am I going to lose you to the bed this morning?"

"Possibly," she sighed. "Though I prefer both with you in it."

"Fair enough," he agreed; moving to sit on the edge of the bed, his face growing serious in thought. "Listen, I have something I need to tell you. Actually, two somethings."

"Okay," Maddie straightened up, turning her focus away from his body and back to his words. They had spent most of their time on Bendal, not even getting to what had gone on in England while she was away. "Go ahead."

"Good news? Bad news? What do you want first?" He held up two hands, as if judging two different weights.

"Bad news," she answered quickly. "I'm a bad news first kind of a gal."

"I'll note that," he took a breath; turning is body to face her. "Bad news. The paps are going to be on you more than they were before you left."

"What? Why?" Her face screwed up. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing new," he shook his head. "They just...they figured you out."

"Figured me out? They've know who I was for a long time, where I lived, where I worked...what else was there to figure out?" Maddie was confused.

"They dove into your time in Bendal."

"Okay. But I don't understand...they knew I was there with DWB before and that we met in Bendal and..." With purpose, Harry leaned closer. His hand reached out, sweeping the shirt from her shoulder; pressing a kiss to the scar that was a year old. His eyes moved to meet hers and she understood.

"They know that you took a bullet from a gun that was aimed at me." His words were blunt, truthful. No beating around the bush.

"But...we don't really know that."

"Maddie..."

"We don't! He could have been aiming at me! Or not aiming at all! For all we know, that was a completely random shot!"

"Well, first. That's not exactly true. He was aiming. He may not have been aiming at me but he was aiming. It was me or Ella or that little girl. And second, he was not aiming for you. You moved to step into that path. You weren't standing there to begin with and had you stayed put, you would not have been hit. But you didn't, you stepped into it. So what do we have? You stepped up and took a bullet that was met for me, Ella or that injured little girl. The papers are saying it was for me. But honestly, anyway you go, you're...a hero."

"Oh God," Maddie moaned, pulling his pillow over her head.
"Harry's Hero," he laughed as he repeated a headline.

"Tell me they aren't calling me that," her voice was muffled. Harry remained silent for a moment and then reached out to pull the pillow away from her. Leaning up slightly, she met his eyes. "They are calling me that, aren't they."

"They are," he nodded with a smug grin. "Come on...it's not so bad."

"Yes it is!" She sat up. "Harry... Calling me a hero is... Listen, I reacted on a gut level instinct. I just moved. There was no forethought to it, no decision. It was instinct. The real heroes are the men and women who make a conscious effort every day to risk their lives, to risk their livelihood, for the betterment of others, for the safety of others. Those are the real heroes."

"Okay," Harry agreed. "So tell me, how is what you just spent the last two weeks doing not an example of what you just said."

"I..." She stammered; caught.

"You can't," he smiled. "You risked your life, your livelihood, for the betterment of others. Tell me that's not what you did. Look at the bruises on your arm, think about the hole Collins pulled you and Ella out of and tell me that's not what you did."

"But..."

"And the year and half you spent down there before? Getting ruffed up and intimidated? Being threatened and shot at...all for the sake of others. Tell me that's not what you were doing down there."

"Harry..."

"So they call you a hero. Let 'em," he shrugged. "They'll write their stories, publish their photos and then they'll move on to something else."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It is." He watched as she took it in, thought it over and nodded; letting out a long breath. "This is me...helping you navigate this life. I just wanted you to know there will be more of them around for a bit."

"Okay...Okay." A smile moved to her face as she moved on; accepting what he had told her and looking forward. He couldn't help but note how much easier the process was for her, how much easier she had accepted it.

"Ready for the good news?" He chuckled as he moved from the bed towards his clothes.

"Please."

"While you were away, my grandmother called," he spoke so casually, so innocently that the impact of the conversation almost passed Maddie by. "She's requested that the two of us join her for tea."

Almost.
"Oh God..." Maddie moaned, falling back onto his bed and reaching for the pillow; Harry laughing with great humor as he readied for the day.

"Ella..." Maddie's voice sang out as she knocked on her best friend's door. "Come on Ella...open up..." Harry had been right. She had been bombarded with photographers when she left Kensington Palace to return to her place. Even after she had unpacked, showered, and set out for the day, they were still waiting for her. And, as she stood outside of Ella's apartment, two coffees in hand, there was somebody across the street watching her every move. "Ella!" She knocked again. "Come on woman! I need to talk to you. I am having tea with his Grandmother and..." She trailed off as the door swung open and her jaw dropped; shock taking over her entire body.

"Good morning love."

"Bishop?!" She blinked, almost unable to process the reality.

"The one and only," he grinned, pulling her into the apartment and shutting the door behind her. "Come here..." He gathered a stunned Maddie into his arms. "I can't tell you how good it is to see you."

"Thank you..." Though confused by his presence, she hugged him back. "Is...I'm sorry, I just... Is Ella here?"

"Yeah, she's just..."

"Bishop!" Ella came from her room, pulling her robe around her as she moved. "I thought I told you not to answer the door!"

"I couldn't leave her standing outside in the cold with the photographers," he defended before turning a smirk to Maddie. "That's really no way to treat Harry's Hero, now is it?"

"Oh God," Maddie groaned at his reference. "What are you doing here? What is he doing here?" She looked to her rosy cheeked friend; smiling wide. "Do you have Matt back there too?"

"No," Bishop spoke up. "She does not have Matt back there too."

"I don't," Ella sighed; avoiding Maddie's probing eyes for the moment. "Okay Bishop. It's time for you to go. I told you, I'm Maddie's today. We have things to do...."

"Things to explain," Maddie offered.

"You have to go," Ella spoke only to Bishop.

"May I at least put on some pants first?" He watched Ella move; eyes full of adoration and amusement.

"You may." Leaving the two women in the entry way for a moment, Bishop hurried back to Ella's room to dress. Maddie let a full beat of awkward silence pass between them before she spoke.

"Coffee?" Maddie held out one of the cups; her lips curling up at the sides.

"Thank you," Ella took it casually. "I know what you're going to say."
"You have no idea what I'm going to say."

"I can guess."

"I doubt it."

"Okay ladies..." Bishop returned, dressed and smiling wide. "Maddie, it's lovely to see you again—especially because it means Harry's going to stop walking around on edge all the time..." He kissed her cheeks. "Maybe the four of us could do dinner sometime?"

"Sure," Maddie smiled, narrowing her eyes at Ella. "Is there a four of us now?"

"Good-bye Bishop," Ella pushed him towards the door.

"Good-bye love," his voice was sweet and soft and had the same melting effect on Ella that the sun had on ice. Maddie watched as her rough exterior friend grew soft, her cheeks blushing slightly as she tilted her lips to kiss Bishop. Right there in front of Maddie's eyes. "Call me later?"

"We'll see," Ella slipped back into her mode; shrugging nonchalantly.

"Sure, sure," Bishop grinned, knowing her enough to know—she would call. With one final nod of his head, he slipped through the door. The sound of it closing behind him echoed in the room as the two friends looked at each other.

"So..." Maddie took a breath. "Matt is..."

"Gone."

"Oh-kay. And Bishop..."

"Would fly to Bendal to pick me up if I asked him to." Ella's eyes rose to meet Maddie's who swallowed at the lump that formed instantly in her throat. With a nod, she smiled; wide and warm. That was enough. That was more than enough.
Chapter 63

Christmas had always been at the top of Maddie's list of experiences. She loved everything about it; the snow, the lights, the brightly wrapped gifts, the hustle and bustle of shopping, the family, the giving, the way people seemed more friendly, more willing to help. She even loved the stuff that people normally hated; the icy streets, the way the lines at shopping centers doubled and tripled the closer the holiday drew, the way the music started playing earlier and earlier every year. At home in Colorado, there was almost always snow. Even if it was a beautiful, sunny day at her parents' home, they could drive a few hours into the mountains and be surrounded by snowy peaks and icy windows. When Maddie celebrated Christmas in Bendal, she missed the sweaters and the hot chocolate and the snuggling in front of the fire, but the spirit had remained; the sense of community. Experiencing the Holiday Season in London for the first time, amidst the snow and ice packed streets but without her family brought about the strangest feeling of nostalgia and hominess all at once.

Her time since returning from Bendal had flown by. As requested, Maddie and Harry had joined his grandparents for tea at Buckingham Palace—where Harry gave her the 'inside tour', sharing tales of his childhood and family lore that made her smile like the Cheshire cat. He had made it a point to make her laugh, to put her at ease, to show the human side of the pomp and circumstance that oozed from everything around them. So that when they finally sat for tea, Maddie felt a little less intimidated.

The afternoon could not have gone any better. The Queen of England, in fact, was still merely Harry's Granny. She was warm and welcoming and made Maddie feel at home in such a way that she was certain had attributed to her overwhelming popularity; at home and abroad. Harry had been incredibly relaxed; joking with his grandfather, talking of upcoming trips to the country. Surprising herself, Maddie was much more relaxed than she had expected to be; sitting tall and proper and taking an active part in an engaging conversation with the Queen about her time in Bendal and her experience in service to the people there. It went so well that, when it was time for the two of them to be on their way, Maddie felt the slightest bit of regret, wanting to stay longer and soak it all up. Maddie smiled wide, dipped in a slight curtsey and thanked them both profusely for inviting her to sit with them. And, as they walked away, Harry's hand draped loosely around her waist, he pressed a kiss to the side of her head and sighed. From the look in his eyes, it had gone very, very well.

As November flew by and the year grew closer and closer to an end, Harry had decided that Maddie hadn't seen nearly enough of Europe. Knowing she had a heart for travel, he made it a point to make it a priority; effectively commandeering her free weekends for quick holidays to neighboring countries. They had been to France twice; once on their own, once with Bishop and Ella—who continued to evolve as a couple. They had eaten amazing food, drank bottles of champagne, and Maddie had spent ten solid minutes looking out over a snow covered Paris from the top of the Eiffel Tower when they were allowed a private tour.

They had ventured to Germany where they became tourists; drinking bier, visiting the Black Forest. Harry even begrudgingly agreed to accompany her on a tour of Germany's castles. The reporters caught up with them as they made their way, hand in hand, through Neuschwannstein Castle; snapping a picture that they printed with the headline "House Hunting-Royalty Edition". Maddie couldn't help but laugh when she saw it and, feeling quite silly as she did, she tore it from the magazine and put it in her memory box. Something about the photo made her smile and she wanted to keep it.
Traveling with Harry was indescribable. Not only did he travel within a higher level of luxury, he was well traveled, well schooled on other countries, other cultures and he served her well with his plethora of knowledge. Maddie was in awe as he taught her local customs, spoke in foreign languages. And Harry, Harry loved traveling with Maddie. She was relaxed and easy going, she was smart and funny, she was adaptable and flexible and she was willing to try just about anything he asked of her. During those few, quick trips to neighboring countries, Harry could already see the qualities in her that would help get her through the tours she would be taking once she stood at his side officially; he could already see her walking in that role. And he knew—she was going to love it. In those weeks leading up to the holidays, Maddie's passport was getting a workout and she just knew he had more travel plans for her after the holiday.

As December descended upon them, there was snow on the ground, cold in the air, and Maddie had caught the Christmas spirit. Of course, it didn't hurt that there were parties and events scheduled around every corner. There was the hospital Christmas party which Harry attended as Maddie's date. He was his usual charismatic self, charming her co-workers, entertaining everyone with his humor and making Maddie the envy of many in the room with the way he looked at her, the way he stayed by her side; eyes full of pride and love.

There was an official event that Harry attended at St. Joseph's honoring the soldiers and their families. Though Maddie was not allowed to accompany him to the event officially, she was on the roster as part of the staff. So she sat in the audience, next to her co-workers and she watched him work. She watched in awe as he spoke from his heart, from a place of deep respect and understanding, to the veterans and their families. He spoke of duty, honor, sacrifice. She watched the impact his presence and his words had on the patients, on the staff. It was humbling, silencing, to see the force that Harry walked with; to see the way his presence and his support moved those in the room. She felt goose bumps on her skin, a lump in her throat and a 'that's my man' smile on her face. And later, long after the official part of the night was over, after he had shaken hands and taken photos and wished the very last patient a Happy Christmas, he slipped relatively unnoticed into her office and Maddie, unable to control herself, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply.

"You just keep getting sexier and sexier and..." Her lips crashed against his again; pushing him back against her closed door.

"Mmmm..." He moaned into her mouth; his mind catching up with his body. "Here? In your office?" His eyebrows arched suggestively. "I'm not saying no, I just want to be sure I understood the meaning behind that."

"Let me lock the door," Maddie was smug as her hands moved behind him, clicking the lock into place; Harry's hands clutching greedily around her waist. "What do you say Captain...feel like shocking me with what you can do in ten minutes?"

With a wry smile, Harry pulled her flush to him; his lips descending onto hers with heat and fervor. Challenge accepted.

It began and ended quickly. It began and ended with a kiss. It began and ended with instant, all-encompassing passion and desire. It began and ended with Maddie wrapped around him, clinging to his shoulders and groaning his name into his flesh. And, as their hearts settled, as their breathing calmed, he helped steady her as she lowered her feet to the ground; a feeling of satisfaction and completeness washing over her every pore.

"You know..." Harry looked around as he tucked in his shirt. "There aren't any toys in this office. I remember your office in Bendal having much more toys."
"I work mostly with adults here. The toys are at the hospital," Maddie explained, adjusting her skirt and sliding her shoes back on her feet.

"Makes sense," he ducked slightly to look in the mirror on her wall; smoothing out his hair, checking for traces of her lipstick before turning to her. "Can you come home with me?"

"I don't know," she blushed slightly as she looked up at him; her skin still hot from his touch. "You were here on business. Can I walk out the door with you?"

"The door we just had sex against?" He chuckled, smoothing a fly away strand of hair.

"That would be the one," she wrapped her arms around his waist, smiling up at him as his hands ran over her back.

"You're probably right," he sighed deeply, wanting to—in that moment—fix that issue once and for all. "I would still like to see you tonight."

"Come to my place?" She reached for her bag and shut down her computer. "I'll sneak out now. You say good-bye to whomever you need to say good-bye to and meet me there later?"

"Absolutely..." He leaned into her; kissing her fully.

"Mmmm..." Maddie smiled against his lips. "I'll see you soon, your Royal Highness..." With a glint in her eye, she stepped away from him; opening the door and stepping out into the empty hallway—save for Brad who stood guard outside. With a slight blush to her cheeks, she nodded hello. Harry stepped from her office, pulling the door shut behind him and stood, goofy grin in place, watching as she walked down the hallway.

"Thank you Doctor," he called out to her. With a turn of her feet, a bite of her lip and a shake of her head, she continued on her way out of the building—nobody was the wiser.

This wasn't the first Christmas that Maddie had spent without her blood family, it wasn't the first holiday that she had been on her own. Nonetheless, as the holiday grew closer, as the realization that Harry would be absent for Christmas as well as the days leading up to set in, Maddie found herself growing more and more nostalgic; clinging to traditions. In that spirit, she planned a small, intimate, pre-Christmas gathering for the night before Harry was set to leave for Sandringham House—as was Royal Family tradition. With three days until Christmas Day, Maddie had planned a cozy night in for Harry, Bishop, Ella and herself. Her fireplace was lit, hot cocoa warm and rich, a pot of meticulously made chili on the stove. Her home was decorated almost to the point of laughter; lights draped all over; ornaments, stockings, carefully wrapped gifts and the sound of Louis Armstrong singing White Christmas in the background. It was enough to make any Santa Claus feel at home.

Maddie was in her bedroom when Harry arrived. Taking one final look in the mirror at her red party dress, she hurried to let him in. Pulling the door open, she inhaled sharply.

"Merry Christmas," she grinned as his eyes grew wide.

"Wow..." He looked her over. "You look...amazing."
"Thank you," she smiled, tugging his coat so as to pull him inside. "Care to join me inside?"

"Absolutely," he nodded and entered. Maddie's hands were quick, sliding between his coat and his sweater; stepping into his arms.

"You're wearing my favorite sweater."

"I know. I like the effect it has on you."

"The one where I can't keep my hands off of you?"

"That one exactly."

"Hi," she smiled up at him; nestling closer.

"Hi," he smiled down at her; kissing her lightly.

"You're a little early, you know. Do you want to take me under the mistletoe before our guests arrive?" Every word dripped with suggestion as she leaned into him.

"Ha..." He laughed through a groan. "I would. I really would. But I can't."

"You can't?" She raised her eyebrows. "I hope that's not a permanent position because..."

"No, no," he shook his head; his hands running up and down her arms. "I just...I...I have your Christmas gift."

"What? I thought we were going to exchange gifts after you got back from Sandringham."

"No." He shook his head, his eyes dancing with excitement. "I'm going to open mine when I get back. You get yours right now."

"Harry..."

"Come on. Don't look at me like that. It's an amazing gift, I promise."

"Oh I have no doubt. But we made a deal."

"Please Madeline. You won't regret this." He looked so cute, so sweet, like a little boy dying to show his mother his latest find. Surrounded by love and warmth and the Christmas spirit, Maddie simply couldn't say no.

"Fine." She gave in; beaming with excitement as she did.

"Fantastic." He clapped his hands together and moved to the intercom. Maddie watched in confusion as he pressed the button. "Come on up."

"It's downstairs?"

"Yes." He was positively giddy; bouncing on his heels. In less than a minute, there was a knock on the door. "Okay, now listen, when I open this door, you are probably going to want to tear off my clothes and thank me in a way that only you know how..." Maddie crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes as he chuckled. "Just remember that now is not the time and to save your
"Harry..."

"Fine," his smirk turned into a loving smile as he leaned to kiss her lips; soft and sweet. Reaching for the doorknob, he grinned, "Merry Christmas."

And when Harry swung open the door, revealing his gift, Maddie's heart thudded to a stop, her eyes welled instantly with tears and there was a small, brief moment, where she wasn't entirely sure she was still conscious; that she thought that maybe she had fallen asleep while getting ready and that the entire interaction between her and Harry had been a dream.

"Mom?"

"Madeline."

It was real. She was real. Maddie let out a breath as Harry stood aside and her mother stepped into her home. Suddenly Maddie was enveloped in her mother's arms; surrounded by love and excitement.

"Oh my God...mom?" She pulled back slightly; looking into her eyes, feeling her there. "I cannot believe this. I..." She shook her head in disbelief. "Are you really here? Am I imaging this or..."

"I'm here," Hannah grinned; holding Maddie's face in her hands as she kissed her daughter hello. "I'm here."

"But...how?"

"Harry." Two sets of tender eyes turned to where he was standing next to the closed door; watching with joy.

"You..." Maddie's words were choked as she met his eyes. "I can't believe this."

"Well, I'm heading up to Sandringham and I really couldn't handle the idea of you here, alone, on Christmas so..."

"How long?" She could barely form a complete thought around this moment; could barely keep the shock at bay.

"Is it still Sunday the twenty-second here?" Hannah glanced between the two of them as Harry nodded with a smile. "I'll be here one week. I fly out next Sunday, the twenty-ninth."

"Oh my God..." Maddie hugged her tight. "I don't even know what to say or...I..." She pulled back to look at her mother. "Welcome to London, mom."

"Thank you," she grinned, wiping at a stray tear that snuck out of Maddie's eye. "Now. My understanding is that we're having a party tonight."

"We are!" Maddie laughed. "Oh God. Do you want me to call and cancel or..."

"Nonsense!" Hannah rolled her eyes. "I would love to meet your friends. Do you think, though, that you could direct me to my room or a bathroom so I can settle in a bit and freshen up? I've been traveling for quite some time and..."
"Absolutely," Maddie nodded enthusiastically, taking her hand in hers and pulling her towards the spare bedroom; Harry following behind them with her luggage. Hannah thanked them both and, wanting to pull herself together before the others arrived, slipped into her bathroom.

"I offered to put her up in a room at the Goring but she wanted to stay here," Harry explained as they walked back down the hallway to her living room.

"Harry..." Maddie came to a stop; her voice cracking as she looked at him. His eyes locked with hers and he felt nervous, a little shy, at the intensity there. "You brought me my mother."

"Yeah..."

"My mother who does not have a passport..." Maddie moved closer to him.

"Well, she does now." He smiled.

"Who hates flying..." Maddie moved closer still.

"She prefers first class." He shrugged.

"To England. You brought me my mother for Christmas. Harry..." Maddie moved into his open arms, her heart completely full of love. "I don't know what to say."

"Nothing. Say nothing," his fingers stroked her cheek as he lowered his voice. "Though you do want to tear off my clothes and..."

"I really do," Maddie's grin matched his as they began to laugh at how the very thing that brought out that desire was the one thing that would keep it from happening. "You're good Wales. Really good."

"Merry Christmas Madeline." His eyes held hers for a moment before he dipped his head; capturing her lips with his.
Chapter 64

It wasn't long before Hannah returned to the living room, refreshed and changed. Before Hannah could pour thanks at Harry for convincing her to make the trip, the bell rang and Ella and Bishop were headed up. Maddie greeted them with amplified enthusiasm, pulling them into her place with warm hugs and introducing her mother with pride. While Ella beamed brightly at the chance to finally meet Maddie's mother, Bishop jumped ahead of both of them; pulling her into a crushing hug and kissing both of her cheeks. Maddie laughed as her mother hugged him back; unsure if she was really able to handle someone like Bishop. Wanting her mother to taste and approve of the chili, Maddie pulled her into the kitchen, leaving Harry to open a bottle of wine for their friends in the living room.

"You flew her mother in for Christmas?" Ella spoke in a hushed voice.

"I did," Harry nodded; popping the cork out and reaching for a glass.

"Nicely done. You are going to get lucky on this for a good solid month," Ella chuckled while Bishop shook his head with a grin.

"Maybe longer." He added.

"Come on," he poured the wine into the glasses. "I'm leaving tomorrow. You're going to be with Bishop for Christmas at his parents. It makes no sense for her to be here alone if she doesn't have to be."

"Awww...." Ella's head tipped to the side, her lips pulling into a smirk. "Two months. Easy." While Bishop laughed along with her, Harry shook his head and finished off the glasses.

"The chili's ready," Maddie grinned as she carried the pot into the dining room, her mother behind her. And then, as her friends—and her family—gathered around her lovingly decorated table, as she served them her meticulously prepared meal and drank bottles of wine, her mother stepped with ease into the circle of friends. She was sweet and motherly with Ella, she laughed at Bishops insane attempts to entertain her and amused them all with tales from Maddie's childhood.

As they finished dinner and moved the laughter and the wine into the living room, Maddie sat between Harry and her mother and the party continued late into the night. Harry revealed the rest of his present; an itinerary for Maddie and her mother that included spa time, lunches at some of the finest restaurants, and tours of the highpoints around London—including a Private tour of Buckingham Palace and a trip to Highgrove at the end of the week to meet up with Harry, Charles and Camilla before Hannah had to leave. Maddie thought it was all too much, knew it was all too much, but her mother was so happy to be there, Harry was so happy that he was able to make it happen and keep it a surprise that Maddie decided to let her protests slide and simply be happy—just like the rest of them. Finally Hannah rose to her feet with a big yawn.

"Okay kids. I have been traveling for about a day and I am exhausted. I've had a great time but I'm done for the night." Her surrender was met with a series of groans; followed by a series of hugs. Bishop held onto her for the longest, drunkenly delirious as he told her good-night and slipped her his phone number in case she needed to get away. Maddie swatted at Bishop as Harry moved to Hannah. As he embraced her, she pressed a kiss to his cheek, held tight to him for an extra beat and told him thank you with such weight, it left him speechless. This trip was more than just a flight to London; he had helped her do something she had never done before; she had a passport,
she was traveling internationally. And the way it made her daughter smile was something Hannah would carry with her forever. Harry watched as the two women walked down the hallway, Maddie making sure her mother had what she needed and telling her goodnight.

When Maddie returned from her mother's room, Ella and Bishop were in their coats, waiting to tell her good-bye and then, just like that, Maddie was alone with Harry. She knew her time with him was limited, he had a plane to be on bright and early in the morning. She knew he would need to leave soon and, especially following his great surprise, she was feeling reluctant to let him go. Harry watched from where he sat on the couch as Maddie moved around, flipping off the lights in the room; leaving only the glow from the tree.

"You really outdid yourself this time," she smiled down at him, her eyes sleepy.

"I want you to have a happy Christmas," he reached out to grab her hand in his; tugging lightly for her to join him. Maddie nodded with a smile; bunching her skirt up as she moved to sit in his lap, fabric pooling around them. Harry moved slightly so that her knees could fall on either side of him, his hands moving up into her hair. Her eyes searched his as she sighed into him; her hands resting at his chest.

"But the spa and the tours and..." His lips pressed against hers; wanting to silence her, wanting to use these last moments before he left for something else. "And Buckingham Palace? We could have done the touristy thing like Ella and I did when I first moved here." Harry chuckled; pressing his forehead to hers, momentarily ceasing his drive to kiss her.

"You're not exactly a tourist anymore, Love." His hands moved around her waist; holding her to him. "Think of what that would do to the tour if you were there and somebody recognized you. You've been in those halls without a guide."

"I had a guide," she tugged at his sweater; her hands at his chest.

"I don't want to talk about the palace, Maddie..." His voice was whisper soft, one hand leaving her waist to stroke her cheek.

"Me neither..." She grinned, tilting her lips to kiss him. The room grew silent around them; still. Nothing but the rustle of the fabric of her dress moving against that of his sweater as they moved closer to each other. Nothing but the soft hush of their breath, growing slightly heavier as they leaned into each other. "You know that I understand that you have to leave, right? I understand that this is not just a duty but a familial obligation and that you not only need to be there, you want to be there...you know I get that right?"

"Yes," he nodded; his lips clinging to hers, finding it difficult to focus on her words given her current position.

"And you know that I am not the type of woman who would stomp her feet and throw a fit and...you know I don't really mean it but..."

"Maddie..." He breathed against her lips. Pulling back slightly, Maddie's hands moved to his face; holding him steady so she could meet his eyes.

"I am going to miss you on Christmas, Harry. I don't like spending holidays without you. I want to wake up with you on Christmas morning and make you pancakes and open gifts and..." She trailed off, her eyes growing unexpectedly teary. "I'm sorry. I just wanted you to know that I'll miss you. I'll miss you and I love you and...and if my mom weren't here..."
"We would have on less clothing?" His eyes sparkled in the glow from the tree.

"Much less," Maddie chuckled. "Thank you for bringing her here."

"You're welcome," he wrapped his arms around her tighter; squeezing her into him.

"So...since you already broke the Christmas present rule," a grin pulled at Maddie's lips. "Can I give you yours?"

"Right now, you can do anything you want," he was under her control.

"I'll be right back..." Maddie moved quickly, despite his groan as she left him. Dipping down, she reached under the tree, pulling out a small slim box before she returned to her spot on his lap. Looking from the box to him, she seemed suddenly shy; unsure. "You know, this is nowhere near what you gave me. But truly, what can compare with my mother in London for Christmas?"

"Very little I would imagine. Your mother's pretty fabulous," he smiled sweetly, his hand reaching out to hold the box, still in her hands. "May I?"

"Yes," she nodded; releasing her hold on the gift. Harry moved slightly, bringing his hands from her to the box; pulling at the paper to reveal a Cartier box. His eyes flashed up to her face, her teeth biting at her lip as she watched him. After a beat, he pulled the lid from the box, his fingers reaching in to pull out a men's bracelet; exactly like something he would have picked out for himself.

"Wow..." He breathed. "This is..."

"Hold on," she smiled; adjusting slightly in his lap, her hand stilling his on the bracelet. "In Bendal, in Africa, there's something called Ubuntu. It's a...philosophy—a way of life really. It's centered around the idea that the group, the partnership is greater than the individual. That the whole is greater than the parts...that we," her hand moved between the two of them. "Are greater together than we could ever be apart."

"Ubuntu," Harry breathed, his heart pounding in his chest as he read the word on the bracelet.

"Ubuntu," Maddie nodded with a smile. "The literal translation is 'I am, because we are.'" turning the bracelet over so that he could read the words she had engraved there.

"I am because we are." He felt tears in his throat, his heart swelling in his chest. "Maddie..."

"I know that my...independent nature...can sometimes be frustrating...""}

"Never," he shook his head; certain.

"And I often have to remind myself that even though I can do things on my own, I don't have to." She tucked her hair behind her ear as she smiled; soft and young and sweet. "I want you to know that, even when I don't always show it or act it or..." She inhaled deeply; meeting his eyes. "You've changed my life Harry. You've made me whole in a way I didn't even know I wasn't. You make me so much better when you're with me than I am when you're not. I...I am because we are. This..." She moved her hand from her chest to his, letting it rest there. "This is so much greater than I ever was without you. And I know I don't show that nearly enough; not nearly enough." Harry held her eyes, unable to pull from his overwhelmed emotions one single response
to her words that would adequately convey the way he was feeling. Blinking back the tears that formed in his eyes, he nodded and moved; leaning up, his hands tangling in her hair—his lips finding hers. She let out an involuntary moan, a gasp, at the intensity of his kiss; her eyes closing as she leaned into him, into the moment.

"Mmm..." Harry smiled against her lips, trying to reign in his desires, trying to control where this would naturally lead if they were alone. Pulling away from her slightly, his eyes smiled at hers. "Do you think I could make love to you right here without your mother knowing?"

"I don't know," she shook her head; cheeks flushed as she chuckled at the idea. "Care to find out?" She longed to connect with him on that primal level, skin to skin, beating heart to beating heart. Harry's hand was strong at the back of her neck as he pulled her to him; his lips kissing her forehead as he took deep breaths.

"Thank you," he kissed her cheek, her jaw, her lips. "I love this; very much. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she smiled; happy that it had gone over well.

"Help me?" He held it out to her, presenting his arm. With a nod, she took it from him, her fingers nimble as she fastened it around his wrist. "Perfect." He grinned, turning his hand to show her. A moment of silence settled over them, a moment of pause; a moment of reflection and gathering. With sad eyes, he smiled. "Bad news, good news..." He lifted his eyebrows.

"You have to go, don't you..." Maddie's bottom lip stuck out just slightly as she guessed the bad news.

"I do," he kissed her again; his thumb rubbing at her cheek.

"What could possibly be the good news?" She smiled, her eyes searching his face.

"That if you asked me now to stay..." He took a deep breath. "I would."

"Harry," she shook her head; a small chill passing over her at his words. "I'm not going to do that."

"I know," he sighed; his hands at her hips. "I'll see you on Friday at Highgrove?"

"With bells on," she grinned. With a final, quick kiss to his lips, Maddie moved from his lap. Harry groaned, but allowed her to take his hand and pull him to his feet. "Come on Wales, before I change my mind and lock you in."

"Ha!" He laughed at how unnecessary that would be; at how easily she would be able to get him to stay put. He pulled on his coat, wrapping his scarf around his neck loosely, before he turned to face her. "Enjoy your time with your mother."

"Well, you made sure of that, didn't you?" She was smiling as she hugged him.

"Warn her about the press," Harry's mind shifted to business for just a moment. "Let her know about the photographers that follow you around sometimes. Don't let her be surprised by that. It's a little crazy when it first happens, as I am sure you remember."

"I do," she nodded. "That's great advice. Thank you."
"Friday?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Friday," she nodded; squeezing him tighter.

"I'm better with you too, you know that, right?" He smiled down at her. "This..." His hand moved between them as hers had earlier. "Is greater than I ever was without you." Her eyes grew soft, watery, as she nodded.

"Merry Christmas Harry," Maddie leaned up on her toes to kiss him.

"Merry Christmas."

On the days when Maddie had to work, her mother enjoyed stepping out on her own; shopping, coffee, a luxurious trip to the spa. She was pampered and primped and treated like royalty; a thought that left Hannah in giggles for almost an hour. She even stopped by the hospital to see Maddie for lunch; meeting her coworkers and her boss—seeing the work that Maddie did, seeing the respect that was held for her.

When Maddie returned home from the hospital on Christmas Eve, they assumed their normal, Forrester Family routine; eating Chinese food and watching A Christmas Story in their pajamas. There was a moment, right before Ralphie's dad gave him the Official Red Ryder Carbine-Action Two-Hundred-Shot Range Model Air Rifle he had been aching for the entire film, when Maddie turned to look at her mother eating from a carton of take out, and her mind jumped into the future; the future with Harry where on Christmas Eve she would be at Sandringham, dressed in wool and silk, drinking holiday drinks with their royal highnesses. It was fate. It was set in stone. If she was a royal, when she was a royal, the nights of Chinese and Ralphie were over. It wouldn't be the first time, she had missed this during her time in Bendal, but there was something about the finality of it all that made her throat tighten. Pulling herself together, she leaned closer to her mother, resting her head on her shoulder and turning her attention the TV; appreciating Harry's gift of this moment more than she would really ever be able to convey.

"I have something for you," Hannah smiled at her daughter as the movie came to an end.

"Really?" Maddie sat up excitedly. "Like what?"

"I will be right back," Hannah kissed her daughter's cheek and hurried to her room. When she returned, she had two gift bags that she had brought with her. "This one is an integral part of our little tradition we have going on here..." She sat the green bag on the table in front of Maddie. "And this one...is a bit of a gift from home." She sat the red bag next to it.

"Oh wow..." Maddie looked between the two, trying to decide which to open first. Going with sentiment, she reached for the green bag. As she pulled it open, her breath sucked into her lungs, her eyes sweeping up to look at her mother. "Our stockings..." Maddie smiled, tears forming in her eyes as she pulled three quilted, patchwork stockings from the bright green bag; one for herself, one for her mother, and one for her father. "You brought dad's?"

"I've been hanging it up every year since..." Hannah's eyes matched Maddie's; teary and soft. "I didn't think it was right to leave his at home."

"I'm glad," Maddie wiped at her eyes and rose to her feet. Handing her father's to her mom, they moved to the fireplace; hanging them in a row, just as they had every year. "See...now everything
"is perfect." Maddie smiled through her sadness, through her tears.

"Yes it is," Hannah sighed; moving to wrap her arms around her daughter from behind; pressing a kiss to the side of her head. "He would be so proud of all you've done."

"You're going to make me cry..." Maddie cried; her hands resting over her mother's.

"Yes, well...I suppose it wouldn't be Christmas without a few tears." The two women stood there, observing their own moment of silence for the man they had loved, the man they had lost. And, when Hannah sniffed and pulled away, she reached for the red bag and turned a smile to her daughter. "Why don't you open this one. It's a little less sentimental."

"Okay," Maddie grinned; brushing at the tears on her cheeks. "Let me at it." Both women returned to the couch where Maddie opened up the gift bag and immediately began laughing.

From the bag she pulled a collection of small gifts from her family at home; handmade drawings and paintings from the girls, a recipe book with marked pages and words in the margins from her grand-mother, a framed photo of her entire family—each one wearing a "Team Maddie" shirt. And finally, a black and white photo of her and Harry. Somebody, she assumed Jenna, had taken a picture of the two of them on the night of her birthday. They were at The Lavender Lady, dressed to the nines and they were dancing together. Her arms were flung around his neck and he was smiling down at her as though she were the most amazing thing on the planet. The photo had been printed in black and white and was set in a stunning frame. Maddie thanked her mother, kissed her cheek and began to display her gifts around her place; all while Hannah poured some hot cocoa into mugs and settled on the couch—ready to start the movie over again.

On Christmas Day, the traditions continued; coffee and homemade banana pancakes. They talked about home, they talked about the farm, they talked about Maddie's father with warmth and remembrance. And, as they settled in to enjoy the fruits of their labor, Hannah called out, pointing towards the TV.

"Maddie!" She held her hand over her mouth, full of pancakes. "It's Harry!"

"Ah yes," Maddie smiled wide. "The family is on their way to church for Christmas service. They do this every year."

"Wow..." Hannah had swallowed her food and was watching in awe. It was so strange; she had always known that her daughter's Harry was actually Prince Harry, but seeing the young man she had hugged just a few nights earlier, walking alongside the Queen was a bit surreal. "That's going to be you someday. Isn't it?"

"Sorry?"

"Christmas Day with the Queen," Hannah pointed to the television. "You'll be walking with them someday."

"If Harry and I..." Maddie began, meeting her mother's eyes and nodding. "Yes. Someday."

"Okay," Hannah smiled at her daughter; acceptance in her eyes. This was her daughter's life, her daughter's future. "He looks very handsome..."

"He does," Maddie agreed; her hand reaching out to squeeze her mother's. "I'm happy you're here mom. Thank you for being here."
"Hmmm," she patted Maddie's hand. "This was Harry's idea."

"I know," she shrugged. "But you had to work for it too. You had to get the passport, pack, travel. So...thank you."

"You're welcome." Hannah took a breath and let it out slowly. "Want to watch A Christmas Story again?"

"Absolutely," Maddie giggled; reaching for the remote and settling in for the morning.

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Hannah's time in London flew by much too fast, though Maddie fought to savor every single moment of it. Following a relaxed, quiet Christmas Day, they went to bed early, slept well and, when they woke the next morning, they set out to see as much as they could before her time was up. They shopped, they toured, they stopped by the hospital and met her boss, they rode the London Eye twice—one in the day time and once at night. They saw Big Ben, they walked across the bridge and, when they went on their special tour of BP, Maddie pointed towards the room in which she had enjoyed tea with Harry and his grandparents. And Thursday night, before they were to leave for Highgrove, they met up with Ella and Bishop for dinner and drinks.

There's a moment in a mother's life when she looks at her child and sees not the little girl who refused to let her brush her hair, not the little child with a worn blankie and the need to be cuddled—but an adult. A grown woman who walks in the world with pride and purpose and grace. As Hannah watched Maddie throughout the week, she swelled with pride. She was a beautiful, talented, wonderful woman that would make any parent proud. She had an amazing career that garnered her respect and admiration from her co-workers. She had wonderful friends who made her laugh and supported her in this crazy new world she was walking in. Hannah was so proud, so happy for Maddie; her face hurt from smiling, her heart warmed in her chest.

Even on Friday, when they slipped into the car Harry had sent for them to meet him and his family in the country, Hannah could see Maddie's growth, Maddie's strength. She was quick to ease Hannah's nervousness at the impending meeting. She chuckled at the irony of the situation; remembering her conversations with Harry, her lunch with Sophie, her rocky navigation of royal life. And then she settled in and explained it all to her mother; answering her questions about how to address Charles and Camilla, rather or not to curtsy. Though Hannah remained slightly nervous, she watched in awe as her daughter brought her into this new world, this new circle she was now a part of.

Harry was waiting for them as the car pulled up the long drive to the front of the stately home. Wrapped in a warm coat, his smile was wide, his excitement evident as they came into view. Hurrying down the steps to meet the car, he beat the driver to the door as the car came to a stop. Extending his hand to Hannah, his smile reached his eyes.

"Welcome to Highgrove," his voice was low, rich; warm. Hannah stepped from the car into the cold, crisp winter air. Leaning in to hug her, Harry pressed a kiss to each of her cheeks.

"Thank you," she sighed, looking around; taking it all in. "This is...amazing..."

"Isn't it?" Maddie called out as she stepped from her side of the car, smiling across the top of the car to the two of them. When her eyes met Harry's, she felt her skin flush. "Hi there."
"Hi there," Harry grinned; watching as she moved around the car towards him.

"I missed you this week," she confessed as he leaned to kiss her cheek.

"I missed you too," he spoke softly, moving from her cheek to her lips; not caring that her mother was standing right there, that his father was right inside waiting for him to bring in their guests. He kissed her, soft and warm and, when he pulled away, her cheeks were pink. "You ready to do this?" Maddie bit her lip and nodded. Stepping away from her, Harry turned to Hannah and led the two Forrester women into his father's home.

Meeting Charles and Camilla was something Hannah would never forget. Her expectations, her assumptions had blown it up so much that finally meeting them was such a wonderful, real moment. Camilla was warm and inviting and Charles brought her hand to his lips and invited her inside his home in such a way that Hannah knew instantly where it was that Harry got his swagger.

Not for the first time on her trip, and not for the last, Hannah wished her husband could have been there at her side. She wished he could have seen their daughter walking next to Prince Charles with aplomb and ease. She wished he could have seen the way Harry's eyes watched her move; with reverence and adoration. She wished he could have been there to see Maddie so happy, so at peace. Her eyes welled with tears that she instantly blinked away as Harry offered her his arm,

"May I escort you to tea?" She looked up at him and pulled a smile.

"Of course. Thank you," she moved her hand through his arm, meeting his eyes with a twinkle. And the weekend commenced.

After tea, Hannah was treated to a tour of the grounds. Though it was winter and the plants were not at their best, she found that she rather enjoyed the walk; finding an appreciation for the way the snow crunched under their feet, the way the trees and shrubs held their form even under the blanket of winter. Maddie had been right, Highgrove reminded her of home; the land, the plants, the vastness; the feeling she had while walking. Charles was a gracious host, a knowledgeable tour guide. And, when they had a moment alone, he took the time to tell her how impressed he was with Maddie, with all that she had brought into his son's life, all that she had overcome and stood tall through. It was clear to Hannah, the affection this man held for her daughter. And Hannah was only too happy to return the sentiments, to return lauding words about Harry.

Harry's family made Hannah feel welcome, at home. She had settled into her immaculate room, she had sat with them for dinner; an amazing meal with wonderful wine. And she laughed at stories from Harry's childhood, sharing her own about Maddie. It was a wonderful night, one she would never forget. And that was even before Harry pulled her aside and asked her to trust him, asked her to follow him. They had finished dinner and his father, working as an accomplice, had asked Maddie to assist him in the library with some made up task; leaving Hannah and Harry alone for a moment.

With her coat in his hands, Harry looked to her with pleading eyes and asked her to follow him. Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was her newly discovered spirit of adventure, or maybe it was a sick sort of curiosity; either way, Hannah nodded, allowed the young man to help her with her coat and followed him out the front door and into an awaiting car. During the short drive, Hannah's mind was working away; wondering where they were headed, why they were alone, and what was running through Harry's mind as his grin deepened with every turn. To Hannah's
surprise, they pulled to a stop in front of a small, dark pub of a place. Harry was quick to step from the car, rounding to take her hand.

"The Royal Oak?" Hannah read the sign hanging outside.

"This is where Maddie and I came on one of our first dates," Harry smiled at the memory. "Now that I think about it, I think that was the first time they took her picture..."

"On the motorcycle?" Hannah asked.

"Yes," he chuckled. "You saw it?"

"I did," she nodded; walking through the door he held open. "I remember thinking...at least he has a helmet on her head."

"Always," Harry smiled and gestured towards a more secluded booth in the back; his favorite spot in the place. Allowing her to walk in front on him, Harry followed her to the spot, sliding into the booth opposite her. It wasn’t very busy inside and those that were there were too caught up in what they were doing to take notice of the Prince. The waitress was quick to join them, smiling cheerfully as she took their drink order. Harry made small talk with Maddie's mother, pointing out a bit of history while they waited for their drinks. Once the waitress had dropped them off and left them alone, Harry cleared his throat and met her eyes; steady and confident.

"Thank you for coming with me."

"You're welcome," Hannah smiled warmly at the young man across the table from her, the young man who had swept her daughter, understandably, off of her feet. "Though, I have a hunch that we could have rounded up a glass of wine and some whiskey at your father's home..."

"I would imagine," Harry agreed.

"Yet we came here," she looked around, her lips tugging into a bit of a smirk. "Alone."

"We did."

"Care to let me in on anything?"

"I wanted to give you something," his eyes grew serious though his smile remained. "A Christmas gift."

"Sorry?" She raised her eyebrows. "A gift? But...you flew me to London to see my daughter, you arranged this amazing week, you..."

"That was my gift to Maddie," he explained, pulling a long, thin, wrapped box from his coat pocket and setting it on the table. "This..." He slid it across to her. "This is for you."

"I don't know what to say," she looked down at it and back up to him. "But...you couldn't have given me this there? With all of them?" Harry shook his head as he took a drink. "Why?"

"Maybe you should open it and find out," he nodded to the box. Hannah took a breath and looked down at it; still confused. With a hesitant smile, she lifted the box into her hands, her fingers pulling at the bow. Harry watched her intently as she tore the paper aside and lifted the lid.
And then it happened.

"Oh!" Hannah's hand flew to her mouth, the box slipping from her fingers; her eyes instantly filling with tears as she looked up to him. Swallowing the lump that developed in his throat, Harry held her eyes as he reached out, pulling the box closer to him.

"It's Friday," he explained; lifting two cigars, the exact brand her husband had smoked, from the tissue paper inside the box. "You went through a lot to be here for Christmas with Maddie and I just..." He pulled a cigar cutter out of his pocket and clipped off the ends. "I just didn't want you to miss out on your tradition, on remembering the smell of your husband..." He pulled out a lighter and held one of the cigars out to her. "I didn't want you to miss out on that just because you were here and not home." Hannah paused for a moment, trying to reign in her emotions, trying to get a handle on the hit to her soul he had just delivered in the loveliest of ways. And then, wiping at her eyes, she took the cigar from him, held it to her mouth, and let him light it. She took a long, slow drag, reveling in the way it made her feel, the way her senses perked up and she smiled at him as he lit his.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

And she understood. Everything fell into place. She had always liked Harry, since the first moment he had called her from Bendal with the terrible news about Maddie's shooting. She had appreciated his thoughtfulness, his genuine concern; his warmth. When he had come to visit in Colorado for Maddie's birthday, she had grown quite fond of him; buying into his sense of humor, his wit, the way he was around her daughter. But in this moment, she really got it. The reason her daughter was willing to leave everything she had worked for in Bendal, the reason her daughter would never be returning to the US to live, the reason Hannah knew that someday, Maddie would happily sacrifice her independence to live in the fishbowl that was the Royal Family; it was this. This way that this young man held onto the words you spoke, the experiences you shared, and used them in the most magnificent of ways—making you feel so important, so taken care of. She wondered if he did this with everyone or if it was something only a select few were able to share. But she decided it didn't matter. If he was this way with her daughter—that was all that was important.

They sat there for a moment, smoking their cigars, sipping their drinks; both watching the other in a comfortable sort of silence—the kind most often felt with family. Hannah, thinking of her initial assumption about this outing, chuckled into her glass.

"Something funny?" Harry leaned forward, his forearms on the table.

"A little," she nodded. He waited for more. "You know...I thought you might be asking me for permission to marry my daughter." Without blinking, without even the smallest hint of a flinch, Harry smiled wide and nodded.

"Like?"

"Hmmm..." She eyed him, debating rather she should admit it or not. "Can I be blunt with you?"

"Of course," he waved his hand, taking another drink.

"I thought you might be asking me for permission to marry my daughter." Without blinking,
"That wasn't my intention. At least not tonight."

"Okay."

"But, since you brought it up...would I have it? If I were I to ask?"

Hannah's heart jumped in her throat. Her upper lip twitched, her natural inclination to be sarcastic coming to the surface. While the words you'll have to actually ask to find out crossed her mind, she bit her tongue. She couldn't do it. She couldn't tease him, she couldn't put him through the wringer. Maybe her husband, were he still alive, would have been able to do it—to give this young man a hard time. But she couldn't. There he was, sitting across from her in this tiny bar in the English countryside, having just brought her the two most precious things in her life, time with her daughter and memories of her husband. How could she even begin to be funny or smart with him?

Hannah took a long sip from her glass, resting it on the table with thought. She puffed at her cigar and, taking a breath, balanced it on the edge of the ashtray sitting between them. Her hands reached across the table, her fingers pulling his free hand into both of hers. With great resolve, with a sureness she could feel in her bones, she met his eyes and spoke from her heart. "All a mother ever wants for her child is for them to be happy; happier than they themselves might have been...even if they were incredibly happy. Fathers, they want different things. Of course they want their children to be happy, but they want other things too. They want them to be smart and successful and productive and they want them to be able to stand on their own, take care of themselves..." She took a deep breath. "But mothers...I think mothers just want the happiness part. They want that light that shines from their eyes, the laugh that lights up your soul..." Hannah laughed lightly. "Maddie has always been all of those things; smart, successful, able to stand on her own, take care of herself. And she's been happy. She has. She's always had this great smile..." Hannah caught herself before she wandered too far off topic. "But you...since you came along...her eyes light up, her laughter hits my soul."

"I don't know what to say..." Harry swallowed at the lump in his throat.

"I'm not finished," Hannah eyed him playfully. He laughed at her smirk; watching it fade into something more serious. "I may be overstepping my place here but...I know you lost your mother when you were young..." Harry's jaw flexed, his arm tensed. Hannah lowered her voice, holding his eyes. "But, as a mother I know, I know...she wanted those things for you too. She wanted the light to shine from your eyes, she wanted your laughter to fill the room. I know Maddie, I know her enough to know that you do those things for her. And..." She smiled softly, rubbing her hand over his. "And...if she does those things for you, if she would make your mother feel as happy for you as I feel for her...then my answer would be a resounding yes. Absolutely. You would have my permission. My blessing." Harry was stunned silent; his heart thudding in his chest. Thoughts of his mother flooded his mind and he looked down at the table, at his hand wrapped up in Hannah's hands. He had to take a deep breath, had to remind himself that he was at a pub, in public. It was all so heavy; his mother, Hannah, the thought of marrying Maddie. It was a lot to sit with. It didn't help that he hadn't seen her in days, that he had spent the entire Christmas holiday moping around his family—inviting massive amounts of poking and laughter. It didn't help that he had yet to properly thank her for the words she spoke, for the way she made him feel. His mother would absolutely see what he already knew, what his family already saw; Maddie made his eyes shine, she made him laugh from his soul.

"Wow..." He breathed.

"I'm sorry," Hannah smiled sheepishly. "My husband would have been much better at this
"I don't know," Harry shook his head with a crack of laughter. "That was pretty good." Hannah chuckled; releasing his hand with a squeeze as the waitress approached to check in on them.

"Are you two doing okay over here?"

"I think he could use another whiskey," Hannah pointed at Harry who took a deep breath and nodded, sitting back in his seat.

"Yes, please." Harry watched as the waitress disappeared from them and looked up to Hannah, his eyes conveying nothing but love and light and happiness. "She does." Hannah raised an eyebrow. "Maddie. She brings all of those things to my life. And my mother, were she still with us, would be the first to confirm that." Hannah smiled; half of her mouth inching slightly higher than the other as she reached for her cigar.

"Well then..." She inhaled and exhaled slowly. "I guess you have your answer."
Chapter 65

Maddie was about three hours into a twenty-two hour flight when it hit her; when it really hit her. Her life had been so fundamentally altered by Harry that it didn't even phase her when he showed up at her place and told her to pack her things—that they were flying to Australia at the drop of a hat to witness the nuptials of two of their friends. Glancing at him across the cabin of the plane, she shook her head with a soft, low chuckle. Just that morning, less than ten hours ago, she never would have guessed what her afternoon would have in store for her.

TEN HOURS EARLIER

Telling her mother good-bye took a toll on Maddie. Watching her mother walk through security and out of her sight felt like Maddie imagined it felt for her mother the first time she left for Bendal; scary, uncertain. Maddie stood in her spot for a full beat before she turned to walk back through the airport. Harry had made a conscious decision not to accompany her to the airport, knowing his presence would only take away from the good-byes that needed to be said. So he said his good-byes and his love to Hannah as they parted ways at Highgrove.

Maddie had barely slipped into the car, given the driver directions, when her phone buzzed in her pocket. Pulling it out and glancing at the ID, she felt her cheeks blush.

"I'm on my way to you right now," her low sultry voice garnered a groan of protest from the Prince on the other end of the line. "No? Really? I thought for sure you would want to..."

"Please stop," he cut in with a breath. "I have a bad news, good news situation for you."

"Oh?" She was curious. "Shoot."

"Not over the phone. Where are you?"

"Just left the airport."

"Can you meet me at your place?"

"Sure. See you in ten." Disconnecting the phone, she gave the driver new directions and sat back in her seat wondering what could possibly be up now.

Maddie arrived at home and, passing Jim on the way in, realized Harry had beat her there. Stepping into her place, she found him sitting pensively on the edge of the sofa, chatting with Bishop and Ella who were smiling wide.

"You brought friends," Maddie smiled at the two of them, leaning to kiss him hello.

"I had to," his hand at the back of her neck held her to him for another. "You and Ella have some shopping to do and there's not much time."

"Much time?" Maddie chuckled. "What are you talking about? Shopping? I thought you had news for me or...is this just...I don't know, some sort of intervention?"

"Yes!" Harry's hands clapped together as he rose to his feet. "Yes. I have news. Bad news," he held up a finger. "Our New Year's plans have been cancelled."
"What? No!" She frowned. She had been looking forward to a fun night out with him, after so much time apart. She wanted to dress up and drink champagne and make love to him at ungodly hours.

"You haven't heard the good news yet." His smile was sly, his eyes full of excitement.

"Well what are you waiting for Wales?" Harry took a breath, glanced at Bishop and Ella, and blurted it out.

"Kiki and Sean are engaged."

"What?!" Maddie's face brightened. "Oh my God. That's great news!"

"And we're going to Australia."

"Wait. Hold on." Maddie's hand reached out to him; resting on his arm. "Why are we going to Australia?"

"Kiki and Sean are getting married."

"In Australia?" Maddie was having trouble tracking him as the others in the room laughed; having had similar reactions.

"Yes," Harry laughed. "Sean and Kiki are getting married in Australia."

"I...When? Today?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "New Year's Day."

"What?" Maddie laughed.

"She told him she wanted to marry him next year," Bishop spoke up. "And he told her he would marry her at twelve-oh-one. So...they're getting married on New Year's Eve."

"New Year's Day," Harry clarified as Bishop's eyes shifted into a glare.

"Oh God, here we go again," Ella rolled her eyes; sighing back into the couch. "They are getting married at twelve-oh-one on New Year's Day..."

"See," Harry waved a hand at Ella.

"Hey!" Bishop turned to his girlfriend.

"In Australia..." Ella finished, ignoring them both.

"Because it's the first place to celebrate the New Year..." Maddie was grinning widely as she thought of it.


"That's incredibly romantic."
"It is," Ella agreed.

"So, catch me up," Maddie snapped into planning mode, looking to her boyfriend for logistics. "We're going to Australia..."

"Ah yes," Harry smiled, loving that she jumped on board so quickly, without any protests. "We're leaving at six this evening."

"But it's noon now," Maddie looked to the clock.

"Yes. But if we leave at six, we get there tomorrow afternoon at four...which is actually three in the morning on the thirty-first, local time. It gives us enough time to sleep and get ready for the wedding..."

"Which is at twelve-oh-one," Maddie raised her eyebrows. "But how did they throw this together so fast?"

"Kiki has family in Sydney with an enormous estate. They will be marrying there," Bishop filled her in.

"It's a party all the way, love. Start to finish. Sean is the first one of us to wed so we're bringing the big guns," Harry kissed her cheeks.

"The big guns?" Maddie snickered. "Does that mean Jim and Nathan are coming along?"

"I'm not sure we have time for your sass," he narrowed his gaze at her, biting his lip playfully. "You need to pack. You need to pack for every possible scenario. It's a long flight, so dress comfortably but the wedding is black tie so..."

"That's where I come in," Ella cut in as she stood. "I need a new dress. You need a new dress. We're going shopping." Maddie was even more excited knowing that Ella would be accompanying Bishop on this trip.

"We're going to head out. I have to pick some stuff up from my place; my tux, the guns..." He kissed Maddie's neck as she squealed. "You two go shop, get what you need. We'll meet here at four thirty to head to the airport." Everybody began moving around, pulling on coats and finding purses. "You can take my card if you like." Harry reached for his wallet.

"Your card?" Maddie laughed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"What?" He cracked a smile.

"Well to begin with, I'm sure there wouldn't be any issues with me trying to use Prince Harry's credit card. And second..."

"It doesn't actually say Prince Harry," he cut in.

"That wasn't really my point," Maddie rolled her eyes. "And second...Wait. What does it say?"

"Same thing as my driver's license," he shrugged. "Harry Wales."

"And second," Maddie continued. "I have my own money. You can put that away. I shop on my own."
"Suit yourself," he shrugged, stuffing his wallet back into his pocket.

"I'll take it," Ella winked at him as she leaned to kiss Bishop.

"Four thirty," Harry's voice was stern as he shook his head at Ella. "Don't be late. We're on a schedule here."

"Yeah, yeah," Maddie grinned, stepping back through the door she had just come in. The whirlwind of an afternoon was only beginning.

"You're late!" Harry called out to them before they had even stepped all the way into her place. He, Bishop, Leo and Sean were there with him. As Kiki had flown out with her family and Anna and Penelope that morning, Sean was coming along with the rest of them.

"I'm..." Maddie looked to her watch and took a breath. "I'm only a tiny bit late. Ten minutes. But...we came back and packed before we went back out so...we just have to grab our stuff and..."

"Late, late, late, late. Late." Harry crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. Though he looked mad, looked stern, Maddie could see the gleam in his eye, his tell. He was messing with her.

"I am very sorry," she held out her hands. "We gave our shopping bags to the driver downstairs. Now, if you'll just let me by, I can grab my bags and we can go..."

"I think you owe the group an explanation," Harry held his ground as Ella laughed.

"The group?" Maddie glanced to the boys who were watching in amusement.

"Mmm Hmm. The group. What was the holdup Doctor? What could be so important that it was worth keeping us all waiting?"

"Harry..."

"Maddie..."

"I actually don't think you want to..." Ella offered, growing silent as Harry's eyes shifted pointedly to her. "Okay..." She waved her hand with a knowing grin.

"Let's hear it."

"Fine," Maddie huffed, her eyes sparkling with defiance as she turned to face the boys. "Fine. If I must..."

"You must." Harry nodded.

"I was buying new La Perlas for the trip." Bishop was the first to snicker. "I have a new dress that needed some...special lingerie and...well, it's been a week since Harry and I have...you know..." Ella let out a gasp, clapping her hand to her mouth. "And I thought maybe I would surprise him with..."
"And you're done," Harry cut in, face red as the group burst into laughter. Meeting her eyes, he cocked his head to the side. "Really now?"

"You said I owed them an explanation. That was the explanation..." Maddie's lips twitched in a smug grin.

"Yeah, yeah. Get your stuff," he stepped aside, waving the two ladies to the back of the place. With laughter all around, Maddie and Ella hurried past him. "Let's get this party on the road."

They had made it to the airport in plenty of time to load the private jet that would be taking the six of them, plus Harry's security to Australia for what would go down as the craziest party of Maddie's life. Three hours into the flight, the boys were playing poker, drinking dubious amounts of champagne and enjoying their last moment of "guy time" before Sean said "I do." Maddie sat next to Ella, sipping on their own drinks, making an under-their-breath commentary on the boys that often found them in fits of unexplainable laughter. The night was young, the flight was long, and the fun had really just started.

While out shopping, Maddie and Ella had made a decision, a pact. This trip was going to be all out fun; a great time. They had made it through so much in the last year, in the last few months, and they deserved a wild, uninhibited break. And Sean and Kiki's last minute, surprise nuptials on New Year's Day in Australia was the perfect setting for that to happen. They were traveling in luxury, the group was going all out and Maddie and Ella were throwing caution to the wind and going with them. Ultimately that was what drove Maddie to buy the $2000 dress that Ella insisted was made just for her. It was what motivated her to purchase the delicate la Perlas that Harry would slip off of her the following night. And it was what fueled the cross-cabin flirtation she and Harry had been engaging in since lift off.

Somewhere around midnight, after hours of suggestive glances and thinly veiled innuendos, Harry rose to his feet, discarded his hand and sauntered over to where Maddie sat; her eyes fixed on him. He really was the only one she knew that could walk with such swagger without looking completely ridiculous.

"Your royal highness," she tried for sweet and innocent, knowing her tone would seep through. "It seems as though I've managed to snag your attention."

"You snagged my attention the moment you said the words La Perla."

"Hmmm...." Maddie laughed softly. "You snagged mine the moment you said, can I help you unload that truck..."

"Care to join me in our private cabin?" He arched an eyebrow and nodded towards the back of the plane.

"I don't know," Maddie smiled up at him through lowered lashes. "Are you going to punish me for being late?"

"Oh..." Harry chuckled, his face turning smug. "I certainly could."

"You certainly could..." She was feeling frisky, adventurous.
"Come with me," his voice was sexy, low and more commanding.

"Won't the boys miss you?" She raised her eyebrows playfully.

"They'll get over it," he shrugged. "Are you going to make me beg?"

"Never," rising to her feet, she flashed him a brilliant smile and then, without another word, she moved past him down the hallway. Biting his lip between his teeth, Harry shook his head with a grin. Draining a glass of champagne, he sat it down on the table and followed behind her.

Maddie didn't have to wait long for him to join her in the room. Even though she wasn't watching the door, she could tell the second he slipped in behind her. And when the door shut behind him, she felt an intense relief. After a week of time with her mother, after he had given her such a glorious gift, she was finally alone with him. Her body was already aching for his hands, for his lips.

"Finally..." She let out an involuntary sigh as he moved around her. "I've been longing to be alone with you since..." Harry's finger pressed firmly to her lips, silencing her words. The intense look in his eyes caused heat to surge through her veins. He cleared his throat and began.

"Now..." Harry's tone was firm as his hands moved to his hips; a stern look on his face. "Miss Forrester, about your tardiness..." Maddie's eyes danced with excitement. They were going to play.

"Actually," her lips turned up in a smirk. "It's Doctor Forrester." Even in the moment she had to be her.

"Yes," Despite his efforts to remain firm and in charge, his mouth turned up in a half smirk. "Doctor Forrester it is." He stood in front of her and, hands on her shoulders, leaned in to kiss just below her ear. He heard her sigh happily; her hands moving to wrap around him. Very quickly, he grabbed her wrists and pulled her arms down by her sides.

"Harry..." She protested but his finger returned to her lips. With a stern look in his eyes, he shook his head and held her arms to her sides. Moving achingly slow, his lips returned to her neck and she gasped. His mouth was so warm and firm on her skin.

"Close your eyes," he mumbled onto her shoulder, his hands pushing aside the neck of her shirt; making way for his lips. Pulling back to look in her eyes, he raised his voice. "Close. Your. Eyes."

And then, stifling her inner urge to fight back, Maddie did as he instructed. Her eyes fluttered closed and her heart sped up. It felt like minutes before she felt him touch her again. Her breath sucked in quickly when his mouth descended on her throat; her head tilting back to allow him greater access. Licking his way up the column of her neck, he nipped gently at her chin. Her lips parted, waiting for his; but he moved right past them; to her ear. Holding her head in his hand, he pressed his lips close and whispered,

"You drive me absolutely mad." She moaned her approval and reached her hand up to clutch at his arm. "No, no, no," he chuckled and removed her arm; placing it at her side. Her lips stuck out in a pout, but her body trembled with desire. This forceful Harry was one she could get used to. "No touching."

And then he stepped away from her. She could hear him move and the next time she felt him, he
was behind her; pressing his body flush with hers. He was enjoying this too; the evidence of that
was tight and rigid against her. A smirk spread across her lips. Reaching around her, Harry's
hands began the process of removing her clothing in a painstakingly slow fashion. With the speed
of a turtle, Harry tugged at the hem of her shirt, pulling it up over her head and letting it fall to the
ground. He pushed aside her bra straps, licking and sucking at the skin they revealed. Running his
palms down her sides and across her stomach, he gripped at her hips and turned her around to face
him.

When he stepped closer to her, his scent invaded her nostrils, his skin radiated heat, she wanted
nothing more than to reach out and close that last inch between them; but she remained still. The
sound of her zipper to her jeans drew a breath from her parted lips. As they pooled at her ankles,
she felt her body react to the chill of the air.

Harry was quick to bring warmth to her skin. Moving first to her bra, she felt his hot breath
through the thin fabric and her body arched towards him involuntarily. She could almost feel the
smirk on his face when he pressed his lips to her cleavage; allowing her the smallest of relief as he
removed her bra. Gathering her breasts in his hands, he kneaded them, rubbing his thumb lightly
over her nipples. Maddie, still in the darkness her eyelids provided, had to press her lips together
to keep from crying out. Her hands balled up in fists to keep from reaching out to him. And when
his mouth moved first to one breast and then to the other; drawing them in, bringing them to life
with his tongue, Maddie felt her knees give slightly. Her breathing began to come up short and her
skin began to tingle and just as she was about to grab his head and press him closer, he stepped
completely away from her.

"Harry?" She gasped.

"Shhhh..." His finger ran slowly over her lips, dipping in slightly between her parted lips and then
disappeared. And there she was, standing mostly undressed in their private cabin on a plane to
Australia; breathing heavy and labored, having no idea where Harry was or what his next move
might be. And she was unbelievably aroused. She fought to control herself while she anticipated
his return.

And when he returned, her heart skipped a beat. His hot breath on the outside of her panties was
the only thing she felt. Gulping at a lump in her throat, she reached behind her and sought support.
Finding the edge of the small dresser, she grasped it and took a step back to lean against it.
Allowing her to move, Harry followed, this time pressing his mouth to her. Running his hands up
her thighs in a needy, hungry way, he let his fingers trace her skin back down to her feet where he
slipped her socks off and quickly tossed them aside; his tongue following the trail his fingers left
up and down her legs. Harry moved to the small slip of fabric that remained on her body. With his
lips, he teased around the edges, his tongue dipping in, making her moan. And then, after much
too long, he slowly peeled them from her body; his hands skimming her center as he removed
them. Maddie shivered.

Standing only to press a too hot and too quick kiss to her lips, Harry knelt in front of her; bringing
her right leg up off the ground and resting it on his shoulder. And Maddie had never been more
thankful for a piece of furniture in her life. As his tongue flicked against her, she held on to that
dresser with all she had; groaning and pressing against him.

When Harry chuckled against her, the sensation sent a tremor through her body. "Harry!" She
gasped, dangerously close to toppling over the edge. He could feel her start to spasm and then,
taking every ounce of control he had; he stopped. Moving away from her completely, he rose to
his feet and took a step back.
"What are you doing?" Her eyes flew open and looked to his smug and satisfied face. He was completely dressed and breathing heavy.

"Well..." He shrugged and ran a hand over the back of his neck; his eyes twinkling with playfulness, with that playboy charm that he was rumored to have. "What kind of punishment would this be if I gave you exactly what you wanted?"

"Please tell me you're kidding..." She began to protest but the words fell from her mouth when he moved; with great purpose towards her. Gripping her waist, he lifted her up off the ground and sat her on the dresser that had held her up. "Oh!" She cried when his lips crashed against her neck; moving her back against the wall of the cabin. Her hands moved to pull him closer, but he grabbed them and pinned her hands down to the top of the dresser; arms at her sides. Maddie groaned in frustration and Harry pulled back slightly.

"Tell me what you want," his eyes locked with hers; his hands gripping her thighs, his fingers pressing into her flesh.

"You know what I want," she smirked; her breath coming out in pants.

"Tell me what you want or I'm going to leave you right here on this dresser." Maddie raised her eyebrows in defiance. Meeting her challenge, Harry's hands fell from her body and he stepped away from her; smug.

"No!" She cried out, instantly blushing at the volume of her own voice. "I want you. Inside me. Right now." She was whispering, breathlessly, trying to be mindful of the others on the plane.

"Oh?" His lips curled up deviously. Stepping back towards her, his hands moved to his belt and zipper; undressing only enough to free himself. Watching her eyes widen slightly, Harry waivered for only a moment; not sure he had it in him to be restrained any longer. And then, with little ceremony he hiked her legs up around him and plunged deep into her; pushing the breath from her lungs.

"Yes..." She hissed; loving the idea that she was completely naked while he remained almost fully clothed. Once he was as close to her as he could possibly be; buried to the hilt, he ceased movement. One hand rested on the wall behind her, holding them steady while the other moved up and over her hip and went directly to her core. Holding himself inside of her, he began to stroke her with his fingers. Her hips rocked and pushed against him, craving more friction inside, but he held back; watching in labored amusement.

"God I love you..." He groaned, his eyes never leaving her face. "I love the way your mind works. I love your body...I love the way you make me absolutely mad for you...I could do this forever." Maddie whimpered and arched against him; imploring him with her body to move; just an inch. His fingers, diligent and nimble, were pushing her to her limits.

"Harry, please for the love of..."

"Shhh..." He interrupted and then, with a soft, ghost of a kiss to her shoulder, Harry pulled out and plunged back in before halting his movements yet again. Her head rocked back, resting against the wall before she sat up and then, leaning forward, her lips sought his. Allowing her to come within centimeters of his mouth before he pulled back, Harry chuckled at her expression; frustration mixed with pleasure.

"Please Harry..." Her eyelids were heavy, her lips sticking out in an adorable little pout. And he
had no control anymore—none at all. Holding her face to his with one hand, his other moved to
grip her thigh; and his hips began to move in deep, hard thrusts. Abandoning his control of her
hands, Harry pressed into her; knowing they were both so close, knowing he couldn't hold out on
her much longer. Her hands moved up, struggling with his shirt, longing to have skin to skin
contact.

She tried to break free from his kiss, wanting to focus on his shirt, wanting to rid him of his
clothing, but he held her to him with his hand fisted gently in her hair; refusing to let her lips leave
his. Pushing faster, Harry's breaths came up quick; ragged. With the long, slow build up he had
'punished' her with, it took very little to bring her to her peak. And when she came it was powerful
and thunderous and it moved him right over the edge. Clinging to her; holding her tight, Harry let
go; biting gently into her shoulder as he did. Standing there; slumped against the wall and propped
up on the dresser, Maddie grinned wide, kissed his half bared shoulder and muttered,

"All this because I was late?"

"All this because you were late." His eyes were heavy as he moved her against him; more gently
than before, taking her weight onto him. His need to care for her replacing his need to connect on
the most physical of levels. He would always come back to that, no matter the fun they had—this
was all about love for him, all about Maddie.

"I'm likely to never be on time again." She sighed and Harry chuckled against her skin, dropping
soft, sweet kisses as he moved, helping her stand; helping her steady herself.

As they dressed for bed, Maddie found that she couldn't rid herself of the soft pink blush his
actions had brought to her skin. She found that she couldn't stop grinning. Even as he pulled her to
his side in the small airplane bed in order to catch a bit of sleep before the craziness began, she
smiled into the dark room; her skin flushing as he kissed her, long and warm and full of love
before wrapping his arm around her and closing his eyes.
Even with all the revelry, even with Bishop playing his guitar and Leo mixing cocktail after cocktail, the flight to Australia was a long one. So, when they finally touched down on land, the entire group was relieved to finally be off the plane. Though their bodies and minds felt like it was four thirty in the afternoon, the rest of Sydney was convinced it was three thirty in the morning. Surrendering to the local culture, the group maintained a low profile—opting for checking into their rooms at the resort they were staying at for the next couple of days and taking it easy. Maddie and Harry were staying in a top-floor two bedroom suite with Harry's Security Officers in a suite of their own across the hall from them. Bishop and Ella were next door with Leo and Sean—who would only be there until that night after the wedding when he would join Kiki in the Bridal suite. Maddie laughed as Harry and his friends easily took up two floors of the resort. It was going to be a wild adventure. Because they were worn from the trip, and a little tipsy from Leo's experiments, going to sleep seemed like the most natural thing to do. So they settled and they slept. And when they woke, early afternoon on the 31st in Sydney, Australia, they had a decadent lunch, dressed for the beach, and headed for the sun and surf—such a stark contrast to what they left behind; as was the trip.

"You brought a flask?" Maddie eyed Bishop as they set up on the beach; lounge chairs, umbrellas, towels. They were quite the group. "To the beach. You brought a flask?" Her lips twitched in a smirk.

"I did," he nodded, tipping it back and then holding it out to her. "Care for a swallow good Doctor?"

"No thanks," she shook her head with a laugh as Harry caught up with them; wrapping his arm around her waist from behind and kissing her neck. "Mmmm..."

"Good morning," he growled into her ear; making her hair stand on end. "What do we have here?"

"Bishop's drinking," she turned her head to kiss him properly.

"Is he sharing?" Harry's eyes twinkled.

"He is," Bishop cut in, holding the flask out to Harry. Taking it, Harry tipped his head back and swallowed, his arm never leaving Maddie's waist.

"Thanks man," Harry handed it back to him and grinned at Maddie. "It's a holiday my darling. What is breakfast without a little scotch?"

"Gross," Maddie's eyes rolled as Ella laughed. Bishop, Leo and Sean were pulling off their shirts, slipping off sandals; preparing for the water.

"If you don't want scotch, we can get you something else," Harry turned to look towards the resort, waving at a tropically dressed waiter who was quick to move their way. "What do you want love? Orange juice? Coffee? Champagne?" He chuckled at the look on her face before turning a pleasant demeanor to the young man who stepped up to them. "Hi there."

"Good Afternoon," the young man took them all in with a warm smile. "Can I help you with anything?"
"You can," Harry smiled, pulling his key card from his bag and handing it to the young man. "This is where we're staying," he pointed to Maddie and back to himself. "She's with me. Whatever she wants...whatever it is...put it on my room. Would you do that for me?"

"Absolutely sir," he nodded; not at all put off by what was a normal request for him. "Ma'am? Can I get you anything?" Maddie's eyes were watching Harry with a grin in place.

"Tell the gentleman what you want, love. He'll get it for you," Harry's hand at the base of her neck pulled her in for another kiss.

"An iced tea would be lovely, thank you," Maddie smiled at the young man.

"Right away," he nodded and stepped away.

"An iced tea?" Harry laughed. "You can have anything you want and you go with an iced tea."

"I wanted an iced tea," Maddie shrugged, watching as he peeled his shirt off, putting his hat back on his head with a smirk. She was suddenly curious. "When you say anything..."

"Ha!" He tossed his head back; sliding his sunglasses back onto his face. "I mean anything."

"Like..." Maddie bit her lip; intrigued—playful. "Like if I wanted...a box of multicolored pistachio Macaroons?"

"Done." Harry was nonchalant as he began to rub sunscreen onto his shoulders and chest.

"What about..." Maddie's head tipped to the side in thought. "What if I wanted a Pincushion Hakea plant?"

"No problem. I don't know what that is, but I can't imagine it being a problem."

"The most recent edition of The Denver Post...hard copy, not the internet version."

"Got it."

"A Tandem bike?" She arched an eyebrow, wondering when he would say when, as Harry finished his sunblock application and moved towards her. His arms snaked around her waist and he grinned.

"Anything you want."

"Hmmm..." Maddie smiled up at him, dropping the inquiry for the moment, her arms tangling around his neck as she moved closer. "What if I want your hat?"

"Oh no," he shook his head. "That you cannot have."

"Hmmm..." Her lip stuck out in a small pout, contemplating her next move. With a curt nod and a quickness that he didn't know she had, she snatched the hat from his head and was out of his arms, running down the beach. Shaking his head with a low, menacing chuckle, Harry took off after her. When he caught up with her, he retrieved his hat, swung her up over his shoulder and headed for the ocean giving the beach-goers, and the internet, photos of a lively young couple cutting loose and having fun—forgetting completely about the iced tea.
After their time on the beach, the group loaded up and returned to their rooms for naps and showers before dressing and heading out to the estate for the wedding. They looked magnificent, the whole lot of them. Maddie was blown away by just how well this group cleaned up; the men dapper in their tuxes, the women primped and beautiful. She almost felt like they were preparing to star in a commercial for something luxurious, like a Rolls Royce or Chanel. They were beautiful, young, and full of life—even as they were seated for a wedding that was to begin at 12:01 on New Years Day.

Sitting next to Harry, she found that she couldn't keep her hands off of him; and him off of her. They sat close, her arm tucked through his, his hand on her bared knee. It was a small, intimate gathering; family and a few select, close friends. Kiki and Sean had chosen siblings as their attendants, making it so their group of friends were seated together; alive with excitement—only fueled by Bishop's hidden flask.

"I need to warn you..." Maddie whispered into his ear as it neared midnight. "I tend to get a little sentimental at weddings."

"Oh?" He was so close to her, she could feel heat radiating off of his body.

"Not you?" She cracked a grin.

"Not me," he shook his head, his thumb rubbing a pattern on her knee.

"Not even at your brother's?"

"Definitely not at my brother's," he laughed. "There were cameras everywhere....thousands of people...not really room for sentiment, you know."

"Fair enough," she nodded; understanding—her mind washing over how odd that must have been. Maddie looked up at the altar, an exquisitely decorated space at the end of the ballroom they were in; flowers and candles galore. Off to the side was a clock, counting down the minutes, now seconds to the New Year. The room was buzzing with anticipation as the clock clicked from one minute left.

"How do you think this is going to work?" Ella leaned closer to Maddie. "Like...do you think it will start at midnight or..." She grew quiet as a side door opened; the minister, Sean and his brother stepped through, taking their place at the altar. And the clock continued to count down. A soft music began to play from the band stationed towards the back of the room as a well-dressed, master-of-ceremonies looking man took the microphone in front of the band and turned his attention to the countdown clock at the altar.

Thirty seconds.

"I think they are going to start at midnight," Maddie whispered, her hand tightening its hold on Harry's arm.

She was right. As the clock ticked to ten seconds, the countdown began. The Master of Ceremonies, the family, the friends, began counting down along with the clock. Sean stood tall, proud, his eyes fixed on the back of the room, his lips marking the seconds between him and his wife. Maddie's smile grew wider and wider with every tick.
As the clock struck midnight, balloons and confetti fell from the ceiling; showering over the guests, the fireworks over Sydney Harbor boomed into the sky, and the band struck up Auld Lange Sine. Holding Maddie close to him, Harry dipped his head to kiss her; welcoming the New Year with the love of his life.

"Happy New Year," he spoke against her lips.

"Happy New Year," she echoed; closing her eyes as he kissed her again.

Then amidst the celebration, while the balloons settled and the couples parted, Kiki and her father began their way down the aisle to the jazzy, traditional tune. All attention, all focus, turned to the beaming bride whose eyes were locked with Sean's.

Maddie had attended weddings before, many weddings; family, friends. But this wedding was a different thing entirely. What an experience it was, to sit with your own great love while watching somebody declare theirs forever.

As the crowd sat, Harry and Maddie sat, holding tight to each other, unbelievably moved by the experience of watching somebody prepare to take the vows that they could see themselves taking. As Kiki reached Sean at the altar Maddie found that she could not get close enough to Harry. As the Minister greeted the group, Maddie found that she had to swallow a lump in her throat. And as Sean and Kiki repeated their vows; traditional vows that had been repeated for years before and would be repeated for years after, Maddie felt tears in her eyes. Looking up to Harry, she wiped at her eyes and held tightly to his hand in hers. Harry, always one to sense when Maddie needed him the most, turned his head, his eyes meeting hers. And, as everyone stayed focused on the Bride and Groom, he dipped his head slightly to kiss her cheek, his eyes meeting hers with a force that made Maddie breathless. Maybe he did get sentimental after all.

"Maddie..." He whispered, catching on the lump in his throat. And Maddie, unable to speak, turned her face closer to him and nodded; knowing he was asking her a silent question, knowing she would forever answer in the affirmative. Harry lightly nudged her shoulder, effectively moving her lips to his in a soft, emotion packed kiss. And, once again, she was lost in this reverent space he consistently managed to create; just for the two of them. It was only the clapping that pulled them from their trance; from each other. Snapping back to the moment, they rose to their feet and applauded their friends as they made their way back down the aisle; as Husband and Wife.

Just like that, after years of dating and a handful days of engagement, Kiki and Sean were married. The wedding was over.

The night was all but lost in a haze of celebration. As soon as the excited newlyweds reached the end of the aisle, the party began. Music played and the happy couple led their guests from the ballroom outside to the immaculate, landscaped courtyard that overlooked the ocean and their own private beach. It had been transformed into a Gatsby-esque paradise with the highest touch of class and the best elements of fun and whimsy. There were serious moments; when Kiki's parents made a toast, when the couple danced for the first time, when they cut the cake. And there were comical moments; when Sean insisted on a Conga line, when his brother made a speech.

And Maddie had surrendered to it all. This marvelous trip to paradise had been exactly what she had needed to fall into. And Harry was there right along with her; steadying her when she needed it, and falling by her side when she wanted it. He was exactly what she had needed to fall into.
So, as Kiki and Sean started out by mingling with their older guests, with their family members, Maddie smiled sneakily and, taking Harry's hand in one of hers and stealing Bishop's flask in the other she pulled him willingly off to the side; to a large lounge chair that could easily fit two. They were tipsy and smiling wide as they fell into it; her legs tangling with his as they stretched out. They sat in silence for a moment, listening to the ocean, listening to the party around them. Kicking her shoes to the ground, Maddie curled up next to him and Harry wrapped an arm around her; holding her close as the stars twinkled above them.

"Do you ever wish you could?" She kept her voice soft and low.

"Could?" He sipped from Bishop's flask.

"Run away like this? I mean...I know you have to get married in England..."

Fighting the urge to correct her you to we, he nodded. "I do."

"Do you ever wish it could be this way?" She waved a hand out at the crowd; cracking a smile at Bishop trying to embarrass Ella by dancing like a fool.

"Of course," Harry laughed at his friend before nudging Maddie with his shoulder. "Why? You want to piss off the establishment and elope right now? I bet the minister is still around." His eyes held this look that told her he was only half joking—less than half.

"Don't joke," she rolled her eyes; taking the flask from him and swallowing.

"I'm not joking." He insisted. Maddie sighed, allowing her mind to dip into the possibility for the briefest of moments.

"They would never forgive us," she shook her head thinking of his family, of the people of Great Britain.

"They would. Though it would take a while," Harry laughed, his eyes twinkling under the night sky; getting a great deal of humor out of the idea.

"Can I..." Maddie shifted slightly; her dress rustling as she moved. "Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask me anything."

"I want to talk about what it means...to be married to you."

"Oh?" He turned a smug grin to her.

"Not the love part, not the romantic part..." She paused as a waiter approached them with a tray of champagne. Harry took two glasses, smiled and thanked the man. Maddie continued. "I want to know about the...obligations. Like marrying in England...the duty part, what might be expected of...a hypothetical woman who planned on marrying you. Can we talk about that? Or is it too soon to..."

"No," he shook his head, handing her a glass of champagne. "It's not too soon. We can talk about it. I just have one condition."

"Okay."
"We drop the hypothetical." He took a drink and leaned closer to her; needing to be closer to her. "We're not talking about some woman. We're talking about you. What it means for you to marry me. If we're going to talk about it, let's move out of the hypothetical and talk about it. Okay?" His finger reached out to brush a stray strand of hair from her forehead.

"Okay." Maddie breathed; a little nervous, a little excited.

"Okay," Harry grinned. "What do you want to know?"

"I don't know," she laughed. "I have lots of...questions...that I'm finding difficult to find words for. I guess...I don't know. Can you actually marry an American?"

"Of course," Harry shrugged, resisting the urge to laugh. This was serious. She had asked for his guidance, asked for his help and now she was trusting him to give it; this was serious. "Why wouldn't I be able to marry an American?"

"I don't know," she shook her head with a chuckle. "Because there was a war and the US separated from England and...there's this history of...I don't know. I know nothing about the Monarchy. I have a President, who is replaced every four to eight years. I know nothing of the deep historical roots of your country and your family and..." She sighed. "And I know nothing about the metric system."

"You think inches versus centimeters is going to be an issue?" He couldn't help the smirk that pulled at his lips.

"I thought me being an American would be an issue. It starts with inches and centimeters...Are you sure you can marry somebody from another country?"

"Are you kidding? If we consulted a history book, we would see that my ancestors have been overthrowing countries and taking their women for hundreds of years."

"Oh my God...you're right. I mean...I know you were trying to be funny but it's so true. Your ancestors are in history books."

"It's not going to be an issue," he shook his head; his finger running along her arm.

"If you say so," Maddie surrendered. She had no choice but to trust his answers, his lifetime of experiences.

"You know," he smiled, snatching her hand in his and bringing it to his lips. "My grandfather wasn't a citizen when he proposed to my grandmother."

"Really?" Her eyes brightened at the mention of the long, steady marriage of his grandparents.

"Yes really. You also might be surprised to find that the marriage laws in the UK are actually much more liberal than those in the US."

"But surely you're not counting yourself as just a member of the general public. I would imagine that the marriage laws for the British Royal Family are a bit less lenient."

"Fair enough," he took a breath and met her eyes; searching for what she was getting at.
"Would I need to change my citizenship? Give up my US passport and apply to be a member of the Commonwealth?"

"You wouldn't have to," he shook his head, looking down at their joined hands.

"Hey..." She tugged at his hand, forcing his eyes back up to hers. A wide smile spread over her face. "I would be willing to. I would. I just...I need to know what's expected. I need to know what people are going to want, what they are going to look for, what they are going to focus on. Don't leave me out here on my own, to figure it out as I go...bring me in. Tell me..."

"Yes," he spoke up; his eyes hazing over with an apology for all that would be asked of her. "There would definitely be questions about it. While I doubt my grandmother would demand such a thing, the public most definitely would expect it."

"How could I be a member of the British Royal Family if I wasn't willing to be a citizen?" Maddie smiled wistfully as she imagined the headlines, the stories.

"Something like that," he smiled.

"Okay then," she nodded; patting his knee. "So I need to look into the citizenship process at some point." Harry halted; pausing to give the moment the weight it deserved.

"At some point," he agreed; moved.

"So...you could marry me."

"I could," he laughed. "If you agreed to my proposal."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed; her tension easing. "Let's say, for arguments sake, I'm on board."

"Let's." He grinned.

"Then what?"

"Then..." He took a deep breath. "Then everything changes."

"Everything?"

"Pretty much."

"Would you have to get the Queen's approval?"

"It's a good idea."

"Oh God..."

"Don't worry. She likes you. There's no reason she would say no. She's not that involved in what we do."

"Okay..." She took a deep breath. "Then what?"

"Well," he adjusted in his seat, his mind working through what he knew, what he remembered from William and Kate's engagement. "You would be assigned security, almost immediately."
"Like Jim and Nathan?" Her eyes traveled across the room to where the two men sat at a table, enjoying the food.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "They would move into your life and they would be with you...basically all of the time."

"Wow..."

"Then there would be an announcement."

"An announcement?"

"On TV, in front of hundreds of cameras and journalists. There would be a photo-call. There would be an interview where somebody asks you questions to which the answers are incredibly personal and intimate. Do you love Harry? How did he propose? When do you plan on having children...that sort of thing." Finishing his champagne, he sat the glass down and continued. "And then there will be a wedding."

"It'll be big?" Her mouth turned up in half a smile; knowing the answer.

"Grotesquely so." Harry couldn't help but laugh at it all; at the circus that would commence—all because he had finally decided to commit to the woman sitting next to him.

"And televised?"

"Most definitely." Maddie nodded, taking it all in; letting it settle in her mind.

"Will I have to change my name? My first and middle names I mean. I know they aren't regal or..."

"No," he sighed. "No. You won't have to change your name. You'll still be Madeline Jay. Though, you won't be Forrester anymore."

"What will I be?"

"Well, the general understanding is that before I marry, I will be made...the Duke of Sussex."

"Mouthful."

"Yes," he laughed.

"So that would make your wife..."

"You." He corrected.

"The Duchess of Sussex?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"Bigger mouthful."

"Yes," Maddie laughed.

"So, you could be Madeline Sussex."
"Wow..." She breathed, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her dress. "That's not so bad."

"Though people would refer to you as Her Royal Highness, the Duchess of Sussex."

"That's pretty heavy." Her gaze drifted just a bit.

"Is it?" She glanced up to him, seeing the concern in his eyes. Reaching out to take his hand, she shook her head.

"No. No...it's just a name."

"And a title," he smirked nervously; his anxiety building as it all came out. "People would curtsy to you, show deference to you, call you ma'am and..." His words fell silent as she pressed a finger to his lips. He swallowed and met her eyes; searching for how this was playing out in her head.

"Will I be your wife?" She was soft, sweet; her fingers tracing his jawline as her hand move to his neck.

"Yes," he answered quietly.

"Will I get to move in with you?"

"Yes," he nodded, calming. "At Kensington most likely."

"Will I get to wear your polo socks?" She bit her lip to keep from laughing.

"Any time you want," he relaxed; tension leaving his body and he sighed into a laugh.

"Okay then," she twirled her glass around in her hand. They had covered a lot, more than they had up until that moment. But she wasn't quite finished. "Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Would I have to quit my job?" Her eyes were more serious as she looked to him and he knew instantly, this answer was not going to be as well received.

"That's not an easy answer."

"Yes it is," she sat up a bit. "It's either a yes or a no."

"It's not," he shook his head. "It's both...it's..."

"Harry."

"I know your work is important to you."

"It is."

"And you would be able to continue the work you do..." Maddie opened her mouth, but he rushed ahead. "But yes. Yes. At some point, you would have to quit your job." He watched as she processed; her eyes staring off into the distance. "I'm sorry. I know it's..."
"It's years and years of schooling..." Maddie spoke softly. "It's a PhD. It's licensing exams and boards and comps and..."

"I'm sorry. I..." He whispered, trying to pull it together. "I know it's a lot to take in, a lot to handle. I know that it's your entire life...Maddie. I get it. It's just that there are events to attend, trips we would have to take. I would be serving at my brother's side, I would be a full time royal. We would be full time..." Even as he said the words, he couldn't imagine anyone signing up for this. "You just wouldn't be able to do all of it while holding down a steady job, much less the two you have now. And I'm not even sure you would want to do it. Your clients would lose their anonymity, you might have people wanting to see you just to see you and..." He held tight to her hand, pulling her attention back to him. "But the work could still be the same. You...you wouldn't be able to go to Bendal to rebuild after a quake but you could go there, we could go there. We could open Community Centers. We could take the press and draw attention to the kids, to the people. Maybe you wouldn't be in the room with the vets anymore, but you could put your name, your title, the palace behind initiatives that would benefit the men and women in uniform. You could choose charities that serve them. You could start your own charity.... The job might change. But the work doesn't have to..." His eyes were scattered as he watched her; hoping and hoping that she wasn't about to bolt.

"I just..." Maddie cut in; her voice low as she stayed still, playing it out in her head. Her eyes hit his, her forehead crinkling up. "I just...what exactly am I going to DO all day?" A burst of laughter escaped her lips and Harry felt like crying at the relief that flowed through his body. "I mean...if I'm not working...what do I actually do?"

"Wow..." He breathed; his heart aching with joy at her question. "I don't know love. You do whatever you want. You...you take meetings, you have lunch..."

"Lunch?" Maddie laughed. "I'm going to get huge."

"You take up running," he waved his hand.

"Oh no," Maddie shook her head, her face moving into a scowl. "I don't run. Sorry. I don't care how bored I get, I'm not running....unless there's somebody behind me chasing me."

"Well..." Harry took a drink. "You would be able to hire somebody to do that...if you wanted." Their eyes met for a brief moment and then, with the abandon that came with the weekend, they both burst into laughter; leaning into the other with a new assurance. They were still there, falling back into their chair in a fit of champagne assisted giggles, when Bishop and Ella caught up with them.

"I cannot imagine what could possibly be so funny," he sighed; dropping to sit at their feet, pulling Ella into his laugh. "Because I just got here and I know he's not that funny."

"The game?" Maddie laughed."

"What are you two doing over here?" Ella looked them over.

"Making plans," Harry answered; his fingers tangling with Maddie's as he offered her a wink. "Okay," Bishop's eyes flashed wide before he shook his head, dismissing it. "So. Here's the game."

"The game?" Maddie laughed.

"Ah yes...you..." He pointed at Harry. "Kiki's cousin's sorority sisters want to meet you..." He
nodded to where Kiki stood, smiling in his direction with an apology in her eyes. Harry's smile remained as he groaned at the news.

"Of course they do," he sighed. Maddie turned to look towards the group of expectant women; already primping.

"Of course they do," her chuckle had a bit of a bitter edge to it.

"But we are going to play a drinking game...." Bishop intervened, waving between himself, Ella, and Maddie. "And here are the rules. Every time one of them curtsy's or tosses their hair back over their shoulder or laughs loudly at something that's not funny...we are going to take a shot..."

"How will we know if it's funny or not?" Ella asked; buying into his game.

"It's Harry. We know." Bishop grinned, his hand patting his breast pocket for his flask. "Hold on..." He looked scattered for a split second before Maddie sat up.

"Here it is," Maddie reached for his flask sitting on the table.

"Little thief," he shook his head at her; snatching it from her hand. "Go on Your Royal Highness....we have a game to play." Harry stood, buttoned his coat and leaned to kiss Maddie; holding his lips to hers for a moment.

"Don't be too long," she held onto his hand, her eyes flashing to the group of women waiting to meet her boyfriend; her eyes narrowing slightly.

"Don't be jealous, love," Bishop nudged her playfully.

"I'm not," she protested, her eyes shifting from Harry's. But he caught it; the look on her face that gave her away.

"Don't be jealous," he shook his head, leaning to put his lips to her ear. His whispered words drew a tremble from her skin. "The Duchess of Sussex..." Her breath sucked in as he kissed her neck. "I'll be right back." And then, straightening up, he moved away from them; off to fulfill his duty as Kiki's friend, his obligation as a royal. Maddie relaxed back in the chair as Ella moved up to sit by her side; all eyes watching as Harry stepped up to Kiki's side and spoke. As if on cue, all four of the women around her burst into loud, head tossing laughter. Fighting a smirk, Harry flashed Maddie a look as Bishop held the flask up in the air in a salute to him.

"Time to drink ladies!" He announced.

With a shake of her head and laughter on her lips, Maddie reached for the flask. Two of the girls flipped their hair over their shoulders and Maddie knew. She was about to get incredibly drunk.

..............................................................

When Maddie woke the next morning, she found she had a serious headache and a deep, intense, but totally unjustified hatred for Bishop. Yes, he had introduced the drinking game—though it wasn't entirely his fault that the women were head tossing, curtsying, laugh at anything-ers. Yes, when Kiki and Sean kicked off their shoes and dove into the pool, Bishop had pulled Maddie and Ella from their comfortable chair into the water—though he didn't actually make her participate in the chicken fight competition that ensued. So, while he certainly was there, while he was certainly an accomplice, he shouldn't shoulder all of the blame.
Groaning, Maddie rolled to her side, her eyes peeking open to look for Harry. Surprised to find she was alone, she sat up in their bed. Scanning the room, her eyes fell on her dress that Harry had removed, her new lingerie that he had peeled from her body...the remnants of his tux that he almost tripped trying to get out of. A flush hit her cheeks, a laugh bubbled from her throat. Life with him was guaranteed to keep her on her toes. 

Life with him.

Her heart swelled as the conversation they had the night before moved to the front of her mind. With a deep breath, she rose from bed; pulling on his boxers, his t-shirt, as she moved across the room—loving the access she had to his things, to him.

Stepping out of the bedroom, she was greeted with the smell of breakfast. Harry, sitting at the dining table reading the paper, looked up with a wide grin.

"Good morning, love."

"Morning sunshine," she smiled through her hangover. "You ordered breakfast?" She looked at the spread on the table; pastries, fruits, coffee, tea.

"I did," he tilted his head back to kiss her. "But if there's anything else you want, I can call down and..."

"What's that?" Maddie asked as her eyes caught something on the table next to what would be her seat; something pink and floral.

"That..." Harry pointed as she moved away from him toward it. "That is a Pincushion Hakea plant. Apparently."

"Oh my God," her eyes snapped from the plant to him. "You found it..." Her breath sucked in as she looked more carefully at the table; taking in the other items situated around her. "You got it all. Harry!" Her hand reached out. "The box of Macaroons, the plant, the..." She lifted the newspaper from the table. "The Denver Post. Oh my..." Not missing a beat, Harry swallowed his orange juice and pointed.

"The tandem bike is over there. Though...it looks a little rickety. You may have to convince Bishop to ride it with you."

"I don't know what to..." She was flabbergasted. It was all there. All of it. Everything she had listed in her mindless, pointless list. He had remembered all of it. And it was all there.

"Oh. One more thing," he moved from his seat then, lifting his hat from the table and settling it on her head. "You said you wanted to wear this." With a kiss to her speechless mouth, he winked. "It's not all duty, love."

The flight home was not nearly as lively as the one to Australia, but they all did their best to keep the party going; to keep the festivities with them until the very end. They played cards, they watched ridiculous comedies and, as their arrival drew near, they reminisced over the highpoints of the trip. Maddie felt a new ease with Harry and his life; a new comfortableness with his lifestyle—with her future lifestyle. Glancing at the tandem bicycle she had insisted on taking home, she grinned wide and sighed back into her seat. It was a big adjustment, an enormous role she was looking at—but Harry had this way of making it seem not so bad—more like an adventure they
would be taking together, though not on her tandem bike—he had made that clear. This trip had been exactly what she had needed; she was relaxed and ready—ready to go back to work, ready to dig in and make it through the London winter, ready for the eventual place she would stand next to him.

Arriving in London brought a sad sort of silence over the group. But, holding tight to Harry, Maddie smiled wide as they stepped off the plane. Much to Maddie's surprise, Thomas was standing next to a car on the tarmac; tall and stoic. She hadn't expected to see him there and, according to the way Harry stalled, the tension in his arm, he hadn't expected him either. With a knowing glance to Bishop and Leo, Harry grew serious.

"Thomas," Harry nodded as he stepped up to the car, Maddie's hand still in his.

"Welcome home, Sir," Thomas nodded in returned and, as Harry expected, he held out a phone. Harry's eyes settled on it as he breathed deep. Plucking it from his palm, Harry pressed it to his ear, already connected.

Thomas knew what none of them knew. It was Charles and, at that moment, he was calling Harry in; beckoning him to Clarence. "Fine." Harry spoke in a clipped tone. "Just let me drop Maddie at home and change and I'll..." He looked down at his clothing. "I'm in jeans and a shirt and...okay. Okay." With a heavy nod of his head, he disconnected the phone and handed it back to Thomas. "I've been summoned."

"Why?" Bishop asked; his arm around Ella's shoulders.

"Don't know. He wants to see me." Harry's eyes were business as the driver went about loading his stuff into the car.

"But you behaved," Bishop thought over the last few days. "You were respectful, you never took your clothes off, you..."

"It's not that." Harry ran a hand over the back of his neck.

"What is it?" Ella asked.

"I don't know." He shrugged.

"I can take Maddie home if you would like," Bishop offered.

"Thanks but he said to bring her," Harry explained, as confused as the rest of them.

"What do you think it is?" Maddie's eyes were wide.

"No idea," he looked to her with a small, tight smile. "Come with me?"

"Sure," she nodded, feeling nervous. Saying their good-byes, they slipped into the car; Thomas taking the seat next to the driver who immediately set out for Clarence House. Maddie watched Harry's face and she could tell; he was nervous, deep in thought. She reached out for his hand. Though he let her take it, he was in another place in his mind.

When they pulled up to the door, they were immediately whisked inside; the hustle indicative of the urgency they had felt since they arrived at the airport—such a stark contrast to what they had left behind. Maddie had been to Clarence House before; for dinner and tea and once just dropping
by with Harry. But this time it felt more formal, more businesslike. They were greeted by Charles
who, though serious, was polite and welcoming—kissing Maddie hello, asking about her trip.
William and Kate were there as well; offering their hellos, their hugs—but something was off;
Maddie could tell. Either her read of the room was off and she was losing her touch or something
serious was going on.

They moved as a group towards an office, a board room almost; Harry holding her hand the entire
way. The doors to the room were open and there were already men seated inside. Seeing the
reaction on Harry's face, she knew that he knew them. His eyes met his father's and his hand
tightened around Maddie's. Stepping towards the room, Charles was kind as he asked Maddie to
wait outside; nodding for Harry and William to follow him inside. Harry stopped and leaned to
kiss her, avoiding her eyes as he did. Dropping her hand, he followed his father inside; William
just behind him.

"Are you coming?" William looked to his wife who shook her head softly.

"I think I'll wait outside with Maddie," she felt a strange allegiance to her future sister. With a
quick nod, William stepped inside; the doors closing behind him. Maddie's eyes moved to Kate's
with a dazed sort of look on them. With a comforting smile, Kate gestured towards a pair of chairs
off to the side. Not knowing what else to do, Maddie followed her.

"You didn't have to wait with me," Maddie's voice was small in the enormous hallway. "I'm sorry.
That came out rude. It was sweet of you to sit with me but you shouldn't feel obligated..."

"It's okay," Kate shook her head with a small smile. "I don't feel obligated. I would rather be here
with you than in there with them anyway."

"Sure," Maddie smiled and looked to her fidgeting fingers.

"You had a good trip?"

"Yes," Maddie sighed. "We had an amazing trip."

"What a luxury, no?" Kate shrugged thoughtfully. "Being able to run off and have a wedding
with just your friends and family."

"Mmm," Maddie nodded. "It was beautiful."

"I bet." Kate glanced to the door quickly.

"You know what's going on in there, don't you?" Maddie studied her closely as Kate bit at her
lower lip. "You know who those men are."

"Maddie, I can't..."

"It's okay," Maddie smiled; leaning back into her chair.

"I wish I could," her eyes were wide, sympathetic and Maddie shook her head, letting her off the
hook.

"It's okay. I understand. I just...is he okay? He's not in trouble or...." Their conversation came to
an abrupt close as the doors swung open. Both women rose to their feet; Charles stepped out with
the men; shaking hands and thanking them for coming as the door shut behind him—Harry and
William still behind them. As the men disappeared from their view, Charles smiled first at Kate and turned his attention to Maddie. She did her level best trying to read his face as he reached a hand out to rest on her shoulder.

"Harry asked me to show you in," his voice was warm, fatherly. His hand was firm as he guided her to the doors, knocking on the dark, heavy wood. They swung open instantly and, with a glance back to Kate, Maddie stepped inside. Her eyes scanned the room; massive and ornate; dark and serious. Harry stood at the far end of the room, his back to her. William, standing between them, turned to her with a smile. With a pat to his brother's tense shoulders, he slipped past her.

"Excuse me," he nodded as he moved by. The doors shut again and she was alone with Harry; who still hadn't turned to face her.

She suddenly felt very young, very unsettled; scared. "Are you..." She cleared her throat and took a few steps in his direction. "Are you in trouble?"

In response, Harry chuckled bitterly, loudly; shaking his head.

"Is this..." Maddie swallowed the lump in her throat, searching for something. "Are inches versus centimeters a bigger deal than you thought?" She tried for a joke, but it fell flat. "Harry...give me something because I'm just..." He turned towards her then and one look at his face made her heart fall to her feet.

"It's not you," he had sad eyes as he shook his head. "There's something I need to tell you."

"Oh?" She felt small, dainty, and she hated it. "Bad news, good news?"

"No." His voice echoed solemnly in the room.

"You look so serious," her eyes were scattered. "Harry..." And then, with three words, Harry took her breath away.

"I'm being deployed."
Chapter 67

Day 116 of 120

When Harry was deployed, Maddie received masses of unsolicited advice; from all corners of her life. It wasn't just from family, friends, and colleagues—it was from everyone. Her high profile romance with Harry had made her more of a household name. People felt comfortable with her, like they knew her—at least well enough that they could offer her guidance on how best to navigate and survive Harry's 120 days of deployment.

Most of it she found annoying. Yes, it was sweet of people to care about her. Yes, it was thoughtful that they wanted to ease her pain, her worry. But, the vast majority of the advice givers were people who had never sent away somebody they loved to fight in a war. Most of the people had never been called upon to stand tall while their heart, their soul, pulled on that instantly recognizable camouflage uniform and walked away from them. Walked towards the hot zone.

Over the course of her time with Harry, she had watched him handle the public; watched him negotiate those awkward moments when somebody stepped into your private moments; your dinners, your fights, your need to be in solitude. She had watched his grace, his ease, his ability to slip into a space where he could hear what people had to say, offer a smile and a word of thanks and then slip back into the headspace he had occupied before. Though she hadn't had nearly the years he had to perfect that—when these people approached her with advice, she tried her level best to imitate it. She would force a smile to her face—much like the smile she wore at the reception following her father's service—disingenuous but necessary; expected. She would hear their words of wisdom, thank them, and continue on her way.

Occasionally, rarely, she would hear something that stuck with her; something that resonated deep inside of her. Almost always those words were spoken by somebody who had been in her shoes at one point in their lives. Like the twenty-two year old man she spoke to on Day 7. The man who she would see at Saint Joe's every Friday bringing his four year old daughter to a play date with other spouses and children. His wife was serving her third tour in Afghanistan. He had been in her shoes; more than once. When he approached her, he had been reserved, humble; cautious. He didn't want to intrude, didn't want to impose, didn't want to assume that her experience was anything like his experience. But he had seen the news, he had read the stories and he knew. Her heart was in Afghanistan with his.

"They say it gets easier," Maddie smiled tiredly when he offered his sympathies.

"It doesn't," he had shaken his head. "It just gets closer to the end."

Her eyes had welled with tears. He understood what most others did not; Day 1 was no different than day 71 of a deployment. Sure, time was passing, days were fading—but on day 71 Harry was no further away from danger than he was on Day 1. It wasn't easier. It was just closer to the end. The young man shared with Maddie a little ritual he and his daughter had to mark the days of his wife's deployment. In their home, in a space they would see every day, a space they both had access to, they had two large cylindrical vases. On the day his wife left, they had put 120 marbles into one of the vases—one for each day of her deployment. And every morning, he and his daughter would move one of the marbles to the empty vase. It was a visual representation of time passing; the nearing of the end.

Maddie thought that was beautiful; symbolic and sweet. This time her thank you was sincere, heartfelt, her hug was warm and appreciative. And that night, on her way home, she stopped at the
store and bought two vases, 120 marbles. One for every day that Harry would be deployed. She had poured all but seven of them into one vase; placing each of the seven carefully into the other and settling them on her mantel—under the painting of Bendal, next to the photo of them at The Lavender Lady. The only thing she did differently was that she would take a marble out of the "Days Left" vase, carry it in her pocket throughout the day and, at the end of the day, she would slip it into the "Days Passed."

And that is exactly what she had done on Day 116 when she left for work that morning. She smiled as she removed another marble, rolling it between her fingers before slipping it into her pocket; staring down the last four as though to let them know that she wasn't afraid, they wouldn't take her down. She was going to make it through them just as she had the previous 115; though it hadn't been easy.

Maddie's mood was lighter that day; having learned how to cope along the way. She offered smiles and nods as she passed by her colleagues. She asked one of the younger patients at the hospital how his Playstation battle with his older brother had gone and high-fived him when he said he had won. She had an early morning meeting with the Intervention Team, a play therapy session with a little girl who had made her a macaroni necklace, and was headed back to her office when her day came to a screeching halt.

Flipping through the files in her hand, she rounded the final corner to her office and she stopped in her tracks. Standing outside her door were two well-dressed, unassuming men who she knew instantly. They were Royal Protection Officers. That could only mean one thing; Charles was there.

She could almost hear the blood rushing from her brain, leaving behind a soft hum that only faintly drowned out the sound of Harry’s voice in her ear, the night before he left, telling her that if anything happened to him, his father would come to find her. She wouldn't find out about it from the nightly news—his father had sworn to that.

And there she stood, in the middle of the day on Day 116, looking at the two men waiting outside of her office—and the idea that just inside those doors was her entire life. She almost folded; almost collapsed right there on the cold tile floor. But something in her—most likely the same thing that kept her walking after her father died—something kept her upright.

She barely breathed as she studied her door; her intense fear occupying her mind in such a way that breathing never even crossed her mind. Holding her folders tightly to her chest where her macaroni necklace still dangled, her fingers turning over the marble in her pocket, she took a step in that direction. She had no choice but to face this, to face him. Oh God, she thought, tears coming to her eyes. She wasn't prepared to handle this. Not Harry.

The three short weeks leading up to Harry's deployment felt like 21 days of training; for both Harry and Maddie. When they finally left that room at Clarence House, one hour after they had stepped into it, the preparations began. Immediately, Harry’s schedule was altered. The majority of his official events were cancelled, making way for more intensive training at the Army Base. As his training began, so did hers. Right away she was thrown into the world where Harry was somewhere else. He spent the weekdays at the base, coming home only on the weekends, all three of them. Maddie had to learn how she was going to manage the time without him, how she was going to manage the massive onslaught of media attention once word rang out that he was gone, how she was going to handle the way her heart felt whenever she thought of him in battle.
Harry was changing. His body was harder, more sculpted; built for the rigor that frontline duty would bring. His mind, too, had become tougher; having been put through intense mental and psychological training—including what would happen to him should he be captured—and how he should respond. She could tell it was difficult, living in this world of limbo; his mind focused on his training, on what he was being called to do while his body was in England—waiting.

But when he was at home with her, he would let his guard down; he would be soft, loving, gentle. He would smile the smile that had kept her entranced with him for all this time. He would laugh and joke and play. At the same time there were these moments of pure honesty, when his eyes would tighten, when he would allow her to witness his darker moments; the moments that sat in the very real world where he was going to a war, to fight and even kill people. There was no way to avoid it. That is what he was doing, what he was trained to do.

And the night before he would leave her for four months, for 120 days, he let his guard down completely and she saw all sides of Harry; the soft and the tough, the light and the dark, the well-trained and the uncertain. He was leaving first thing the next morning and had spent dinner with his family; quiet time with his father, signing papers, reaching an understanding. He had taken shots with his brother; saying more in their silence than they did in their words. He had kissed Kate, held her tight and, when she started to cry, he squeezed her even tighter and told her to keep William in his place, off the pedestal that everyone else seemed to think he occupied. And then, with hugs to his father and brother, he went to Maddie who was waiting for him at his place at Kensington—in nothing but his button down shirt and polo socks. None of it was necessary. He was already there, already in a space where the only thing he could do, the only way he could show her was to...show her. Pulling her to him, his hand firm at the base of her neck, he had every intention of loving her well into the night.

"Harry..." Maddie's voice was soft and quiet in the dark room. They lay together, a tangled mess of limbs and sheets, glowing in post coital delight.

"Hmmm?" His finger reached out to trace a path along her thigh casually draped over him.

"Is there..." She blinked at the tears in her eyes, really wanting to keep the emotion from the moment if she could. "Is there anything you need from me? Before you leave or..." She trailed off, preferring silence to tears. A small, tired smile played across his lips, his hand flattening out to squeeze her leg with affection.

"I need you to be careful," he called out to her without moving. "I don't want to hear about you running off to a third world country to rebuild anything or save anyone. I can't do what I need to do if I'm worried about you in a pile of rubble somewhere..."

"No rebuilding," she agreed with a sniff. "No saving. I promise." Her hand reached for his, her fingers running over his palm. They were silent together for at least two minutes; their breath stabilizing, their body temperatures cooling, their eyes growing heavy.

"Listen, Maddie..." Harry's hand closed around hers as he moved, turning so he could look down at her. "We need to have the talk..."

"The talk?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted, her lips twitching into a smile. "Don't worry big guy, my mother had The Talk with me years and years ago. We're safe. You're off the hook."

"Hmm..." Harry smiled but shook his head. "A different talk. The one you have with the people in your life before you leave for battle." He heard her suck in her breath. "Maddie, if something happens to me..."
"Harry." Her protest was on her lips in a heartbeat, it was in her body—the way it tensed, the way it moved slightly away from him—involuntarily wanting to avoid the pain it knew was associated with this conversation.

"If something happens to me..." He cracked a little; holding her face in his hands as tears rose to his eyes. That was all it took for Maddie to let the floodgates open. "My father swore to me that he would come to find you. You won't have to hear about it on the evening news or see it flashed on some magazine headlines. He will come and find you first..."

"Harry," she held onto his hand that was cupping her face; tears falling out of her eyes and down to the pillow.

"And you won't have to sit at the back of the church." She let out the smallest of whimpers at the thought. "He promised you wouldn't be at the back of the church with the Ambassador to Ecuador or some crazy shit like that. They'll take care of you, they'll take you in..." He took a deep breath. "If you have any problems while I'm gone, call Will. You have his number, he's happy to be there. If there are any issues with the press or the paps get too close or you don't know what to do, call Will. He'll walk you through it." He could feel her head nod in his hands; his head dipping to kiss at her wet cheeks. "And for God's sake, whatever you do, if I'm gone, don't let Bishop go on and on about honor and duty and try to convince you that I would want him to look after you....okay? That is not at all what I would want." Maddie began to snicker through her tears; creating a mirrored response in Harry. "Make sure Bishop stays away. You understand?"

"Yes," Maddie's voice cracked, her smile weakening as the sadness surged. "Harry...Please stop talking about what happens if something happens. I am trying really hard right now to show some of the control and serenity that I've seen other partners do but...I'm so afraid.

"Don't be afraid," his hands held her cheeks. "Don't be afraid. It's one of the safest instruments in the world. And I know what I'm doing. I...they wouldn't let me go in if I didn't know what I was doing. I'm going to be okay," he kissed her. "I'm going to come back."

"You don't know that."

"No. No I don't."

^~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

**Day 1 of 120**

Day 1 was the worst. The absolute worst.

Saying good-bye to Harry was torture in a way that Maddie was not prepared to handle. He had been wise in insisting they say good-bye at his place, in his bed; far from the watchful eye of the public. Because Maddie was a mess. From the moment she woke up and rolled to her side to look at him, finding him already awake and watching her, she was a mess. She was embarrassingly blubbering and sniveling and, though she tried to turn away, tried to hide her eyes—he pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight. There was very little time left.

There was a moment, a split second when she just about lost it, when she almost gave in to her urge to beg him to stay. She wanted to remind him that on Christmas he was willing to toss aside his family tradition to stay with her, that less than a month ago, he had suggested they piss off the family and all of Great Britain and elope. She wanted to remind him of that now and then
disappear with him—somewhere they would never find them, somewhere he would be safe. She wanted to cry and plead and stomp her feet. And for a split second it crossed her mind.

And the very next second, she felt incredibly guilty. He was leaving for four months and this was the good-bye she was giving him?! So she pulled it together. She channeled the strength of the men and women she worked with every week at St. Joe's. She took deep breaths, ran through the plethora of calming techniques that she had taught clients over the years and she pulled it together.

"I have to take a shower," he spoke softly, his lips against her forehead. "You want to come with me?"

"No," she shook her head, wiping at her eyes. "You go ahead." Harry nodded, kissed her again and slipped from the sheets. She felt his absence immediately; moving to snuggle into his spot, into his pillow, into his scent. Squeezing her eyelids shut, she took deep breaths and listened to the noises around her; the steady stream of the shower, the clock ticking on the wall, the wind blowing through the trees outside.

Maddie's eyes locked with his when he stepped back into the room; moving first to kiss her. She took a deep breath and bit her lip when he stepped away and began to put on the universally recognized camouflage uniform. She blinked back the levy of tears that threatened when he slid on his necklace, when he fastened the bracelet she had given him around his wrist. Standing at the foot of his bed, he stood in silence, watching as Maddie's mind worked overtime trying to keep it together; trying to maintain her cool.

"You can stay here as long as you would like," he was desperately hanging on to his control. "And you can come back whenever you want. You have Thomas' number. He can get you in here...though I should warn him about your sock thieving ways."

"You should," Maddie nodded, letting out a ragged breath. Looking down at her hands, she implored herself to keep it together.

"Maddie..." His voice cracked as he called to her. In his next breath, she was up—out from under the covers, walking across the length of his bed to where he stood at the end. His head tipped up to look at her, his hands moving around her body; pulling her close to him. Pressing his head to her stomach, he hugged her tight. Holding his face in her hands, she pulled his head up to look at her; her eyes memorizing his features.

"I love you Harry," she smiled down at him; her thumbs stroking his cheeks. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," he smiled, his eyes wet, his heart betraying his desire to stay calm and collected.

"Go and do what you need to do and then you come home to me..." She chuckled as she recalled the way he had sent her off to Bendal. "You stay safe and careful and...and remember that I need you. I need you back here with me. We have plans...I can't have those eight kids without you Wales."

"Ha!" He chuckled; his body vibrating against her as his hands rubbing along her arms. "I'm going to hold you to that."

"I don't care," she shook her head. "You come home to me and you can have as many as you want."
"Now see, I know you've lost your mind..." His grin wavered as he took a breath. "I have to go, love. Come down here and kiss me properly."

"No," Maddie shook her head, her eyes giving up the fight as tears escaped onto her cheeks. But she went. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she stepped off the bed and into his arms. Her entire body wrapped around his; his arms holding her off the ground. Pulling her face from the crook of his neck, her lips found his; kissing every bit of love and strength and promise into him.

"I'll see you in four months," he whispered, pulling his face back to look at her. "One Hundred and twenty days."

"Two thousand, eight hundred and eighty hours," Maddie bit her lip. "I did the math."

"You're a strange woman, love." He smiled, kissing her again.

"I am," she nodded, her legs unwrapping from around his waist, finding the soft pile of his carpet. When his eyes hit hers, the small bit of humor rushed from the room replaced with sadness and worry and heartache. Harry dipped his head to kiss her, one last time; his lips moved against hers, gentle at first. But when she fisted his shirt in her hands and pressed her body into his, his mouth opened over hers, allowing her tongue to tease against his. His hands grabbed at her; running over her skin, over the curves of her body; pulling a groan from deep inside of her. Forcing himself from her, commanding his body to take a step back, he breathed heavily, her fingers flying to her lips-red and warm from his.

"I have to..."

"I know."

"Four months," he vowed.

"Eight babies," she promised.

When he turned away from her, she felt her balance shift. When he reached for his bag and his hat and moved towards his door, she felt her heart pull in her chest—as if it were going with him. And when, with one last crooked grin and one last wink of his eye, he stepped out of his room, closing the door behind him—she felt her knees give out.

He was gone. Just like that. Day 1 of 120.
Chapter 68

Day 3

On Day 3, the world was let in on Harry's deployment and the media went absolutely nuts. There was news of his departure everywhere; pictures of him in uniform plastered all over town. It was like every medium of press was shoving it in her face; taunting her with the reality that Harry was off fighting in a war. The headlines called out to her, the news anchors spoke to her. All she could hear, all she could see was how His Royal Highness was heading right into the thick of it. And then there was the article that was released saying that he was at the top of the Taliban hit list, detailing the things that could happen to him if he was captured.

It made her want to vomit.

And the paparazzi—the paparazzi was all over her. It was so much worse than when they were trying to figure out her name, it was so much bigger than when they thought they had nude photos of her. They were absolutely everywhere. They waited outside of her place. They were at the entrance of her parking lot at work. They were stationed outside of the clubs and restaurants she and Harry had been to. They knew where she got her hair done, they knew where she liked to buy her groceries. They knew the tiny little bookstore she liked to peruse at leisure. They were everywhere. And they were relentless with their questions.

How is Harry? Where is Harry? Does he call you? Are you worried? Is he still okay? Do you miss him?

Do you miss him? Are you out of your fucking mind? She wanted to yell—though she never did. They were everywhere with their inane questions, their invasions of her space, of her privacy, of her God given right to grieve his departure and be depressed until he returned.

It made her want to break things.

Day 5

On Day 5, Harry's friends began to settle around her; circle the wagons. Ella had always been there, from day one—sleeping over the first two nights and taking Maddie to her home the next. But on Day 5, Harry's friends rallied.

Bishop was first—Bishop was always. When he showed up at her office door that day, after a long day with clients, Maddie was so shocked to see him, she almost knocked him over as she hurried past him.

When he told her his car was parked in the parking garage, and that the press had no idea that he drove a car, much less what it looked like, she felt the very beginnings of an emotional melt down. And when he tossed her his keys and told her she could drive it until the press figured her out—at which time he would switch it out for something else—she had to sit down in her chair to keep from falling.

She didn't care what snarky comments Harry made about Bishop, she loved this man. And she knew Harry did too.

Next it was Penelope. Her sister's best friend's roommate worked at the salon Maddie frequented. And, as a result of some sordid tale from university, she was still in debt to Penelope. Calling in
that favor, she invited Maddie over to her place where, over a bottle of wine, they both enjoyed manicures, pedicures, and a full cut and color. As silly as it seemed, the pampering made Maddie feel like a new woman. And she didn't have to hide behind a magazine or sneak in the back door to make it happen.

They were all there; Leo offering a safe, press-free haven and a booth in the back for the nights she wanted to come out, and sending food home for her to enjoy on the nights when she didn't.

Kiki and Sean returned from their honeymoon and stepped right onto the defensive team that surrounded Maddie. They were all there; Ella, Bishop, Kiki, Sean, Penelope, Anne, Leo. They were there to pull her through the crowds, there to help shield the onslaught of cameras and, when she couldn't handle it, they were there with a bottle of tequila.

They loved her—and Harry—too much to leave her out there on her own. This was how they protected him. This was how they watched after her.

**Day 11**

On Day 11 Maddie started to feel better. Her lungs were expanding more, her heart not quite as heavy. She wasn't crying herself to sleep as much and had found that she wasn't avoiding wearing makeup in order to sidestep any embarrassing smudges.

The media attention had begun to wane a bit. She could look at a newspaper stand. She could watch the nightly news.

Though she was nowhere near ready to say things were getting easier. She had put up her vases of marbles and she felt comfortable saying things were getting closer to the end. With every day, things were getting closer to the end. But not easier. It wouldn't be easier until Harry was home; safe and in her arms.

But she could come out of hiding. She could walk through her day without her sunglasses. She could go to the grocery store again. The media was still there, but the newness of the story had worn off and, when Justin Bieber was caught cheating on his movie star girlfriend, there were bigger stories to print.

Maddie wanted to send a gift basket to that little shit with the ridiculous hair. But instead she went back to her favorite bookstore and wasted an entire afternoon.

**Day 18**

Day 18 was Valentine's Day and Maddie had been dreading it for a good solid week; though when the day actually rolled around, she found that it wasn't quite so bad. She spent the morning in a meeting, met with the group she ran for early childhood kiddos and joined the staff in passing out goodies to their regular patients. Feeling gracious, she took on an extra shift that night, allowing one of her colleagues to take her girlfriend out for a romantic evening.

When Maddie finally left the hospital, she stopped off at a bakery a few blocks from her place to buy a pastry and walk the rest of the way. There was something about the crisp white snow, the brisk air, that made her feel refreshed; not as heavy. Turning the corner towards her house, she caught something out of the corner of her eye. Squinting, she tried to focus on the stairs leading up to her place. Was that...

"Goddamn it Forrester!" Bishop's voice called out into the night. "We have been sitting here for hours! Would you hurry up and let us in your bloody place before my pecker freezes, falls off, and shatters at Ella's feet!" Maddie could hear Ella giggle as she hushed him.
"What in the hell are you two doing here?" Maddie hurried towards them; looking at their pink noses, their bundled bodies.

"Waiting for you," Ella hugged her best friend; kissing her softly on the cheek. "I thought you were working early today?"

"I took an extra shift so Miranda and Jamie could..."

"DOOR!" Bishop groaned. "Could you open the door before we dive into the gossip circuit at the hospital?!"

"Wow," Maddie snickered, moving past them both to do as he asked. "Bishop is an entirely different man when he's cold." Ella smiled apologetically, moving quickly into the heated hallway that greeted them. Taking the stairs to generate more friction in their cold legs, the three of them were in Maddie's apartment in no time. "I still don't understand..." She looked them over as she shrugged out of her coat, unwrapping her scarf. "It's Valentine's Day. Don't you two have plans?"

"We did," Bishops sighed, his fingers and his mood thawing as he took Ella's coat from her. "We had dinner, we had drinks...this is the next part of our plans."

"Me?" Maddie laughed. "Hanging out with gloomy me is part of your Valentine's Day plans? You don't have to do this, you know..." She looked to Ella. "I know you love me, but you shouldn't make him be here tonight. I'm going to be fine. I have my pastry and a bottle of..."

"It's not me," Ella shook her head, slipping off her heels and moving to Maddie's couch. "I'm not making him be here. He's making me. Well, not making me but...you get it."

"What?" Maddie's smile pulsed as she turned to Bishop. "I don't understand. Why would you..."

"This..." Bishop's arm extended and there, hanging from his hand, was a bright red gift bag.

"You brought me a gift?" Her eyes flashed from the bag to his and he shook his head. "Then who..."

"A little bird. Or a big bird. An Apache bird..." Bishop chuckled at his own joke. "Harry left this with me. He asked me to bring it to you tonight and, well, the Captain gets what the Captain wants and..." Maddie's hands moved to her mouth, her eyes welling with tears. "I have a gift. I have wine and I have Ella...in case you need to cuddle. Because I am not allowed to cuddle. He was incredibly clear about that." Maddie managed a laugh through her tears, her heart confused at the overwhelming sadness that was mixing with the smile on her face.

"I don't know what to..." Maddie shook her head and, upon Bishop's coaxing, took the gift bag from him. Ella patted the spot next to her on the couch and Maddie was quick to sit there, pulling a blanket from the back and draping it over her and Ella's legs. She stared at the red bag in her lap, almost afraid to touch it; afraid of what it could do to her.

"Go ahead darling," Ella nudged her lightly as Bishop stepped out of the room to open the bottle of wine and find glasses. Taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, Maddie steeled herself and pulled out the tissue paper that had been stuffed inside. The bag was unnecessarily large for the long, slim box that was nestled at the bottom.

The bag fell from her lap onto the floor next to the tissue paper as her fingers held onto the box carefully; almost reverently—taking in its shape, its color, its weight. Trying to push down the lump in her throat, she pulled at the silver ribbon and lifted the lid off the box. Her fingers were gentle as she lifted the delicate silver chain from the box; pulling it up and out.
"A necklace?" Ella smiled, leaning in closer as Maddie pulled the end of it from the box. Maddie's other hand reached out, cupping the small, simple pendant that hung at the end. Pulling it closer, her eyes read the word and instantly filled with tears.

"Ubuntu..." Maddie whispered; her head hanging as she began to sob.

"Oh honey, come here," Ella moved, pulling her friend into her arms; cradling her head to her like a small child. The box fell from Maddie's lap, the chain held tight in her hand, as she leaned into Ella; waves of sadness washing over her.

When Bishop returned, he had three glasses of wine in his hands, but he took one look at the couch and sat them on the table. Ella looked up at him with wide, wet eyes and he sighed heavily. Moving to sit on the table in front of the couch, his hand reached out to Maddie; rubbing down her back in a soothing way; his heart hurting for her. He let her cry for a good minute, let her wallow and sob and then, he cleared his throat and spoke softly.

"You know...I don't know if it'll help or not..." Ella looked to him as Maddie sniffed and quieted for a second. "But I thought you should know...my pecker has thawed. No worries about it crashing to the floor and shattering."

There was a split second, a pause in the room where Ella thought over just how much it would hurt if she were to punch him. And then, in the very next second, laughter erupted.

And just like that, Maddie was pulled from the darkness.

This was how they protected him. This was how they looked after her.

Eventually Ella helped secure the necklace around her neck and Bishop distributed the glasses of wine and joined them on the couch. Toasting Captain Wales, they tipped back their drinks and sighed into the moment.

That night, after an entire bottle had been emptied, after she shoved Bishop and Ella out the door to a cab—insisting they have some time to the two of them, Maddie went over to her mantle and, her fingers stroking the pendant Harry had left for her, she pulled the marble from her pocket and dropped it in the "Days Passed" vase with a smile.

Day 18. Check.
Chapter 69

Day 25

On Day 25, Maddie received a family heavy phone call from Colorado. The family was together for dinner at her Uncle Patrick's and they decided maybe she needed to hear from them. And, though it was midnight and Maddie had been asleep, she needed it more than she thought. Her mother was first; sending her love and offering to hop on the next plane to England. Patrick was next with a completely inappropriate joke and a "buck up little camper" type motivation. Her grandmother offered to send soup and a knitted blanket. Gary offered to send something from the farm and Kyle offered to come out and go on a soul-purging hike somewhere in the English countryside. And then she spoke at length with Derek about what life was like on a base in a military zone and, knowing she needed it—knowing she could handle it—he was honest with her. She appreciated that about him, about all of them—not feeling the need to hide things from her. He was quick to note that Harry was in the air, he was flying out of a base and things were a little different for him than the frontline guys and gals who were on the ground. And, because he had been honest with her, she believed him.

Day 42

On Day 42 Maddie's other family moved closer to her. Caving to her partner's wishes, and the best interests of their family, Khenda finally gave in. She and Collins packed up their belongings and moved to France. They had waited to tell Maddie and Ella, waited until they had a home secured, till they had jobs secured—until they were absolutely sure. And then they about burst with happiness when they could finally tell her. Two days before they were to arrive, they called Maddie with the good news.

She immediately felt tears of happiness fill her eyes when Khenda called to tell her. As soon as she hung up, she called Ella and they made travel plans for that weekend. It was much easier to convince Ella to go to France than it was to Bendal. They packed their bags, let Bishop drive them to the airport, and in just over an hour—they were reuniting their small Bendal family.

They spent 48 hours in France; 48 wonderful, homecoming hours with Khenda and Collins. They helped them move into their place, they painted walls, they picked out baby furniture and made fun of Khenda's cravings for chocolate shakes. They hardly slept at all; there was too much catching up to do. Khenda was due in June and they would not be finding out what gender their baby would be. She preferred surprises. Collins, elated that she finally allowed them to move to a place safer, more stable, was willing to go along with anything else that she asked. Maddie's heart swelled watching the two of them together; watching them move around each other with such love and adoration. It was a reassuring, comforting 48 hours.

And when the 48 hours was over, Khenda stayed home sorting through her fabric samples for curtains while Collins took Maddie and Ella to the airport. There were tears, there were hugs, and there were promises of many more weekends to come. It was there that the photo was snapped of Collins kissing Maddie's cheek with familial love in his eyes. And it was that photo that was published in a London tabloid with a headline implying Maddie was having a French Affair while Harry was off serving his country.

It was the first time she saw only red. It was the first time she wanted to track down a reporter and punch him in the face.

The bloggers were all over it though; catching the photo and recognizing Collins from pictures of Harry in Bendal. And those bloggers were amazing. They pulled down deep and produced photo
after photo of Collins and Khenda laughing with Harry, standing with him at events. And the bloggers were vicious; quick to call the photographer and the tabloid to the carpet. Though there was no apology, no retraction, it was clear that the majority of the public wasn't about to fall for this particular story.

It was the first time Maddie wanted to track down a blogger and hug them.

**Day 51**

On Day 51, Maddie agreed to accompany Bishop to the Royal Opera House to see Swan Lake. He had taken his mother's tickets thinking that he and Ella could go but, when Ella was called in to work the weekend because somebody was sick, Bishop called on Maddie. His mother didn't want the tickets to go to waste and he promised it would be a good time. Maddie had stalled, not feeling up to the dressing up that would accompany a trip to the Opera. But she loved Bishop and he had stepped up as her friend, going above and beyond to make sure she was surviving Harry's deployment. So she smiled wide and agreed to go.

And when Bishop showed up on Day 51, Maddie was dressed to the nines with a smile on her face and her hair upswept. Bishop whistled low and slow as Maddie shook her head at him.

"I'm not sure your best friend would approve of how you're looking at me right now."

"I'm not sure my best friend would approve of what I'm thinking about you right now..."

"Bishop!" She smacked him with her clutch.

"Ouch! I'm kidding! Good God woman. What do you have in that thing? A brick?" He rubbed his arm. "You know you cannot take bricks into the Royal Opera House."

"I read that on the website," she snarked right back at him as she reached for her coat.

"Resourceful," Bishop smirked; helping her with the coat and moving to open the door for her. Maddie smiled at him and reached out to pat his arm as she moved through the door.

"Five bucks says that tabloid paints you as the next in my long line of lovers I take while Harry's out risking life and limb..." Bishop paused for a beat, knowing that still pissed her off, and then he shrugged; pulling the door shut behind him.

"Five bucks says I'm going to be the one to leak that particular story." With another smack to his arm, Maddie chuckled.

"It's a good thing I know you're joking."

"And it's a good thing I brought liquid medicine," he patted his breast pocket. "Cause that brick isn't getting any lighter." Offering her his arm, they slipped from her building into an awaiting car and were on their way to the Opera.

Maddie had to admit, she was enjoying herself. Bishop had been right. He had promised her a good time and he was delivering. They had a lovely meal before the show, the performances had been amazing, and at intermission, he even allowed her to buy him a drink. When the lights flashed, they downed the remaining wine and made their way back towards their box.

As Maddie stepped into the dim walkway, she felt her phone buzz in her purse. Peeking inside to check the ID, she didn't recognize the number.
"Sorry," she whispered to Bishop; pulling the phone from her purse as people were taking their seats. "It might be work."

"Make it fast Forrester, they're pretty strict around here," Bishop winked at her as she pressed the button.

"Hello?" She spoke into the phone; unable to hear much of anything on the other end as the orchestra began to tune.

"Excuse me miss," an irritable usher gave her the eye.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the usher, to Bishop. Pressing her hand to her other ear, she hurried back towards the door to the lobby. "Hello?" She asked again.

And when the voice, his voice, breathed, "Madeline..." Her lungs hitched in her chest and her eyes stung with tears.

"Harry?" She stood still, her head shaking; unable to process it. "Oh my God. Harry. Is that you?" That same usher cleared his throat and stepped closer to her. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm leaving I just..." She broke into a run to the doors; needing to get out, needing to take this phone call. Pushing out into the lobby, she took a deep breath. "Please tell me you're still there."

"I'm here love," he was grinning. She could tell. "Where are you?"

"The Opera with Bishop," she wiped at her cheeks; a pointless act, as her tears just kept coming.

"Ha!" He laughed; the first real, from the gut laugh he'd had in a while. "Did you say the Opera with Bishop?"

"Yes," she sniffed, looking for a place to be that wasn't out in the open, a place where people wouldn't see her crying.

"Why are you at the Opera with Bishop? What bet did you lose to get yourself in that predicament?"

"I...I...I don't want to talk about the Opera. Or Bishop. Or...Harry...are you okay? Are you..."

"I'm fine," he was quick to reassure her.

"You can call?" She perked up, hurrying across the lobby to a phone booth—an old fashioned one that had the doors that would pull closed around you. It was ornate and spacious and provided just enough privacy.

"Occasionally. I only have a few minutes but..."

"I love you," she cut him off, her body folding over, her hands rubbing at her eyes, not caring in the least that she was smearing her eye makeup.

"Oh baby I love you too," his voice was low, soft. Maddie nodded, unable to speak for a moment; the lump in her throat constricting. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Harry knew this was hard for her, so he continued. "I saw that Khenda and Collins moved to France."

"Mmm Hmm," Maddie nodded, pulling it together.

"And you went to see them. How is she doing? How's the baby?"
"She's doing so well," Maddie smiled; her breathing leveling out as she thought of their friends. "She looks amazing and the baby is doing great. She's the most adorable pregnant woman I've ever seen. And Collins is just...beside himself."

"I would imagine," Harry laughed.

"Wait, how did you know that I saw them..." Maddie thought it over for a split second and then, her edge returned. "You saw it, didn't you?"

"The article that said you were sleeping with Collins?" He raised his eyebrows. "I heard about it."

"Assholes," she groaned. "I don't think I've ever wanted to pummel somebody as much as I did that day."

"Don't worry, love. When I come home, we'll go to Paris and I'll kiss Collins on the mouth. We'll see what they write then." Maddie burst out laughing at the image, the tears squeezing from her eyes.

"It's okay, my fans were all over it..."

"Good."

"I miss you Harry." Her voice was softer this time, she was calmer. "Are you being safe?"

"I am."

"You're coming home to me?"

"And those eight babies," he laughed and she sighed. "Are you doing okay Maddie? I know the press and the paps and...I know it's been hard. You okay?"

"I am," she nodded, her fingers lifting to play with the pendant on her necklace. "Though your Valentine's gift nearly took me down."

"You liked it?"

"I loved it," she sighed; leaning back against the wall of the booth. "I love it."

"Tell me what your day was like," Harry's voice was low as he made the request.

"My day? It was incredibly dull compared to yours I would imagine," she smiled sadly at the thought of what his day might have looked like. "I'll bore you to tears."

"Maybe," Harry shrugged. "Maybe I just really want to hear your voice..." He trailed off and she nodded.

"I woke up an hour earlier than I set my alarm clock for," she began; more than eager to meet his request. "I mean an entire hour. I'm not sure what's working against me lately, but that is just too early..." She heard him chuckle and continued talking. She would tell him every single detail of every single day if he asked her too. "For breakfast I had..."

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When Maddie emerged from the phone booth ten minutes later, she felt so many different things. She was happy she was able to speak to him, damaged that she had to let him go. She was refreshed and ready to face the remaining 69 days, yet she was tired from the major emotions that she was juggling. Stuffing her phone back into her clutch, she glanced down the hallway in search
of a bathroom to check her makeup.

"Ahem." She turned to her left, towards the sound and her smile returned.

"Bishop."

"When you ran out, I was worried it might be bad," he pushed off of the wall he was leaning on and made his way towards her. "When you were in there on the phone for ten minutes, I figured you were fine. But I stuck around on the off chance you might come out of that phone booth dressed like Superman."

"Superman?" She arched an eyebrow.

"Yes!" Bishop nodded. "Clark Kent went into the phone booth and Superman came out."

"Ah...sorry," she waved her hand down at her dress. "No such luck."

"Oh well," he shrugged, reaching into his suit pocket and handing her his handkerchief.

"It was Harry," she confessed, taking it from him and dabbing at her eyes.

"Yeah?" Bishop's face lit up and it hit Maddie—here was Bishop, taking care of her, looking after her. Yet in reality, he had known Harry much longer, he had been Harry’s best friend years and years before Maddie even came along. They were family. And she suddenly felt a bit foolish, and embarrassed for being so selfish with her emotions.

"Yeah," she nodded, linking her hand through his arm. "He's doing really well and he told me to give you this," with a twinkle in her eye, she tilted up and kissed his cheek. Bishop smiled down at her and patted her hand.

"I appreciate the gesture, but I know Harry very well. There is no way he told you to kiss me."

"He did!" She insisted, her eyes shifting slightly.

"Oh-kay," Bishop laughed; not believing her for a second.

"Listen, what do you say we miss the end of this show and I take you out on the town?"

"Out on the town?" Bishop perked up.

"Drinks, dancing..." Maddie shrugged. "I don't have anywhere to be. Do you?"

"I suppose not," he shook his head and began walking towards the coat check. "Though you do know if we're seen out at a club tonight, they are definitely going to write about it tomorrow."

"I do," Maddie nodded and sighed. "Five bucks says I'm the one that tips them our location." With a wink and a grin, she stepped in front of him, offering the attendant her numbered ticket. Maddie didn't care what they wrote about her, she and Bishop were in the same boat. They both loved Harry and, after hearing from him, after feeling secure in his safety for the day, they both needed a little night out.

The next day, she increased her hours volunteering at St. Joe's; eager to give more to the men and women who were coming home. Hearing Harry's voice had propelled her forward; towards doing more. And that was just the place to focus her attention.

Day 72
Day 72 was Maddie's lowest point of Harry's entire deployment. Since her night at the Opera with Bishop, the night Harry called, Maddie found that she was navigating the days a little better. It wasn't easier—it wasn't as though she was ever rid of the constant reminder that he was gone—but she was growing more adept at handling it.

With the exception of Day 72.

To be fair, it had started off pretty rough. Maddie slept through her alarm clock; rushing about to dress and make it to the hospital in time for meetings. She missed her morning coffee, she missed her morning pastry, and she missed the memo that said that lightly scattered showers in London actually meant torrential downpour. She had her umbrella, she had her raincoat and her rain boots, and she had the biggest mess of frizzy hair she had seen in years.

All she wanted to do was sink into Harry's bathtub—with Harry—in the hottest water she could handle and then crawl into Harry's bed—again, with Harry—and spend the day snuggling up in the comfort and luxury she always felt in his arms. But her day had different plans for her. The hospital was slightly organized chaos from the moment she stepped in to the moment she stepped out—and when she finally stepped out, she knew she would need assistance in shutting her brain off, in coming down from the craziness that had permeated her entire being. So she did what any smart gal would do; she called Bishop and Ella. And in less than an hour, they all met at Leo's. Sean and Kiki were already there, sitting at their booth off in the back.

"Finally." Maddie sighed her first bit of relief of the day, sinking into her spot next to Sean with a smile on her face. It had been a crazy day, but it had been productive—at least she was proud of that. Bishop and Ella were right behind her and Leo made it a point to stop by; kissing each and every one of them. The restaurant was full, the TVs over the bar were broadcasting a Football game—though Maddie would forever refer to it as Soccer—of two highly competitive rivals. Though Leo's establishment was typically catered to a less rowdy group of people, the game was a big one and it was generating quite the customer base. The mood was excited, the people spirited, and the place was absolutely packed.

There was something about it all that reminded her of home; that reminded her of drinking beer with her cousins and watching an American Football game; cheering and screaming and cutting loose from the tensions of the week. As she finished her second beer, she grew silent; her mind processing through her day—shutting the door on her caseload, closing out metaphorical files; allowing her to step away from work and into her private life—a skill that would serve her well in her future at Harry's side.

They were well into their fourth round, laughing and sighing, having just finished dinner, when Day 72 became the darkest day on the calendar.

"Oh my God!" Maddie heard one of the University students call out in a tone that was clearly not football related. Not two seconds later there was this loud, collective gasp coming from all around her; a few more gasps.

"Did somebody win?" Maddie's eyebrows rose, looking over her glass at Sean across the table; whose face had drained of all color. "What is it?" Maddie turned around in the booth before anyone even thought of answering her.

And there, on every TV in the place was Harry's picture. The anchor was cutting into the game to bring them all breaking news. Harry's picture held pride of place while in the corner, old b-roll footage of the war in Afghanistan. And then, the anchor, with a sad, stoic look in his eyes reported,

"For the first time in its existence, a British manned Apache helicopter has been shot down in
Afghanistan. While the DOD has not yet commented on this breaking news, we first received word of it from the Taliban, who has been quick to claim responsibility....and to announce..." The anchor took a breath. "That they have, indeed, captured Prince Harry of Wales...." Though the anchor continued talking; explaining in more detail the news they were hearing and the sources from which they were hearing it, Maddie heard none of it. People around them began to groan, crying out at the news; removing their hats. But Maddie's hearing had faded, her ability to breathe had been hindered. She turned in the booth, turning back to her friends, with a slow, methodic shake of her head.

"No..." She whispered. "No. They would have called me if...they...." Her eyes met Bishop's and she saw a shattered, broken man looking back at her. "No." She told him; stern and angry. "He swore that if something happened, I wouldn't see it on the news. They would have called me before. Don't you get it? I wouldn't find out like this. I...." Maddie pulled out her cell phone; checking and re-checking and checking again. She had no missed calls, no messages. "See!" She held the phone out to her friends who were not easily convinced. And the frantic look in her eyes gave tell; she wasn't either.

The room, once lively with slightly drunken sports fans, calling out to the TV, calling out to their rivals, had grown quiet. Now all that could be heard was the voice from the same anchor and the University girls at the table behind them who were crying into their drinks. The nation already slipping into mourning.

Maddie shook her head, her mind refusing the tears in her eyes and she wanted to hit them. To shake them. Harry wasn't captured. He wasn't shot down. She would know that. She would know that.

"Bishop," Maddie's voice croaked. "Look at me. They are wrong. They are. I..." She felt Ella's hand on her arm as Leo hurried up to the table, his eyes scattered, his hair mussed.

"I think you should come with me," though he spoke to the group, he looked directly at Maddie. "Wha...why?" She looked up at him, her eyes filling with tears.

"Because this place is..." He glanced uneasily at the TV. "I don't know what's going on but if that's..." He shook his head. "If people see you here they are going to be all over you in seconds. You need to come with me right now."

"He's right," Bishop nodded; pulling his voice from somewhere deep inside. "Come on. Give me your hand." He reached across the table and nodded to her.

"This is ridiculous. This is...."

"He wouldn't want you sitting here for this Maddie." Bishop's voice was firm; his eyes set on her. "He wouldn't want you to..." Maddie's hand fell into his then; both of them unable to continue with the line of thought he was heading down. She pressed her lips together and nodded and then, without another word, the group was up and moving. They followed Leo through the place, down a hallway, behind the scenes of the action. Rounding a corner, he pushed open the door to his office and stood aside, allowing all of them to enter. As the door shut behind them, Kiki let out a cry; her eyes welling over.

"What the hell is going on right now?" She was shaky; afraid.

"I don't know," Bishop shook his head, pulling his own phone out to dial.

"Here..." Leo went to the TV in his office and flipped it on; Harry flashed to the screen in an
instant. This time he was in that unmistakable camouflage, walking with his squadron. Maddie felt her stomach turn.

"Shut it off," she whispered, her eyes full of water. "Shut it off! I don't want to see this. I don't want to hear that! Don't you understand? Before Harry left, his father swore that if something happened to him he would tell me himself! He wouldn't let me hear about it in a bar...Harry would never let me hear something like this in a bar...don't you..." She looked at their faces then, looked into their eyes. Not one of them believed her; not one of them wasn't crying. Her eyes flew away from them then, looking to the TV. Her heart slowly fell, straight out of her chest and onto the floor. "Please..." She begged Leo in a breathless voice. "Please turn this off. I can't..."

And then, with a sound louder than the pounding in her ears, her cell phone rang in her hands. With wide, terrified eyes, she looked down at the ID.

CoW. It read. Charles of Wales—her code name for Charles.

And whatever force had been keeping her tears at bay, gave in—surrendering to the flood that tumbled from her eyes.

"I can't," she shook her head, holding her phone out away from her; not wanting to hold it, not wanting to look at it. "Please..."

"Stop," Ella's voice spoke up, moving to her best friend as she wiped at her own tears. She stepped right up to her, taking her face in her hands and forcing her to look at her. "In through the nose, out through the mouth." Maddie shook her head, but Ella remained firm. "You need to answer that call Madeline. You need to know what he has to tell you. Now take a breath through your goddamned nose and let it out through your mouth!" The room was stunned at her words, at her force. But it worked. Maddie did exactly as she was told. She breathed twice and then, her hand clutching to Ella, she answered her phone.

"This is Maddie," she whispered. Harry's friends, her friends, watched on pins and needles as Maddie listened to Harry's father; his heavy, warm voice.

"Madeline, it's Charles," she held her breath and squeezed her eyes shut. "Harry is fine. He's on the ground, secured at the base. I spoke to him myself two minutes ago. I swear to you. Harry is fine. Madeline, do you hear me?" They watched as she heard his words, watched as she pressed a hand to her mouth and nodded; tears toppling from her closed eyes. "Madeline?"

"Yes," she croaked; her eyes opening to look to his friends, their friends. "They're wrong. It's not him. It's...he's fine. Harry's fine." Kiki let out a cry while Leo's hand slapped his wall in relief.

"I apologize that I wasn't able to reach you before now. We were not informed of the incident until after the press had been informed and made the decision to go with the...news." His disdain was clear in his tone. "I had to make a few phone calls, I had to be sure before I called you. The Ministry of Defence is going to correct this after they contact the families of the men who were injured, but I wanted to get to you first. Please know that, had I any control over this, I absolutely would have brought you in before it hit. You do know that, don't you?"

"I..." She cleared her throat. "Yes."

"Are you alone right now?"

"No," she shook her head, a grin spreading over her face as she watched them hug each other. "I'm...I'm with our friends."

"Would you like me to send for you? You can stay here if you like...or I can call Thomas and
"have him open up Harry's place at Kensington?" Maddie's eyes flooded again at his words. And she loved him. She loved him so much that she considered going to him, just so she could crawl into his lap and hug him for being so considerate of what she might need—even in a moment that must have been gut wrenching for him.

"No, thank you though."

"Maybe a weekend at Highgrove?"

"Definitely," she nodded; trying to gain control of her emotions so she could pass the news onto their friends.

"I'll call you to set it up," he sighed deeply. "Please take care of yourself Madeline. I promise, this will not happen again."

"Thank you sir," her voice was tired; haggard.

"Good night dear."

"Goodnight," Maddie sniffed and disconnected the phone; meeting Ella's eyes. Her voice cracked as she joined their excitement. "It's not him. It's not him. Harry's fine." And then, because she couldn't stand on her own any longer, she flung her arms around Ella's neck and let her sobs take over. The relief in the room was palpable as even Bishop shed a few tears.

"Are you sure?" He asked Maddie when she began to pull back from Ella. "Madeline. Are you positive?"

"Yes."

"But the TV, they are still reporting. They..." Bishop was more scattered than Maddie had ever seen him.

She moved then, taking his face in her hands. "Charles spoke to him himself just before he called me. There's going to be an announcement. There were no deaths but there were some injuries and the MOD wants to contact the families of the men who were actually shot down. But he swore...Harry is fine." Bishop's eyes lit up, his face brightened and, acting on adrenaline alone, he pulled Maddie into his arms; kissing her cheek three times before pressing her head to his shoulder in a hug.

They stayed there in that office, all together—hugging and laughing—until the news corrected their mistake. Maddie could only imagine the amount of flack the press was going to take the next day, the way the world would look at these journalists who jumped, gunning to be the first to report, the way the public would revolt. But that night, she didn't care too much. When they emerged back into the main bar area, the patrons had swung back from their depressive state and a celebration had ensued. Bishop tried to talk her into staying, into having a bottle of champagne with him—but she couldn't. She wanted nothing more than to put an end to this long, emotionally draining day. But she insisted that he stay with the group and tie one on. It's what Harry would want. So she kissed her friends, hugged them tight and—with Leo's assistance—she snuck out the back door and headed home.

There were a few extra paps across the street from her place when her cab pulled up. Holding her head high, she smiled a small smile and stepped out of the car. If there were going to be photos of her floating around after the incident, she wanted them to see the side of her that was saddened by the news but relieved it wasn't Harry; the side that wasn't rattled to the core.

She didn't want them to see the side of her that came out the second she shut and locked the door.
behind her; the side that fell apart. Allowing her tears to flow freely, she took a hot bath, she put on her pajamas—his shirt, his socks—and she crawled in her bed; pulling the comforter up and over her head.

Day 72 was over and it had taken its toll on her. She was happy it was over. She was happy he was okay.

She was deliriously happy.

AND.

And there were still 48 more days to go. This wasn't over yet. Not by a long shot.
Day 74

On Day 74 Maddie finally fell asleep. It had taken 46 hours and a trip to Highgrove, but she finally fell asleep. The night of the Apache incident, Maddie had gone home and had every intention of sleeping away the anxiety and fear left behind from those few minutes she thought the news could be right. But once she hit the pillow, her mind woke up; processing the moment over and over and over and over again; making her stomach turn, making her brain go wild. And she was wide awake.

For two days.

On the second day, Charles called her to extend an invitation to Highgrove for the weekend. Deciding that time away was exactly what she needed, Maddie agreed. So, after packing up her things and an easy drive into the country, she was being greeted by Charles and Camilla at the door to the beautiful estate Maddie had fallen in love with some time ago. It was late in the evening but they had waited to have dinner with her. As they ate Maddie decided that at some point in their lives, Charles and Camilla must have been pulled aside and schooled on the fine art of conversation because they kept the conversation flowing and lively, despite Maddie's lackluster alertness. After dinner, Camilla suggested Charles and Maddie have hot tea in the den while she returned a phone call to her daughter. Pleased to spend time with Harry's father, she followed him willingly. Taking her seat on the chair opposite his, she tucked a blanket around her legs and breathed in the fresh, country air.

She could listen to him talk for hours; he was so much like Harry. She wondered if it would be strange if she asked him to read to her. Deciding it would, she just smiled and continued to ask questions about his favorite topic; the grounds around them. And he kept right on talking.

Charles wasn't daft. And he wasn't blind. He could see her drifting long before she knew she was drifting. Her eyelids were heavy; the beats between blinking lasting longer and longer. He could see how hard this had been on her; Harry's deployment, the attack. His heart ached for her; for his son. He had never had daughters, though he now considered Kate one of his own, but his heart ached for Maddie in a way he imagined her father's would have were he there to see her like this.

"Madeline," his voice was syrupy as he leaned forward in his chair. She opened her eyes and nodded her acknowledgement; a bob of her head. "Perhaps it's time for us to retire." He included himself, suspecting she wouldn't be easy to convince.

"Maybe..." Maddie sighed with a sleepy smile. "Maybe you're right." So she rose to her feet and let him hug her tight.

"Good night darling," he was sweet with her; comforting.

"Good night sir," Maddie smiled sweetly and stepped away from him; not thinking twice about the blanket that she had wrapped around herself. Passing Camilla on the way towards the stairs, she said goodnight and continued on.

When Maddie stepped into the room she usually took when they stayed at Highgrove, she was shocked to find the room empty; devoid of her belongings. Though she generally ended up in the same bed with Harry, her things were always in here. Stepping out, she looked up and down the hallway. Was she really that tired? Had she passed her usual room? She glanced back inside; finding the settee that Harry had christened with her on one particular drunken night. No, this was
the right room. Flipping on the lights, she crossed the room, opening the bureau. The staff normally unpacked her things, turned on lights, warmed up the room...but none of that had happened. And her things were nowhere to be found.

Stepping back out of the room, Maddie made her way back downstairs, hoping to find an answer.

"Everything okay?" Charles called to her as she stepped off the last of the stairs.

"I..." She shook her head with a chuckle. "I thought that I would be in the same room, but my things aren't in there. I guess I've been moved?"

"Ah yes," he nodded. "I'm sorry. I suppose I should have asked you first. I thought you might be more comfortable in Harry's room this weekend."

"Oh?" Maddie's voice croaked; her eyes filling up.

"I hope that's okay. If it isn't, I can have your things moved right away..." He moved to stand.

"No, no," she held her hand out. "It's okay. It's...it's very okay. Thank you." She bit at her lip, her hand moving to her heart as she smiled at him. "Good night."

"Sleep well dear," he returned her smile; her connection. Without another word, Maddie returned upstairs; to Harry's room.

Pushing the door open, she felt instantly more at ease—because she was surrounded by him. She shut the door behind her and stepped inside. The staff had unpacked her things in Harry's space and it was the sweetest combination of his life and her things and it made her tired eyes swell. Bless Charles for thinking of this, for knowing this might be something she wanted; something she needed.

She moved around his room slowly, shedding her blanket and looking for her pajamas. In her search, she opened a drawer full of crisply pressed and folded shirts. Giggling at the tight, clean lines, she knew this was the work of the staff. No way did Harry put so much care and precision into the ironing and folding of what were essentially t-shirts. Her fingers ran along the edges and she was surprised by the soft fabric. She pulled one of them from the drawer, letting it unfold as she held it up. A smile spread across her face. It was a white "Walking With The Wounded" t-shirt she was certain she had seen pictures of Harry in while throwing out the first pitch when the Mets played the Twins. Tossing her blouse to the side, she removed her bra and pulled this t-shirt over her head; basking in the comfy warmth it provided. It smelled slightly of him; the same detergent, the same softener. She wondered, only briefly, what he might have to say about her going through his drawer, taking his things. And then she shrugged. If he wanted her to give him eight babies, he could handle her taking one of his t-shirts. A wide smile spread across her face as her body pushed out a yawn.

Standing, she let her pants pool around her feet, pulling off her stockings and leaning to open another drawer. Finding a pair of boxers with a tiny red pinstripe and a polo player in the corner, she pulled them on; followed by the pair of polo socks she had taken with her on Day 1—socks she had worn almost every day since. Catching herself in the mirror, she couldn't help but laugh. What a site she was; exhausted and frazzled and dressed in his clothes—all too big for her. He would love to see this, she thought. Reaching for her phone she snapped a picture. Maybe she would show him someday. Titling the photo Day 74, she plugged her phone in, turned off the lights, and crawled into his bed—her body letting go of the tension, relaxing more and more with every move she made.

She snuggled into his bed; letting him surround her. Closing her eyes she let her sleep deprived
brain drift to thoughts of him. Her senses followed close behind. She was in his clothes, in his bed; and everything around her had the faint, soft smell that was almost him. Close enough that it made her long for him next to her. If she was quiet enough, she could bring his voice to her mind, almost hearing him. If she closed her eyes tight enough, she could almost feel his hands on her.

God she missed him. She stretched out; flexing her muscles, settling further into his bed. Sighing, she let out more tension; her lips curling up into a smile. The memories came easier to her as she relaxed and let her mind wander. She pulled up his smile, his laughter, the way his eyes twinkled when he was messing with her. She pulled up his kisses, his touch, the way he would drive her mad in the most delicious way possible.

God she missed him. Her hands bunched up his sheets, her entire body sighing as she let him wash completely over her. The tension flooded from her and suddenly, unexpectedly, she felt...calm; peaceful, comforted. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked out into his room; her cheeks warm. She felt at home here; amongst his things—amongst his memory.

And then it was there, in Harry's room, wrapped in his bedding, head stuffed into his pillow—that she finally fell asleep.

**Day 93**

On Day 93, Maddie stood at the summit of Pen Y Fan in Wales; her hands stretched out to the sun, her arms welcoming the spring air. She had talked to her cousin Kyle two days ago and she had confessed; she felt claustrophobic—cooped up. But there was nowhere for her to go. She was working, she was volunteering and the press was all over her again. So he told her about Pen Y Fan. His college roommate had been from Ireland and was an avid traveler and outdoorsman. Kyle had called him up and he had recommended the hike, and the view, quite highly.

Two days, one trip to the bookstore, and a train ride to Wales later, Maddie had arrived to the trailhead early in the morning. It was foggy and dewy, but the weather had been warmer lately and she had faith that it would pull through to be a decent day. As she pulled on her backpack, her stocking cap and the ridiculous union jack mittens Harry had gone back to purchase for her so many months ago, Maddie began the journey.

She had given some thought, in that moment, that it may have been a good idea to bring along a hiking partner. But Collins was in France, preparing for a new baby, Ella wasn't even close to a fan of hiking, and though Bishop would have come with her, she wouldn't have been able to process correctly with the jokes and the flask that followed him wherever he went.

So she went alone. It wasn't the first time she had gone alone and she hoped that it wouldn't be the last.

About half way in, she met some other hikers. They were friendly and funny and took to her quite easily. With her hair pulled back under her hat, her sunglasses blocking her eyes, and the incredibly dressed down clothing, nobody seemed to recognize her. Maddie chuckled, either that or they are completely normal people who couldn't care less who she was sleeping with. They were Welsh; clearly. Their accent and language quickly tipped her off. But the moment they learned that she only spoke English, they switched over; giving her tips about the hike, information about the area. They walked with her along the path and they even taught her a few choice words that she would hold in her mind for when Harry returned.

They let her sit with them while they all ate lunch. They let her take their picture as a group at a particularly beautiful spot along the way. And, as they neared the summit, when she grew quiet and introspective, they let her wander away from them, literally and metaphorically, without any hurt feelings or issues. That was the thing that most hikers understood—sometimes this journey
was a group journey and sometimes it was a solo one; and it was perfectly acceptable to float between the two.

When she reached the top, she walked as close to the edge as she could get, inching closer and closer until she felt the air hit her before it hit the cliff. Pulling her bag from her shoulders, she lowered herself to the ground next to it. And there she sat; looking out over the beautiful landscape—the massive expanse of it all. She took deep, cleansing breaths while her muscles relaxed, while they processed the pounding she had just handed them. She loved this part; the largeness of it all. It made her feel small in comparison; humble.

Her mind wound around itself in thought; thinking of him, of the marble in her pocket, of the thirty-four days left until she saw him again. She thought of what that moment would be like. Would she cry? Would she crumble? Would she fling herself into his arms or be stunned motionless? Her mind settled on him and she worried. What was he doing in this exact moment? Was he safe? Was he headed into danger? Was he counting down the days to his return or was that too much to handle while he was there? Would he be the same man when he returned as he was when he left? Was anyone the same when they returned from war?

She knew the answer to that question. She had worked with too many returning soldiers, with too many survivors of trauma not to know the answer to that question.

Though she had never been particularly religious, she had grown up believing in God—in something higher and grander than anything here on Earth. She looked out over the vast beauty before her and, with open eyes, she said a prayer; a prayer for his safety, a prayer for his return, a prayer for her patience and understanding.

She didn't know how long she sat there. She hadn't brought a watch. This hike wasn't about time; it was barely about the summit. It was about getting out, sweating out the stress; processing her feelings. So, when she finally stood, pulling her pack onto her back and, with one last look—burning it into her brain—she turned and began her descent.

That night she stayed in Wales. She found a cozy inn. She bought pajamas from a local store and, from the recommendations of the group she had hiked with, she ate an amazing dinner. As she drifted to sleep that night, she made a mental note; she was bringing Harry here someday—Harry and their eight little babies. She laughed out loud as she thought of it. If they added some lederhosen and a bit of music, they would look like the Von Trapps. Maybe they would have to only have four.

**Day 107**

Day 107 was a bit of a blur; a champagne infused blur. And it all began with the Duchess of Cambridge. In Maddie's entire life, she never would have imagined that agreeing to attend a cousin's baby shower with Harry's sister-in-law would turn out to be the intoxicated adventure it ended up as. But Kate had called two days before the event, imploring her to come along with her. William was originally going to attend but had been called away to duty, Pippa was in the US, and Kate did not want to face her cousin's friends all alone. Maddie had initially put up a fight, not wanting to be the awkward third wheel—but when Kate quietly admitted that seeing her cousin pregnant was difficult for her while she and Will had been trying so hard to no avail, she won her over. So, on Day 107 Maddie put on the frilliest dress in her closet, pinned her hat on her head and, when Kate showed up at her door with her detail, she smiled and invited them in. It wasn't the only time they had seen each other during Harry's deployment, but it was certainly the craziest night they had.

"You know, I could have just come down."
"Yes, I know," Kate nodded, watching while her body man finished checking Maddie's place before nodding his okay and stepping out. "But..." Kate stepped inside and shut the door behind her as she reached into her large bag. "We can't very well drink this in the car, now can we?"

"No," Maddie smirked at the bottle of champagne in Kate's hand. "We're going to drink champagne before we go to a baby shower?"

"Yes," the tall Brunette walked past her into the living room. "You know, I don't believe I've ever been to your place."

"You haven't," Maddie shook her head; reaching for two glasses before joining Kate where she stood in front of the fireplace.

"It's cute," Kate's smile was genuine as she looked around. "I like it."

"Thank you," Maddie held up the glasses.

"Ah yes," Kate pulled the bottle up; expertly working the cork and popping it open. Pouring the two glasses, she sat the bottle down on the coffee table and took a glass from Maddie.

"Should we toast to your cousin?" Maddie raised her eyebrows.

"Nah," Kate shook her head; nose crinkled. "There will be enough toasting to her today."

"Oh-kay," Maddie chuckled. "What shall we drink to?"

"Being able to drink," Kate smirked, thought Maddie was certain she saw something else behind the joke. "How about we drink to you?"

"Me?" Maddie was shocked.

"Yes, you." Kate laughed. "You agreed to come with me to this abhorrent shower. You're going to be bombarded with her University friends asking about Harry and...and you didn't even question my bringing a bottle of champagne to your house at ten in the morning. You just went for glasses..." Kate looked oddly at the glass in her hand. "Come to think of it, why didn't you question the bottle of champagne I brought to your house at ten in the morning?"

"I don't know," Maddie grinned as she shrugged. "It's just...we're dressed up like...cupcakes..."

Kate laughed. "We're going to a baby shower for a woman I don't know with women you apparently do not like and...you're the Duchess of Cambridge...with a bottle of champagne at ten in the morning. Who says no to that?"

"Who indeed," Kate grinned; liking the answer. Holding her glass out to clink against Maddie's she took a small sip and sighed. "Thank you for coming with me to the shower."

"You're welcome," Maddie met her eyes. "I'm happy you thought you could ask."

"Well, we're going to be sisters someday, no?" Kate's eyes sparked with defiance as her face stayed calm; innocent. But Maddie caught it and shook her head with a chuckle.

"Oh no. It may not be too early in the morning for champagne, but it is definitely too early in the morning for that," she drained her glass and sat it on the table. "We should get going."

"We should," Kate nodded; following suit. "And don't worry. They day is long, I have plenty of champagne and we'll be getting back to that soon enough."
"Can't wait," Maddie grumbled, reaching for her bag and following Kate out the door.

Kate had been right though; the shower was a lot to handle. She had called ahead days ago and the group was expecting Maddie to be there. They were warm, they were inviting. Samantha, the pregnant cousin, was incredibly sweet and gracious. In fact, everyone had been incredibly gracious at Maddie's presence; making her feel welcome and part of the group instead of out of place and awkward. Of course, there was the other side to the women; the side that knew who Kate and Maddie were. Though some of them had grown more accustomed to seeing Kate at such functions, none of them were used to seeing Maddie. And, being just a girlfriend and not in the limelight, she seemed a bit more allusive; a bit more mysterious. So these women, who were normally high functioning productive members of society, found themselves in this strange space where they giggled nervously, where they asked about some of the things they had read that they might not normally give the time of day; where they asked about Harry and how he was doing—as if they knew him. Maddie tried her best to smile and nod and answer as simply and sweetly as possible. And Kate, bless her soul, would step in as often as she could to help divert the interrogation. And when the hostess offered them both a white wine spritzer—well, it would have been rude to refuse.

As was expected, the attention eventually turned to Samantha; the gracious expectant mother. Maddie knew right away that she was expecting a baby girl as the entire room they were in was drenched in shades of pink. Even Maddie, who had always been a fan of the color, was finding it a bit much to handle. For the most part, all of the women had babies or were having babies or were trying to talk their husbands into having babies. It was baby overload and suddenly, Maddie understood. Kate and William were trying to have a baby and had yet to be successful. This was a little too much baby for Kate to tackle alone. So she brought along Maddie; Maddie who wasn't even married yet, Maddie who was far away from baby.

Three spritzers later, Maddie sat on the loveseat in the living area, watching with a grin as the hostess arranged items for the next in the long line of ridiculous shower games they were playing. Returning from the restroom, Kate slipped into her spot next to her with a smile that was simultaneously sympathetic and thankful. Maddie was instantly warmed by the fact that Kate thought of her as a sort of confidant; leaning closer to her as the ladies took their seats.

"Oh my God," Kate groaned under her breath as she sat; smile still characteristically in place. "Why didn't I stuff that bottle of champagne in my purse?!

"I don't know," Maddie tried to hide her cringe with a warm smile of her own. "I never thought I would say this...but I wish Bishop were here."

"Bishop?" Kate's exterior cracked for a moment in confusion. "Why Bishop?"

"Because," Maddie sighed, reaching for her spritzer. "That evil genius takes a flask with him wherever he goes."

"Ha!" Kate let out a laugh. "What a grand idea. I should seriously consider that."

"You really should." Maddie agreed, clinking her glass to Kate's as the hostess took center stage and called them to attention.

As the party drew to a close, Kate rose to her feet and insisted they must be on their way; gesturing for Maddie to join her. Samantha followed them both to the door, offering kisses and
hugs and apologies for some of the questions and awe her friends had brought with them. Both Kate and Maddie shook their heads and insisted it wasn’t an issue. Maddie thanked her for the last minute invitation and Samantha thanked her for the collection of classic children’s books that she brought as a gift. And then, with one final wave from the Duchess, the two of them were back in the reprieve that the car provided.

"Wow..." Maddie breathed as the car pulled out into the street. "What a day."

"The funny part is how you think the day is over," Kate's eyes sparkled; her lips pulling into a smirk.

"It's not?"

"No," she shook her head. "I've decided that I want more champagne. Champagne, music and...a girls’ day. What do you say, Madeline? Do you have other plans?"

"I..." Maddie pretended to think it over; her lips pressing together. "Nope. I have nothing else planned. Except...I kind of want to take this hat off." Her fingers snuck up her head, scratching at an itch that hid underneath it and, for reasons beyond Maddie's understanding at that point, Kate burst into an almost uncontrollable laughter.

"You want to take the hat off...." She wiped at her eyes daintily. "Oh wow. We have such a fascinating road ahead of us, don't we." She asked nobody in particular. "Okay...now. We could go out?"

"We could," Maddie nodded; her mind tossing it around. "Though you are pretty tipsy..."

"Who me?" Kate pressed her fingers to her chest in mock horror. "What if we go to your place?"

"My place?" Maddie was surprised. "You want to come to my place?"

"Why not? You have champagne there."

"And wine," Maddie pointed out.

"We can order pizza," Kate suggested.

"Okay," Maddie shrugged. "Let's go to my place."

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Maddie had always known that there was a lot about Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge, that she did not know. She also figured that, as she and Harry moved forward, she would grow to know more and more about this enigmatic woman. She had not, however, in a million years thought that this night would be the night where she would learn a great chunk of that information.

For instance, one of the first things she learned was that Kate liked to be called Kate—by close friends and family. Charles would always call her Catherine, because that was just how he spoke. But Harry, Camilla and William all called her Kate; as did her own family—unless they were trying to get under her skin. She also insisted that Maddie call her Kate—it reminded her of who she was; a girl, a woman with a husband and a home and desires and wants. Not just Her Royal Highness. Not just the future Queen Consort.

"You'll understand someday...Madeline," she had cooed with a wicked smug grin.

That was another thing Maddie had learned. Kate was funny; hilarious in fact. Maddie was in awe
at how composed, how regal Kate could be on the surface, to the public and then how naughty she could turn at the drop of a hat. Or the draining of three bottles of wine. Either way, she had Maddie on her toes; laughing and crying and always on the lookout for her next strike.

"I like you," Kate confessed nonchalantly as she tipped the last of the bottle into her glass and sat it on the table with a thud.

"I like you too," Maddie giggled into her glass.

"No. I like you. I really do," Kate sighed into her seat. "Not just in the way I'm supposed to like the woman that Harry marries. Not just in the way that I can handle sitting next to you at family events or making joint speeches with you at openings and..."

"Don't you think you're getting a little ahead of yourself?" Maddie cut in.

"Am I?" Kate raised her eyebrows; swallowing some wine before she moved to sit more upright, bringing her hand out to hold up fingers as she made her points. "Let's take a look, shall we? Harry's met your family, no?"

"No...I mean. I mean yes. He's met my family. But..."

"No buts. Let me finish," Kate's eyes narrowed as she raised another finger. "You've met Harry's family." Maddie nodded. "You've met Granny. For tea. At Buckingham." Maddie swallowed more wine as Kate rolled her eyes in her direction. "I was with Will for years before I met Gran." Holding up another finger. "Harry's spoken to the press about you...Are you denying any of this?"

"Of course not," Maddie shrugged. "It's all happened. What do you want from me?"

"I want you to stop rolling your eyes when I say you're going to be family. I want you to stop dodging the discussion. I want you to stop pretending that he's just another boyfriend because we both know he isn't. And we both know where this is headed. And the sooner you accept that, the sooner you accept that I know that...the quicker we can move past the bullshit and really be friends."

"Wow..." Maddie blinked; unfazed. "You kiss the future King of England with that mouth?"

There was a beat, a moment of silence, when Maddie thought that maybe, maybe she had gone too far. And then, without even flinching, Kate reached for her glass and nodded.

"I do. Many, many times a day." Their stone expressions lasted only seconds before they both burst into laughter; loud, roaring laughter that came from plenty of booze and a deeper connection.

"Fine," Maddie sighed; her cheeks growing rosy as she thought of him. "You're right. He's not just another boyfriend."

"He's not."

"And, there's a good chance..."

"Good?"

"A pretty good chance..." It was all Maddie was willing to give at this point. Kate accepted it with a shrug. "That we're going to be family someday."

"See, now...was that so hard?" Kate's eyes grew wide.
"A little bit, yes," Maddie narrowed her eyes at her and rose to her feet, in search of another bottle of wine. "Do you find it at all disturbing that we're toasted at seven in the evening?"

"Not at all," Kate shook her head. "Do you find it at all disturbing that I desperately want to put on some pajamas?"

"Ha!" Maddie laughed from the kitchen. "In the back bedroom, third drawer down in the chest of drawers...take whatever you like," Kate jumped to her feet and hurried happily down the hallway to Maddie's room. Maddie opened another bottle of wine, refreshed both of their glasses and pulled off her stockings; with every intent on slipping into pajamas as soon as Kate returned.

"Guess what I found..." Kate's sing song voice called out as she rejoined Maddie in the living room. Maddie turned to look at her; her eyes scanning her over.

"Clearly not pants that fit," Maddie laughed at how short her pajama pants were on Kate. "What are you like an entire foot taller than I am?"

"Maybe," Kate shrugged; her hands tucked behind her back, a cat-like grin on her face. "I found something in your pajama drawer that I think could use a little explaining." Maddie blushed for only a second before she exhaled.

"It's a blindfold Kate. I'm sure you've seen one before."

"A..." Kate stammered, her mouth twitching as her hands came around from her back. "I was talking about this piece of candy stuffed into your socks..." She handed Maddie a piece of her Christmas candy and moved to sit next to her on the couch.

"Look at that..." Maddie's features grew soft as she turned the candy over in her fingers. "He must have stashed these everywhere before he left. I've been finding them for months."

"Blindfold?" Kate stayed on track.

"No, no," Maddie shook her head; holding out the candy. "You found candy. My favorite candy."

"Yeah, yeah," Kate waved her hand. "But you said there was..."

"There is..." Maddie corrected, unwrapping the candy and plopping it into her mouth. Kate watched her for a minute; contemplating her next move. Reaching for her glass, she took a sip and moved closer to Maddie.

"Okay...I'm just going to..." Kate cleared her throat and lowered her voice. "Can I ask you something?" Kate's lips twisted up in a Cheshire smile that made Maddie feel like she should watch for a pie to the face.

"Sure..." She giggled slightly; taking another drink.

"How is...it?" Her perfectly sculpted eyebrow shot up.

"How is it?" Maddie repeated. "The candy?"

"No!" Kate smacked her arm. "Not the candy. It."

"Are you asking me about sex right now?" Maddie held back laughter.

"Yes!" Kate's hands clapped together.

"With Harry? You're asking me how sex is with..." Maddie realized how loud her voice was and
immediately quieted. "With Harry."

"Yes."

"Oh my God."

"What?" Kate's face was blank.

"Oh. My. God."

"What?" Kate laughed. "Tell me. Is he...wild?"

"What?!!" Maddie burst out in laughter.

"I've always imagined him to be pretty...wild..." Kate shrugged, taking another drink.

"I'm sorry," Maddie couldn't shake the grin on her face, or the flush in her cheeks. "You've always imagined him?"

"Stop," Kate rolled her eyes. "Not like that. It's just that he's always been so frisky and randy and he has this quick wit, a sharp tongue." Her face grew smug and teasing. "I just thought he might be the same in bed."

"This is too much," Maddie's hands moved to her face. "I can't even..."

"Oh come on!" Kate nudged her with her toe. "You're an adult. You're a woman. You're a doctor. Is it really that difficult for you to talk about sex?"

"No!" Maddie shook her head. "I can talk about sex all night; all you want. It's just...sex with Harry..." She took a breath; her heart needing a moment. "Sex with Harry is sacred. I don't discuss sex with Harry with...anyone. Nobody. Not even my best friend. And I trust her with my life."

"You don't want it to get out," Kate didn't need to ask. She knew.

"I really don't." And though Maddie knew Ella would never talk, she couldn't risk any accidents. Not with this.

"You can trust me, you know." Kate let the laughter in her eyes fade for a moment of solemnity. "I don't necessarily mean with this. I mean with...anything. You can trust me."

"Thank you," Maddie smiled; touched by her words.

"Do you remember Harry's birthday in Greece? When we were out on the yacht and I told you that Will and I were trying to get pregnant?"

"I do," Maddie nodded.

"You kept that completely to yourself."

"I did."

"You didn't have to," Kate waved her hand.

"I gave you my word that I would."

"You didn't even tell Harry," Kate still grew a little misty as she remembered.
"You asked me not too," Maddie shrugged. It really was as simple as that with her.

"And I trusted that you wouldn't. And it paid off. You didn't." Kate drained her glass. "And now I have a future sister who I can talk to about anything..." She sighed and smiled at Maddie. "Someday you'll feel that way about me. It will just take time. But when you're there, I'm ready. You can trust me too. Nobody on this entire island understands the...uniqueness...that comes with these boys better than I do." Maddie watched Kate for a moment; her mind pondering the discussion, her words. Taking a deep breath and a long drink from her glass, Maddie jumped in.

"He can be."

"Sorry?" Kate looked to her; confused.

"A little wild," Maddie offered; her lips stretching into a grin. "He's generally loving and attentive and...thorough. But there are times when he can be...a little wild."

"I knew it!" Kate clapped her hands together; her Cheshire grin returning. "Oh God how I miss the wild days."

"Miss them?" Maddie laughed. "What do you mean miss them?"

"Things aren't so wild at the Cambridge household," Kate's face fell slightly.

"No?"

"No," Kate sighed. "I swear, once you start trying to make a baby instead of prevent one...things get sort of...mechanical."

"Ah, don't feel bad," Maddie patted her knee. "With Harry in Afghanistan my wild nights have given way to me and my memories."

"Ha!" Kate laughed, though her mood remained the same. Her eyes shifted down to her fingers as they fidgeted together. Just as Maddie was going to open her mouth to ask what was going on, Kate continued on. "You know...they used to behead people around here."

"I'm sorry..." Maddie blinked at the strange segue. "What?"

"They did," Kate nodded; misreading Maddie's confusion. "It was before our time, but not terribly long ago. They would behead women who were unable to produce an heir to the crown."

And the entire mood in Maddie's place shifted.

"Whoa, hey..." She moved; sitting closer to Kate, reaching for her hand. "Come on now..."

"What if I can't do it?" Her dark eyes looked up to Maddie; wide and wet. "What if after all these years of trying not to get pregnant...I just can't?"

"I don't know..." Maddie shook her head. "But I really don't think William would have you beheaded."

"Yeah," Kate sighed. "You're probably right."

"Probably?" Maddie's forehead crinkled.

"I really only have one job, you know? In this marriage, I have one job and that is to produce an heir."
"That's not you're only job," Maddie countered.

"It's the most important."

"No it's not," she shook her head. "I could argue that loving Will is the most important, loving yourself; taking care of your union..."

"Sure," Kate nodded. "You could argue that, but you would be wrong." She grew silent for a moment; pressing the palms of her hands into her eyes as the emotions rushed over her. "God Maddie. We've been trying for so long and I've been counting days and monitoring temperatures and telling him when we can and when we can't and...and it's not even fun anymore!"

"Kate..." Maddie's voice shook at the way she was crying; at the way this was hitting her. "It's okay. It's going to be okay..."

"But what if it's not?" She pulled her hands away from her face and looked at Maddie. "What if it's not okay? What if I can't get pregnant? Then what?"

"I don't know," Maddie shook her head. "I don't know. But I do know this. Will loves you. He clearly loves you."

"I know he does." Just the mention of him lowered the dam.

"And if you really can't have a baby," Maddie smoothed her hair away from her face. "Nobody...nobody is going to take your head off."

"Ha!" Kate laughed bitterly; wiping at her eyes.

"At least not literally..." Maddie added and Kate laughed at that too. Maddie reached for a box of tissues and handed them to her, letting her have a moment. "You know they say that sometimes the stress is too much. Maybe you need to get drunk, get him drunk; borrow my blindfold."

"Oh God!" Kate burst out then; wide, belly clenching laughter.

"What? It's fun."

"I believe you," Kate smiled; her laughter and her tears dying down a bit. She smiled across at Maddie; already feeling a bit better. Her mind shifted slightly; ready to move off topic. "You said...earlier...you said that Harry left you the candy I found in your sock."

"He did," Maddie nodded; her smile turning warm and gooey.

"Care to tell me the story behind that?" Kate snuggled into the chair as she waited.

"Sure," Maddie took a breath; allowing Kate to move them away from the topic. "When I first met Harry in Bendal, I gave him this tour and...he asked about my favorite candy and I told him it was these...these little minty, nougat, Christmas tree candies that my grandmother used to have at her house all of the time. They reminded me of my childhood, my family, Christmas. And...the next time he visited, he brought me an entire bag."

"He brought you a bag of your favorite childhood candy?" Kate's eyebrows went high.

"He did," Maddie nodded. "And now...now he keeps them everywhere. They are at his place at Kensington, I found some in a nightstand drawer at Highgrove. He has them in his pockets when we go out, he brings them when we hike. And, apparently, before he left, he stashed them in every little place he could think of...I'm guessing so that when I found them, I would think of
"Wow..." Kate breathed. "Look at little Harry. He's a great listener, he's thoughtful, he's romantic. Who knew."

"Hmmm..." Maddie smiled; memories of him flooding her mind.

"You know what I want right now?" Kate's head tipped to the side as Maddie rose her eyebrows. "Ice cream. I really want some ice cream. Do you have any?"

"I don't," Maddie shook her head; she hadn't been to the store for a while.

"We could go get some," Kate suggested.

"Definitely. We should definitely do that. We're drunk, we're in pajamas and we're...well, you're you..." Maddie waved a hand to her. "We'll just walk on down to the store and get some ice cream. There's not chance the paps across the street will run that photo tomorrow."

"Fair point," Kate nodded; tapping her finger to her lips as she thought. "I got it!" Hurrying to her bag, she found her phone and dialed. While Kate spoke, Maddie hurried back to her room and slipped on some pajamas. When she returned, Kate was off the phone and refilling their glasses. "Ice cream is on its way," she announced.

"Really?" Maddie was surprised. "Please tell me you did not just call a staffer to make them bring us ice cream."

"I did not just do that," Kate smiled; sipping her drink. "I did the next best thing. I called my husband. He's on his way now." Maddie nearly spit her drink.

"You called your husband? And now he's on his way? To my house? With ice cream? The future King of England is bringing ice cream to my house."

"Yes," Kate nodded once. "Yes and yes. And why do you call him the future King of England?"

"Because he is." Maddie was going to need more wine.

"It still freaks you out a bit, no?"

"Yes." She was embarrassed to admit it.

"We're going to have to get you over that," Kate sighed, handing Maddie her glass. "We're really going to have to get you over that. Drink up."

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ It took him less than fifteen minutes to arrive at her door; ice cream in hand. Maddie, feeling more at ease after finishing her glass of wine, swung the door open; bending down in a curtsey to him as she did.

"Your Royal Highness," she grinned as Kate snickered behind her.

"Oh God," William knew instantly; he had walked into quite the show. Stepping into Maddie's place, he shut and locked the door behind him. Maddie returned to the living room to lay next to Kate on the couch. "You're smashed." He commented as he strolled casually through Maddie's place towards the kitchen.

"We are!" Kate called out with a grin. "Darling, did you know that Maddie refers to you as the
future King of England and you freak her out just a bit?!

"Hey!" Maddie nudged her in the ribs before calling out. "Do you know that Kate thinks your brother is randy in the sack?!

"Hey!" Kate sat up.

"Okay now," William returned with three bowls; passing them around as he took their drunken state in stride. "Maddie, you really don't need to be so formal with me. Come on, we met when you were in the hospital recovering from gunshot wounds, we've had lunch. I like you. I trust you with my brother, with my drunken wife. No need to freak out." He winked at her and turned to his wife; kissing her hello. "And you. Randy? Harry? Really?"

"Ah!" Kate let out a puff of air. "For what it's worth, she agreed that he was."

"I did not!" Maddie defended. "I said he was thorough and..."

"Please for the love of God stop," William dropped his spoon in his bowl and held his hands to his ears; looking at Maddie as he spoke. "Right now, you remember that I am the future King of England and, I beg of you, stop talking about my brother in bed."

"Fine," Maddie huffed; her mouth hinting at the smile that was creeping onto all of the faces in the room. "Fine. I'll stop."

"Thank you," William smiled; lowering his hands and reaching for his spoon.

"Chicken," Kate looked to Maddie with a grin; egging her on.

"Hey Will," Maddie asked; her face remaining calm. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Do they still behead people around here?" Kate's eyes snapped wide.

"What?" Will laughed. "Not really. Why? You have an ex-lover you want us to look into?"

"Maybe..." Maddie laughed; winking at Kate as they all relaxed. "No. I...Wait...hold on. I thought you were gone," she pointed to William who looked to Kate. "I thought you were gone and that's why she wanted me to go with her..." Maddie slowed down; her mind catching up. "You were lying." Her finger pointed to Kate.

"Me?" Her eyes widened as she took a spoonful of ice cream.

"You're checking up on me," she wagged her finger between the two of them. "Don't deny it."

"I won't," Will smiled. "We're checking up on you."

"Why?"

"Really Maddie?" He snickered and shrugged. "You know why." Without missing a beat, Maddie answered.

"Afraid I'm going to run off with Bishop?"

"Exactly," Will nodded; laughter flowing from both of them; both of them knowing how far from the truth that was.
"Sneaky, sneaky..." Maddie shook her head at them. "The Duke and Duchess of all kinds of sneakiness."

"Hey Maddie, can I ask you something?" Kate was looking up at her fireplace.

"Sure," Maddie blinked; her smile returning.

"Why are there two vases of marbles on your mantel?" All sets of eyes traveled to where Kate was looking as Maddie's tears returned.

"Well," she smiled; rising to her feet. "This one has a marble for every day that Harry has been gone.... And this one has a marble in it for every day before he's home." Her fingers fell down into her pocket, pulling out the marble she had carried with her all day.

"That's beautiful," Kate's voice cracked as Will smiled up at Maddie with a nod.

"Hmmm..." She smiled, slipping the marble into the correct vase. "One hundred and seven down. Thirteen days left."

**Day 116**

Flipping through the files in her hand, she rounded the final corner to her office and she stopped in her tracks. Standing outside her door were two well-dressed, unassuming men who she knew instantly. They were Palace Security. That could only mean one thing; Charles was there.

She could almost hear the blood rushing from her brain, leaving behind a soft hum. And there she stood, in the middle of the day on Day 116, looking at the two men waiting outside of her office—and the idea that just inside those doors was her entire life. She almost folded; almost collapsed right there on the cold tile floor. But something in her—most likely the same thing that kept her walking after her father died—something kept her upright.

She barely breathed as she studied her door; her intense fear occupying her mind in such a way that breathing never even crossed her mind. Holding her folders tightly to her chest where her macaroni necklace still dangled, her fingers turning over the marble in her pocket, she took a step in that direction. She had no choice but to face this, to face him. Oh God, she thought, tears coming to her eyes. She wasn't prepared to handle this. Not Harry. They only had four days left. Her vision blurred, she looked to the Security Officer closest to her; barely able to see him.

"Is he in there?" Her voice was cracking as she pointed to her office.

"Yes ma'am," the man nodded one, solid nod. Maddie blinked at the tears in her eyes, wishing she could pull it together. Turning towards her office door, she paused; desperately trying to calm down. Taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly, she shook her head and looked at the Security Officer standing just off to her side. With a double take, she rubbed her eyes and looked at him again.

Her heart stopped beating in her chest.

"Jim?"

"Good Afternoon Doctor," he nodded his head and then, in a moment that made Maddie question her consciousness, made her question her sanity, he allowed the tiniest, crack of a smile onto his lips. Her confusion was etched in the creases of her forehead, into the way the corners of her eyes scrunched up. She had only ever seen Jim as part of Harry's detail. That could only mean...

The folders fell from her hands, crashing to the floor; papers swooshing all around her feet as she
closed the three feet between her and the door to her office. Her hands were steady as she turned the door knob and pushed it open.

Harry.

And her heart started beating again in her chest.
The folders fell from her hands, crashing to the floor; papers swooshing all around her feet as she closed the three feet between her and the door to her office. Her hands were steady as she turned the door knob and pushed it open.

Harry.

And her heart started beating again in her chest.

"You were right..." His voice was rough, tired—but still full of the same heavy charm she had remembered. "You have way more toys in this office than the one at St. Joe's." With his smug, crooked smile, he held up a tiny plastic hedgehog and placed it on the edge of her desk.

There were no words from her; none. There was nothing but a sharp intake of breath as her hands flew to her mouth. Her head started to shake; her hair moving back and forth over her shoulders. She couldn't believe it.

"Madeline..." The word was heavy with emotion as his smile faded.

"Are you...are you real?" She felt weak and exhausted and unsure. "I see you and I hear you but..."

It took him two steps; two long strides in that unmistakable camouflage uniform, to cross the room to her. Two steps for him to connect with her. Two steps for his arm to circle her waist and press her body to his like he was trying to meld them together. Two steps for his lips to find hers; with such ease and familiarity it was like he had never left—like they were still in his room with her standing on the foot of his bed and him beckoning her to come and kiss him properly.

"I'm real," he whispered; pulling back just enough so that he could meet her eyes, his fingers retracing the planes of her face, his hand reclaiming the curves of her body. "I'm real..."

She remembered thinking that his lips were too soft—too soft for somebody who had just spent 116 days in the hot, dry desert. She remembered thinking that his arms were so strong—amazingly strong and steady as they held her to him.

And then she stopped thinking altogether.

Sighing into him; sinking further and further into the warm, soul lifting space he had pulled her into. His mouth was hot against hers; pulling her lips to his, drawing gasps from deep inside of her. Her body awakening under his hands, under his assurances, began to react. Her fingers twisted around his shirt; pulling him closer and closer—though there was no way he could get closer to her in that moment, in that room—with all of those clothes. Walking her one step backwards, his fingers fanned out; his hands meeting the closed door behind her seconds before he pressed her back against it.

Maddie moaned into his mouth, her hands circling his neck; her fingers navigating into the muss of hair that she missed so much. Tearing his mouth from hers, he blazed a trail from her chin, along her jaw, back to her neck—his nose recalling her smell, his mouth remembering her taste.

"You're real..." She gasped; the heat pushed from her lungs in a strangled sort of gasp—her emotions conflicting in the most wonderful of ways. She felt hot tears come from her eyes and she couldn't help but laugh. He was home. He was safe and home and perfect. Yet the tears came anyway. Harry was quick to tend to them with a swipe of his thumb followed by his lips. His arms
moved around her waist then, completely encircling her in his strong, protective embrace. He pulled her away from the door and up into his arms—lifting her feet completely off the ground. Her legs wrapped around him instinctually—as though it was their natural state.

"I'm real," his eyes were dark, intense as they met hers; his hand running along the tangle of limbs around him.

"I missed you," her thumbs rubbed at his temples, her hands fanning out on the sides of his head as she looked down at him.

"You have no idea," he shook his head; his lips curling up as they sought hers again. His mouth was hot, his lips were persistent. It had been too long since he had kissed her, too long since he had felt the way her legs moved around him; too long since he had heard the rush of air that pushed from her lips as he pressed against her. It had been much too long. When he had finally landed that morning, when he had finally touched down on British soil, his first thought, his only thought, was of her. His father was waiting, Will and Kate were waiting, but nothing—nothing—was more important than this moment; when his heart reconvened with hers.

"We can't do this," Maddie chuckled into his mouth; defying her body's desires.

"We can," he nodded briskly.

"Harry..." She breathed; his hands pushing past her white coat, up under her shirt; branding her skin with his fingers.

"I'm a soldier, home from war," his cocky grin was irresistible. "Do it for your country."

"My country?" She laughed.

"Do it for my country," he laughed along with her; his eyes dancing with hers as he eased up just a bit—still holding her in his arms.

"You do know that Jim is just on the other side of this door," her head fell back, resting against it.

"I do." Harry's hand pushed her hair away from her neck so that his lips could find home there; trying their best to convince her.

"He'll hear me."

"He's discreet." His facial scruff rubbed against her cheek as he nuzzled closer.

"There are other people out there who are not."

"You can be quiet," his finger ran across her lips.

"I don't know if I can," she answered honestly, her teeth biting into her bottom lip and...if she was trying to calm him down, trying to ease his want for her...she was failing miserably. Harry groaned; his head shaking back and forth in the crook of her neck. Her hands bunched at his shirt, struggling with her own wants. Looking down at the greens and tans, she frowned. "You're still in your uniform. You're still in...why are you still in camouflage?" Harry laughed as he pulled his face from her neck.

"Because I came straight here. We don't travel with civilian clothes and I came straight here," his eyes shining with unshed tears, his smile stretched across his face—slightly red from the sun.

"You did?" Fresh tears rose to her eyes.
"Absolutely." There was never a doubt in his mind as to who he needed to see first.

"But what about your father?"

"He knows I'm home safe. I'm going to stop by Clarence so he can see me with his eyes. Then I'm going home to shower and change and probably back for some kind of dinner," he smiled at her concern; his arms hugging her close. "Do you want to come with me?"

"I would love to come with you," she bent her head down to kiss his forehead, his nose, his cheeks, his lips; softly, reverently. "You're home."

"I am."

"Early even."

"Yes indeed," he nodded.

"Why is that exactly?"

"Hmmm..." Harry chuckled. "Do I sense a complaint in there?"

"Absolutely not," she shook her head; kissing his lips again. "You know...if we're going to your father's, you're going to have to let me down from here."

"Maybe I don't want to go to my father's," he grinned defiantly. "Maybe I want to stay right here; make love to you on your couch..."

"Hmmm..." She smiled happily. "Not here. Not now. But tonight...I'll make love to you anywhere you like."

"Anywhere?" His eyebrow spiked.

"Anywhere." She held her hand out. Adjusting her weight in his arms, he took her hand in his; shaking it to seal the deal.

"Maddie..." He sighed as he kissed the top of her hand. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," she sighed in return, running her thumb over his lips. And then, with a feeling of regret, Harry felt her legs untangle from around him and he sat her gingerly back on the floor. "Just let me call my boss and get my things and...oh! My files!" Maddie remembered the moment she realized it was Jim standing outside of her door. Turning in her heels, she pulled her door open; her eyes scanning the floor where everything had fallen.

"Here you are ma'am," Jim held out the pile he had collected from the floor.

"Thank you," she breathed, taking them from him. "Thank you." And then, with a wide smile and tender eyes, Maddie broke all kinds of protocol and threw her arms around Jim; hugging him tight and kissing his cheek. Startled, his hands moved to steady her, his eyes looking helplessly to Harry who shrugged and laughed.

"She's excited," he explained.

"She's very excited," Maddie stepped from Jim's arms. "I just need to lock these up and let my boss know..."

"Of course," Harry grinned; he'd wait forever for her. Maddie hurried around; locking cabinets,
grabbing her bag, phoning her boss. In less than two minutes, she was walking out of the hospital; holding tight to Harry's hand.

For the rest of her life she would be surprised by the lack of photos taken that day. Of course the press was kept off the property and they were naturally not expecting Harry to be home for a few more days—so they didn't see him at the hospital. But other people did; Maddie's colleagues, patients and their families. As they made their way to the awaiting car in the parking garage, they passed at least twenty-five people. But not one of them pulled out a camera, not one of them reached for their phone. They smiled and nodded and one elderly man even offered Harry a sincere "Welcome home, son." But they all let him pass in peace.

Their ride to Clarence House was short but Maddie held onto him the entire time; her fingers tracing over the veins in his hand, tickling up his arm. Harry sighed back into the seat; watching London fly by him. The cold, wet air was a welcome change from what he had grown accustomed to. As the car pulled through the tall gates, he turned to look at her; catching her watching him. With a tired smile, he blinked. He could understand her initial reaction at seeing him because in this moment, looking at her, he almost couldn't believe she was real. Pulling her fingers to his lips, he kissed them and tightened his hold on her.

The car pulled to a stop and their doors were opened; forcing them apart and out of the car. Harry stood at the bottom of the small set of stairs, his hand extend back to her; waiting for her to join him before he continued in. With rosy cheeks and bright eyes, she took his hand in both of hers and, with a smile that refused to fade, she followed him inside.

His family was waiting, erupting into a ball of excitement when they entered the room. While Charles moved directly to his son; wrapping him in a pride-filled embrace, Kate's mile-wide smile was aimed directly at Maddie. Harry was reluctant to drop her hand, but did so in order to receive the hugs, the love. Maddie stood to the side, her hands clasped in front of her, as his family welcomed him home and congratulated her on making it through the few months. This was a short stop; just long enough to say hello, to be seen. Charles and Camilla hugged them and loved on them and quickly released them so Harry could stop off at home, relax and then they would return for dinner and drinks later that evening.

"So your boyfriend's back," Kate spoke under her breath as she moved to Maddie's side as she and William walked Maddie and Harry towards the door.

"He is," Maddie nodded; beaming. "Him and his sharp tongue." Her eyes met Kate's and they shared equally amused smirks before the men caught up with them.

"That's a nice necklace," William smiled, nodding to her neck.

"Oh thank you," Maddie smiled, immediately thinking of the Ubuntu pendant. "Harry gave it to me." William looked to Harry with narrowed eyes.

"You gave her a macaroni necklace?" His voice was flat.

"Oh no!" Maddie laughed, her eyes looking down. "I forgot I had that on. One of the kids made it for me during a session this morning."

"You have such a strange job," Kate commented lightly; her fingers reaching out to the macaroni around Maddie's neck.

"I really do," Maddie smiled with a nod.

"You're coming back for dinner?" William asked; his arm finding its way around Kate's shoulder.
"We'll be back," Harry snatched Maddie's hand in his. "I just want to shower and change and then we'll be right back."

"Do hurry," Kate watched as the two of them stepped outside towards the car. "They have champagne chilled and just waiting for the two of us."

"Oh no," William shook his head. "The man has just returned from battle. I'm not sure he's up for that."

"What is he talking about?" Harry looked to Maddie.

"Nothing," Maddie shook her head. "Kate and I spent a night together while you were gone. That's all I'm prepared to say about that." She dropped his hand and rounded the car with a smug smile.

"Oh really?" Harry's interest was hooked; his eyes trained on Maddie as she slipped into her seat.

"See you soon!" William called out with a wave as Harry nodded good-bye and slipped into the car next to her.

"Do you think there's any way I might be able to convince you to stay with me tonight?" He moved closer to her; his voice lowering in a way which had proven useful for him in the past.

"You've already succeeded," Maddie nodded; tipping her lips to kiss his. "Listen...I have a favor to ask and I know you're tired and want to shower and not at all up for granting me favors, but it's incredibly important and I'll owe you—big time."

"Oh-kay," Harry shrugged; curious at the serious look on her face. "Everything okay?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Absolutely."

"Okay then. What's the favor?"

"This was a really great idea," Harry admitted as they stood outside the door; having just knocked.

"I told you it was important."

"You were right," he squeezed her hand in his; the night air making it quite cold. "I think this one is so good, you don't even have to owe me."

"Maybe I want to owe you," her voice dropped and his eyes shifted back to her.

"Maybe talking to me like that isn't the best idea when we're standing outside..." His words were cut off by the sound of the locks being moved. Maddie squealed slightly; bouncing on her feet as the door swung open.

"What are you..." Ella was confused for a split second before her eyes went wide; her hands flying to her throat. "Oh my God!" As she flung herself into Harry's arms, Jim stepped around them in order to do his walk through. "Oh my God!"

"What in God's name is going on out there?" Bishop's voice called from the back of Ella's place as he stepped from her room. He had a direct view of the front door and Maddie could see the instant he knew what was happening.

"I found something in my office today that I thought you should see," Maddie felt tears in her eyes
as she smiled down the hall at Bishop. His entire face eased, his eyes lit up and she was quite certain he thought, for just a moment, about breaking into a run to the door.

Instead, he maintained his cool and sauntered casually from his room as Jim gave the okay nod and Maddie and Harry stepped inside. "Welcome home man," Bishop smiled wide as he unashamedly opened up his arms to greet him.

"It's good to be back," Harry's smile was genuine as he hugged his best friend. Ella kissed Maddie's cheeks, her excitement only multiplied seeing the smile on Maddie's face; the life back in her eyes.

"Madeline," Bishop turned to her then; his hand still planted firmly on Harry's shoulder. His eyes met hers with sincerity. "Thank you." He stepped from Harry then, pulling Maddie tight into his arms.

"No," she blinked back the tears in her eyes. "Thank you." And she meant it. Without him, without Ella, without all of them—she wasn't sure she would have made it through the 116 days that Harry was away. They had kept her sane, kept her laughing; kept her alive. And, as she looked over Bishop's shoulder at Harry's smile, at his sparkling eyes—she wasn't sure she would ever be able to thank them.

"I cannot believe you're home," Maddie shook her head in disbelief; watching from Harry's bed as he moved, toeing off his boots, pulling off his socks. They had finally pried Bishop away from them long enough to make their escape. Now, all Harry wanted to do was shower and change and spend the little time they had before they were expected back at his father's, together.

"I can't believe it either," he shook his head. "When they told me we were going early, I thought I was dreaming."

"Why did you leave early?" Her face scrunched up as she looked to him; not having got an answer when she asked earlier. Harry paused, his mind and body ceasing movement. Then with a shake of his head and a shrug, he dismissed it.

"I'll tell you all about that later," he grinned then, moving to her, his hands tipping her head up so that he could kiss her. He had been away from her for 116 days; days in which he had to force his mind not to think of her, to think only of the tasks and missions at hand. But now he was home; he was done thinking of war. He wanted to think of her.

"Mmmm..." Maddie moaned; her hands moving to his chest, resting on his buttons. "Can I help you with this?"

"You can," he nodded; his eyes twinkling as she began to undo buttons. Her hands were tentative, cautious, as they moved inside his shirt; pushing it back and off his shoulders; listening to it fall to the floor. She moved then to his pants; undoing the buttons and zipper there; pushing them away from him to meet the same fate as his shirt. It was strange for her, this moment where she was undressing him in a way that was far from sexual. He looked amazing; standing tall and in great shape, but that wasn't what she was searching for as her eyes passed over him. She looked him over; from head to toe—checking for any harm, anything out of place. Harry stood still, allowing her to do so; knowing she needed to ease her concerns.

"You're okay?" Her eyes fluttered up to look at him; her fingers stretching out to fall on his chest.

"I am," he nodded with a smile; his hand closing over hers.
"I mean, you're really okay?"

"I'm really okay," his smile stretched; his hand pulling at hers, moving her closer as he took a step in her direction. This time when his lips met hers, there was less urgency there; less insistence. This time when his arms wrapped around her it was less about the strong, firm proof of his existence. This time was about slow, steady assurance. He was home, he was fine and he was hers. In this moment, her body pressing hotly against his, he didn't belong to the army. In this moment, with her mouth opening under his—inventing his tongue to explore, he didn't belong to the family. In this moment, when he moved forward with a groan; his arms adjusting to push her back on to his bed, he only belonged to her. Just her. And, as she pulled him to her, taking his entire weight onto her, she was ready to be selfish. She was ready to be greedy.

Harry knew that his family was waiting. He knew his father was anxious to have them back; anxious to hear about his time away. He knew that there was a celebratory dinner waiting; bottles of the finest champagne. He knew all of that.

He also knew that there was no way anything was going to pull him away from her now. Now that she was surrendering to his roaming hands; her body arching under his touch. Now that she was taking his long, hot kisses into her mouth like they were air; like she needed them to stay alive. Now that she was allowing him to rid her of her clothing in a less graceful, less mindful way than she had rid him of his.

Nothing could pull him from this spot, from this moment; from her.

Making love to Harry had always been amazing; sacred—was the word she chose. But there had never been a time before this, or after really, that would ever compare to how complete she felt as they moved together. It was like a part of her had been gone and had finally come home. She felt whole again. The ache was gone; the glaring absence of him erased.

They moved so seamlessly together, like there hadn't been 116 days since they last made love, like she hadn't been nervous about this moment. And she had been; afraid that things would be different, that it would be awkward. But it wasn't. There was nothing awkward, no stunted movements, no lack of confidence. Her body sought contact with his like her lungs sought fresh air. It was just them; moving against the other, with the other, in the way their bodies had memorized long ago. In a way that drove them both to their edge much quicker than Harry had planned; quicker than he had hoped.

As they came back from that place of bliss, all he could do was smile ridiculously wide, and shower her with kisses. They had all night to reconnect; this was only the beginning. As Maddie's body recovered, her eyes welled with tears; her chest felt heavy. She was overwhelmed by his presence; by the surge of emotions she had been handling for 116 days. Harry moved then, adjusting on the bed, pulling her into his arms in a softer, gentler way. And she went; willingly. She cuddled up to him and let him hold her. She let him sooth her with feather soft kisses and his quiet, steady breathing. And finally, when she began to even out, she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him properly.

"You're home," she sighed breathlessly. "You're home and you're safe..."

"I am," he nodded; taking her face in his hands and kissing her; first her nose, then her chin, then her lips.

"I just had to make sure," she pressed her forehead to his chest and sighed; heavy and deep and relieved. Her hands ran over him then; his broad shoulders, his solid arms, down to his hands that had moved to cradle her head between them.
"Come on," he took her hand; wrapping his fingers around hers. "Come shower with me before we go." Not wanting to be away from him, not wanting to lose physical contact with him, Maddie followed.

Dinner that night was a celebration with Harry at the center of attention. They served his favorite meal, they opened bottle after bottle of bubbly champagne. And they didn't even blink an eye at the way Maddie couldn't quite keep her hands off of him; or vice versa. It was nothing bold or outlandish; it was a hand on his back, his arm, his knee. It was Harry pulling her hand into his, into his lap, as they sat and talked. It was the quick kiss to the cheek he would give her as they moved from the dining room to the study where they sat while Harry told them of his time away. Over drinks and light music, Harry told tales from the front lines—only the ones that brought about laughter. He kept the ones that came with tears to himself; there would be another time for that.

They stayed much later than Harry had anticipated, much later than Charles had stayed awake for some time. But it seemed that nobody wanted this moment to end; nobody was quite ready to move from the celebration that was Harry's return. But eventually the night was drawn to a close and Harry and Maddie found themselves back at his place; alone and with the night ahead of them.

It was there, hours later, when they were lying together in his bed, their clothes leaving a trail up the stairs, their hearts pattering from Harry's wild side. It was there that Harry finally began to talk to her about why he was home early. As Maddie nestled into his side, resting her head on his chest and wrapping her leg around him, he took a deep, shaky breath and offered a tentative smile.

"There's something I need to tell you."

"Oh?" She raised her eyebrows sleepily.

"Tomorrow morning the news is going to announce that I'm back, that the squadron returned four days early," his fingers twisted through hers playfully.

"Okay," she moved; turning over so that she could look at him. His hands moved to her back; shifting up and down as he continued.

"They are also going to talk about why."

"Oh-kay."

"Maddie, something happened." She wasn't sure if it was the tone of his voice or the look in his eye; but whatever it was—her throat tightened.

"To you?" 

"No," he shook his head, half a grin pulling at his lips. "How many times am I going to need to make love to you before you're convinced I'm okay?" Maddie smiled coyly.

"Twenty-two?"

"Ha..." His fingers reached out to trace the profile of her nose. "I'm going to be a busy man."

"You are," she kissed his chest. "Harry...what happened?" Her voice was soft, sweet, as the mood shifted. His eyes grew darker; staring out in thought.
"Nothing big..." He sighed heavily. "The details aren't terribly important. My flight crew went in after another downed flight crew. They were deep in enemy terrain and we probably shouldn't have gone down after them. But we did. We were fired upon and we fired back. At the end of the day we got them all out with one casualty." His eyes shifted down as they welled with tears. "It will most likely blow up into a big deal..."

"A bad big deal or a good big deal?" Maddie's mind was fuzzy as she tried to imagine him in the situation he had described; all while trying to avoid imagining him in the situation he had just described.

"Well..." He adjusted underneath her; seemingly uncomfortable with all of it. "There will probably be medals awarded..."

"You're a hero," she blinked at the surprising tears in her eyes.

"Don't call me that," he shook his head; capturing her face in his hands. "They are probably going to call me that. They are going to call my flight team that. But..." He sniffed; trying to gain control of his emotions. "But Maddie somebody died. One of our men, one of my men...died. He has a wife and a mother and...please don't call me that," his head lifted off of the pillow to kiss her as she nodded. "I don't want to talk about it. I...we all have appointments to talk to somebody. I just...I wanted you to know before it hit." He kissed her again. "But I don't want that to be what we talk about." He shook his head again; pushing the topic away; his hands closing around her arms—pulling her closer to him, pulling her body completely onto his.

"What do you want to talk about?" Her eyes were heavy as she looked down at him; doing her best to let his words rest and move on.

"You," he breathed. "I want to talk about what you've been doing for the last four months. I want to know about the night you spent with Kate. I want to know what ridiculous things you and Ella have been up to. I want to know how your kids at the hospital are doing...and how I can get myself one of those sweet necklaces..." Maddie's laughter rumbled through both of their bodies. Harry looked up at her adoringly, his hands pushing her hair back from her face. "I want to know how many days I have to squeeze in those twenty-two..."

Laughing against his lips, Maddie kissed him then—if he wanted to move on, she would move on. There would be enough time to learn more the next day. For now, she wanted to curl up next to him and bore him to sleep with how normal her life had been without him—well, as normal as it could be when the Duchess of Cambridge showed up with bottles of champagne and the paps were camped out across the street.

Everything intensified after Harry came home from his deployment. The news of his return dropped the next day and, he was right, a big deal was made. Maddie found that Harry had left out all of the gruesome details about the save he and his men had made; most likely to spare her the details, or to spare himself from having to tell her. Either way, it was much more intense than he had alluded to that night in his bed.

There would be a medal ceremony for his crew—no matter their insistence that it was just part of the job; what they signed up for. Despite his desire to avoid it, Harry and his men were lauded as heroes. He hated it; Maddie could tell. He hated the idea that something that left them one man short would also be something he was congratulated on. But, true to form, he swallowed that back and stood tall as they went out into the world.

Of course Harry's fans were back in full force; confessing their love, taking his picture, proposing...
marriage with signs and t-shirts and even a few tattoos, calling out to him on the street, in clubs. While Maddie found it all quite amusing, she expected his ego to inflate; to blow up the size of the entire continent but he stayed centered, he stayed calm. Because his deployment, unbeknownst to Maddie, had hit Harry hard; right at the center of his world.

When Harry returned to England, to Maddie, his focus had settled. It wasn't so much that he had a new mission in mind—he had always known this was the way he would go, the new part was the intensity of his drive; how much he wanted it. How much he wanted her.

The first time he had been deployed, he had been in an on-again-off-again relationship with Chelsy. It had been difficult to be away from her but not quite life altering—not like this.

But this time was different. This time hit him hard. Watching a fellow soldier die; watching him talk about his wife and his family as he drifted from consciousness—that was something that would stick with Harry forever. All it did was strengthen what he already knew. He wanted Maddie. He had wanted her for so long, he had known for so long. But that moment, that snapshot in time, was so intense, so real, that coming home to her was the answer to so many questions he had spent his life trying to answer.

She was the answer.

So, as the days began to pass, as he readjusted to being home, to the new level of interest from his fans, as he stood next to his crew members and accepted a medal from his grandmother, as he stood in silence as they honored their fallen brother, as he looked out at the audience and found her eyes watching him with empathy, with love—he knew what came next. He knew exactly what lay ahead of him and he could not have been more certain or more ready.

It was then that he placed two phone calls; arranging two meetings. One with her Majesty, The Queen and the second with Hannah Forrester.
Chapter 72

Maddie's second summer in London was so much busier than her first. In addition to the work she was doing at the hospital, her work at St. Joe's remained steady; the more men and women who returned, the more Maddie's work load increased. It was a happy sort of busy. It was a fulfilling sort of busy.

And her social calendar was stock full. She attended polo matches, she had plans nearly every weekend with their group of friends; all intent on continuing the celebration of Harry's return. Among all of the craziness, there was Eugenie and Jack's wedding in July. And then one night two weeks before the big day, there was one new arrival that found Maddie, Harry, Ella and a tagalong Bishop in an airport in France running on nothing but excitement and adrenaline.

"A baby Harry. A baby!" Maddie was ecstatic as they hurried out of the airport; Ella and Bishop close behind them. "A baby..." Her voice matched the soft look on her face.

"I'm sorry are you asking me to give you a baby?" His sarcasm was in top form. "Cause I'm willing, but we're in an airport, that guy is taking our picture," Harry offered a cheery wave to the man across the way with his phone aimed at them. "And we should probably hit a few steps first..."

"No," she nudged his arm; her face scrunching up. "I'm talking about Khenda and Collins and the baby that we are about to meet."

"You're excited, I'm guessing?" Ella snickered at her best friend as she tugged Bishop along.

"And you aren't?" She countered; glancing at the bag full of baby goodies Ella carried with her. "Oh!" She exclaimed, spotting Collins just across the open terminal.

"Collins!" Ella called out; her beaming smile rivaling Maddie's. Hearing his name, he turned towards them.

The excitement was palpable as the group enveloped him in their love. Maddie thought for the briefest of moments that maybe they should be embarrassed by the shrieks and the sloppy group hug. But she wasn't. She was too happy to be embarrassed.

"Daddy!" Maddie called out; throwing her arms around his neck.

"I cannot believe you are all here!" Collins was flooded with emotions as he took them in.

"Wouldn't have missed it. Come here big guy," Harry, living up to a long ago promise, put his hands on Collins' cheeks and planted a big kiss, right on his lips. If Collins was taken aback, it was covered with hearty laughter.

"Welcome back, man," Collins clapped his hand on Harry's back; seeing him for the first time since he returned.

"Easy there killer," Ella laughed at him, pulling Bishop to her side. "Collins, this is Bishop; Bishop, Collins."

"It's great to meet you," Bishop stuck his hand out.
"Well hello," Collins eyed Ella as he shook the extended hand. "It's great to meet you too. So...
He turned to the group. "Are you ready to come meet my son?"

"Your son?" Maddie's eyes grew soft.

"Isaiah," Collins face was shining.

"Isaiah," Maddie melted.

"How's mom doing?" Harry asked; wrapping an arm around Maddie's shoulders as they moved towards the exit.

"Oh God..." Collins' hands clutched at his chest, just over his heart; his eyes beaming. "She's a goddess man. An absolute goddess." His whole aura made the group giddy. Harry pressed a kiss to Maddie's head, slipping his sunglasses over his eyes as they stepped out of the airport and into the sun.

I brought visitors..." Collins' voice was low as he knocked softly on the door to Khenda's hospital room; peeking in to see if she was awake.

"Bring them in," a sleepy but blissful Khenda smiled up from her pillow and Collins stood aside, allowing them all to enter.

"Oh..." Maddie breathed, her hand coming to her mouth as her eyes zeroed in on the very center of everyone's attentions tucked safely in Khenda's arms.

"Come in, come in," Khenda's smile widened as she waved them in. Maddie was in awe as she rounded the corner; the scene in that room was so precious, so sweet. They all moved in and around Khenda; hugging and kissing her—careful of the sleeping bundle in her arms. Khenda was so happy to see them, so gracious as Ella introduced a slightly reluctant Bishop—who Khenda instantly put at ease. Collins stood leaning against the opposite wall, watching his family with unadulterated pride and adoration. Ella and Bishop moved to the side of the bed, Maddie sat at the foot of the bed, reaching out to touch Khenda's foot; meeting her eyes with the love they shared for each other. And Harry, true to form, true to the dynamic of his relationship with Khenda, moved right to her side in a way a brother might.

"Khenda..." He looked her over with admiration. "You're a mother!" He leaned in to kiss her.

"I am," she nodded; letting him hug her tight. "Welcome home Captain." She kissed his cheeks; happy to see him with her own eyes. And then, with soft fingers, she pulled the light blue blanket back from the baby's face and stroked his chubby little cheeks as he yawned and fought to open his eyes. "Isaiah, this is Uncle Harry."

"Uncle Harry..." He echoed her with reverence. The look on his face, the joy in his eyes was not lost on Maddie. In fact, it made her heart swell into her throat. It made her stomach flip with excitement.

"Harry, this is Isaiah," Khenda adjusted the tiny little man in her arms and held him out to him. "Do you want to hold him?"
"Can I?" His eyes went wide, as though she had just offered him the opportunity to do the one thing he had wanted to do his entire life. He looked young, alive and happy.

"Of course," Khenda chuckled at him; finding great humor in the way her tiny little baby, now looking up at them with wide eyes, was rendering His Royal Highness into a giddy mess. Harry nodded; wiping his hands on his pants nervously before holding out his arms to cradle Khenda's son.

He was a natural. As he took the baby from Khenda's arms, his entire body transformed; his arms cuddled him close to his chest, his fingers moving to adjust the blanket. With an adoring smile, he pressed a soft kiss to the Isaiah's cheeks, bringing a tiny cry from the little boy and laughter from the group.

"He has the same effect on the ladies," Bishop offered with a smirk; bringing out more laughter.

"Don't listen to them, Isaiah. We know better," Harry cooed; his knees relaxing as he began to bounce gently, swaying from side to side just slightly—subconsciously rocking him in his arms. A natural. Maddie felt tears come to her eyes as she forced herself to look at something else. Feeling Khenda's foot nudge her leg, Maddie looked to the top of the bed to her friend who was watching her with a knowing smile. Harry caught the exchange and his eyes traveled to Maddie. "Do you want to hold him?"

"Yes," Maddie breathed; standing and walking to him. She was in awe as he very carefully handed Isaiah over to her; checking to make sure she was supporting his head, his neck. A grin spread across her face as tears formed in her eyes. "He's so perfect." She pressed a kiss to his forehead, pausing to inhale. He smelled amazing and all she wanted to do was curl up with him and never let him go. "Welcome to the world Isaiah. I am your aunt Maddie." She smiled up at Harry who was watching her and the baby with loving eyes.

Maddie's cheeks flushed at the way he was looking at her, the way he was watching her—it was as though she could see the promise of a whole future in his eyes; a marriage, a home, children. And Harry couldn't care less that the entire room was there to witness this moment bringing him to tears. He had never hidden his desires for a family and he wasn't starting now. It was amazing how Collins and Khenda having a baby could intensify his connection to Maddie. Forcing his eyes away, before he broke down and begged her to be his wife, have his children, he turned to Collins and clapped his hands together.

"Well done, Sir. Well done."

"Thank you," Collins grinned; his bright white smile as Harry shook his hand in congratulations. "But truly, the work was all her." He pointed to Khenda.

"Well done, Mama," Harry flashed a wide smile her way, his hands reaching out to tickle Isaiah in Maddie's arms.

"You want one of these, don't you," Khenda laughed at his trancelike state.

"I want eight of these," Harry piped up and the room really rumbled with laughter as Maddie shook her head.

"Yes well, your birthday is still six weeks away," she met his eyes with a wink before she turned to their friends. "Ella?"
"Oh God!" She moved quickly; her eyes wide with excitement. "I thought I would never get him away from you and Mother Goose over there." She tossed a smirk to Harry who rolled his eyes. "Come here little guy..." She lifted him from Maddie's arms, her voice slipping into mothering mode. "Oh man...you are gorgeous."

And the adoration began again. They passed the baby around, they took turns rocking him, singing to him, bouncing with him. Even Bishop who was shy at first, gave in to the prodding and challenge from Harry and took the baby into his hands while Collins winked at Ella. Gifts were opened, cigars were distributed, and stories were told.

Eventually the nurses came in and insisted that Khenda get some rest. So, the group reluctantly let go of little Isaiah for the night. They kissed Khenda and Collins and they set out to check into the Bishop hotel where they were staying for the one night they would be in Paris. They checked in, the settled their things and then...they were young, the night was early, and they were in Paris. So, after they went on a ridiculous shopping spree for Isaiah; clothes, books, toys—they went out for a celebratory drinks and dinner. But they kept it easy, kept it low-key. They were due back at the hospital for cuddling and love early in the morning before they left for London.

"Harry..." Maddie's voice was deep in his ear as she sat over him in their large bed. They had long ago said goodnight to their friends and, emotionally amped by their night, they couldn't keep their hands off the other.

"Yes love?" He looked up at her. Though he was completely naked, he was moving with an aching slowness as he peeled her clothes from her body.

"Harry..." Maddie couldn't help the words that whispered from her mouth into his ear. "I want a baby..." There she was, straddling his lap; his lips pressed to her neck while he removed her bra and she couldn't keep her mouth shut. She couldn't help it; she had been thinking it all night, ever since she saw him with Isaiah.

"What?" He pulled back; one hand resting on her bare thigh, one sweeping her hair away from her face. "Did you just say that you..."

"Want a baby," she bit her lip. There it was again. "Oh God," her eyes were frantic as they searched his face. "Was that the least sexy thing I could possibly say to you?" Harry's mouth hung open for a moment. "It was," she nodded; rising up, ready to move off of him. "I'm sorry."

"Hold on," his hands were firm on her hips; holding her in place. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I don't know," she shook her head; a nervous laugh passing through her lips. "Out?"

"At one in the morning?" He chuckled. "Half naked?" She moved again, but his hands held onto her. "Come on. Don't go. Don't leave. Talk to me. Maddie..." His finger nudged her chin; moving her eyes to meet his. "You want a baby?"

"I..." She blushed; pink covering her skin from her cheeks to her chest. "I told you before that I wanted children."

"Yes," he smiled; humored at her shyness—especially as she sat in his lap; exposed. "Though you've never said it quite like that."
"Like what?"

"Like you wanted me to give you one right now." The temperature in the room shot up; his eyes were boring into hers.

"Maybe..." She took a deep breath. "Maybe I'm ready for that."

"Oh?" Harry fought to keep his face calm; fought to keep the wide smile from his lips. He didn't want to scare her. "You're ready for...you're ready for a baby?"

"I don't know," she shook her head. "When I saw you with Isaiah, when I saw you hold him and kiss him and...God Harry, when you were swaying with him to keep him from crying...I just..." Her hands moved up his chest, winding around his neck and pulling her body closer to his. "I wanted that with you. I don't think I've ever felt such a...primal urge like that before in my life." Her heart jumped as she spoke the truth. "I want to have that with you." With a wide smile, Harry stretched his neck, kissing her; his hands holding her tight to him, his tongue seeking entrance into her mouth. Maddie groaned as he kissed her; let him render her breathless. Maybe it wasn't the least sexy thing she could say to him—maybe he was unlike almost every other man his age.

"We..." Harry was breathing heavy; his forehead pressing to hers. His hands were shaky as they roamed over her curves. "We have to be married first, Maddie. You have to be my wife. We..."

"I'm ready when you are Wales." She cut in; feeling alive and giddy and brave. His head moved back from hers; his eyes wide with surprise. Maddie's head tossed back in laughter.

"Are you messing with me right now?" He studied her face; her rosy cheeks, the laughter in her eyes. His heart was thumping in his chest. "Are you joking?"

"Would I ever...."

"Yes," he nodded. "You absolutely would. I'm not messing around here Maddie. You want me to ask you right now?"

"Don't be silly..." Maddie's hand slapped at his chest; playfully.

"I'm not being..." He moved then, pushing her gently to the side as he left the bed.

"Now where are you going?" Maddie watched him as he looked through the clothes they had flung around the room.

"I'm putting on pants," he explained. "I cannot very well tell our children that I proposed to you while I was naked and trying to make love to you, can I?"

"Proposed." Maddie's eyes snapped wide; her breath pushing from her lungs. "Wait. Hold on. Wait..." She held her hand out to him as he pulled on boxers. "Stop!" She moved to him then, her hands on his wrists holding him still. "Harry stop! You can't just..."

"I can just." His hands broke from her grasp; wrapping around her and pulling her body to his. "This isn't exactly how I had figured it would go. I don't have a ring or..."

"Shhh..." Maddie's hand slipped up to his mouth; her eyes wide and wet. "Don't ask me because I said that. Don't do it because you feel pressured..."
"Pressured?!" He laughed. "I don't feel pressured. Madeline..." His lips claimed hers; communicating something to her that his lack of articulation was struggling to do. "I've never felt less pressure. I would like to feel more...You can't mess with me like this love. I will call your bluff every time. You want a baby? I'll give you a baby. I'll give you eight babies one right after the other...an enormous house to put them all in..." His eyes were alive; his face was animated. He was so incredibly serious; so happy at the mere thought that it moved Maddie in ways she had never been moved. Her whole body ached with love for him. His hands found her face; soft and loving. "But you have to marry me first. You have to be the Duchess first. There's no way around it. That's how it works."

"I know," she nodded; her voice soft. "I know. But you can't just jump out of bed and throw on some clothes because I tell you that I want all of those things too."

"Do you? Do you want all of those things?" Maddie's lips twitched as she nodded; nervous and excited. Harry, overcome with emotion, wasn't sure if he should laugh or cry or throw her over his shoulder and take her to bed. So he did all three; in one grand sweeping gesture, they were back where they started.

Except they weren't.

Because now he knew. This place that he had been, this place where his future was lined up right in front of him and all he had to do was wait for her to be ready and then reach out and claim it, now she was in that place too. Maybe he should have known that; maybe he should have guessed. Hell, she had been with him through the press and the paparazzi. She had withstood the attacks, the fake photos, the alleged cheating stories. And she was still there; in his arms, letting him kiss her and touch her and make her sigh. She was finally telling him that she was in that place; ready to step up, reach out and claim it.

And God if he wasn't ready to offer it to her.

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Leaving Paris, leaving Collins and Khenda and Isaiah, was a bittersweet moment. They were able to help the new family transition home, they were able to cuddle the sweet little bundle till they sighed and then they were loading up and heading back to London. There was, after all, a Royal Wedding in the works and there was much pomp and circumstance headed their way. They made plans to return for a longer stay, they managed to avoid Khenda's frustrations when she discovered the opulent gifts, and Bishop managed to garner approval from Collins. All in all, the trip was successful. So, with a stash of Laduree Macaroons that Harry had surprised her with in the morning, Maddie curled up next to Harry on the plane and said Au Revoir to Paris while holding onto the new feelings the trip had awakened in her.

Once they arrived home, they had very little time to digest all that had occurred when they were gone. The plans for Eugenie and Jack's wedding were in full force. There were showers and hen parties and last minute I-need-to-get-away-from-the-planning-or-I-am-going-to-explode nights on the town. And of course, there was the dress shopping.

"So..." Ella looked at Maddie over the rack of dresses they were perusing. "Are you coming with Bishop and I?"

"I am," Maddie nodded as she pushed another hanger. "Harry said I should ride with you to St. George's and somebody at the church will show me where to sit..." She pulled a dress out. "What
do you think of this color?"

"What do you mean somebody will show you where to sit?" Ella ignored the dress and watched her friend.

"Well, he's coming with his father and Camilla and he wants me to sit with them but..." She explained casually; biting her lip as she looked over the dress. "Do you think this color is too flashy?"

"Hold on," Ella moved around the rack so she was standing next to Maddie. "He told you that you're sitting with him?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded dismissively.

"In the church?" Ella's hand fell on top of Maddie's. "You're sitting with him in the church at the wedding?"

"Yes," Maddie chuckled; taking in her friend's expression. "Why do you look like I just told you the Earth is flat?"

"Because you just told me the Earth is flat. Maddie...you're sitting with The Family at Eugenie's wedding?"

"Yes," Maddie put the dress back on the rack and slid the hanger along; glancing up at Ella in confusion. "What?"

"Come here," Ella was rough as she grabbed her friend's hand; pulling her through the racks.

"Ouch. Ella..."

"Shhhhh..." Ella pulled her into a dressing room; shutting and locking the door.

"What the hell is..."

"Is there something you want to tell me?" Ella's eyes were wide, her voice low; her arms crossed over her chest.

"No?" Maddie wasn't sure.

"You're sitting with Harry at a wedding. The Family—at a wedding. Do you have any idea how big this..." Ella stepped even closer; her voice so low that Maddie had to lean in to hear it. "Are you hiding a secret engagement?"

"What?!" Maddie laughed out loud; stepping away from her friend. "Of course not. Goodness, Ella. It's his cousin's wedding. I'm sitting with my boyfriend at his cousin's wedding. Relax. It's not that big of a deal." And with a slight roll of her eyes, Maddie unlocked the dressing room door and stepped out.

"Yeah well, we'll see about that," Ella sighed; following behind her. Of course, Ella would turn out to be right. She usually was about things such as this. When the "Engagement Watchers" began to stalk her left hand, Maddie knew Ella had been right.

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On the day of the wedding, Maddie arrived early with Ella and Bishop and, after they had entered the church, Thomas was quick to find her and direct her to the correct location. It wasn't long before the family was making an entrance, before the parade of Windsors was walking before her. It wasn't lost on her how easily she dipped into the curtsey as Dukes and Duchesses walked past her. It wasn't lost on her how Kate looked at her when their eyes met; like she was in on some great big secret—or how Mike nodded his head to her with a smirk. And it wasn't lost on her, the way Harry moved to her side with wide smiling eyes as The Queen was the last to join them. They had merely moments before Eugenie was expected to arrive on her father's arm; only minutes really. But in those minutes, Maddie took in the regality of it all; the beautiful chapel at Windsor Castle that had seen so many nuptials in this family. She was struck by the history that was there; the level of tradition that came with it all.

Slipping her hand through Harry's arm, she leaned in and spoke softly, "Harry, this is beautiful."

"Hmm," He hummed with a smile.

"Do you think we could...You know..." Her lips fell closed as he turned to look at her. Her eyes shifted as she nodded to the altar with half a smirk. "Here?"

"You're trying to kill me, aren't you," his eyes were playful. "I should warn the security team about you. You tell me you want a baby and then you tell me to take off my pants and order me not to propose..."

"Shhh..." Maddie's eyes narrowed at him as her cheeks blushed.

"And now you want to know if we can marry here? Madeline..." He leaned closer to her; closer than he should be inside a church with his father in front of him and The Queen so nearby. "Are you going to let me take you back to my cave or what?" Maddie had to turn her face into his shoulder to keep from laughing; only egging him on. "Honestly now. I've been following you around for years. I adore you...make an honest man out of me..."

"Would you stop?" She bit at her lip, nudging his ribs to quiet him. But he wouldn't. It was too much fun to tease her. Thankfully, the music began and all eyes drifted to the back of the chapel where Eugenie was making her appearance.

"I mean what does a guy have to do to get you to just take that walk with him?" He snuck in one last question before it all began. Maddie shook her head at him with pointed eyes; amused at his naughtiness. And then, clearing her throat, she looked him straight in the eye and answered; effectively shutting him up.

"Ask."

Harry's teeth clenched together as he shook his head at her; warning in his eyes before his attention shifted entirely to his cousin who was about to be married. That small, brief conversation would be the only one like it they would have that night. As soon as they saw Eugenie appear, as soon as they saw the smile on Jack's face; they both jumped into the night of celebration. They held hands while the vows were exchanged. They held tighter when the pronouncement was made. And, when the ceremony was over and they made their way to the reception that was hosted on grounds at Windsor Castle, they joined the family and friends in a night of revelry.

That's not to say that, while he held her in his arms and turned her around the dance floor, she wasn't thinking about what it might be like to dance with him on their wedding night. And that's
not to say that Harry, when he had the one brief moment alone with Ella, didn't secure her help with something that would remain top secret. And that's not to say that, when his family watched the two of them together, they weren't taking bets on how long it would be before an announcement was made.

All of those things were true. But that night, as they drank champagne and danced until dawn, it was just another night that drew them a few steps closer to the other.

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Maddie's second summer in London was turning out to be a big one. She was no longer finding her way, discovering her place. She had arrived; she was home. She knew her favorite nooks and crannies. She had her regular haunts. She had become a part of Harry's tight circle of friends; leaning on them and allowing them to lean on her. And she had become a welcome guest with his family. She never would have guessed just how much her life would change over that last year.

And she never would have guessed just how much it was about to.
Chapter 73

It was a cool August night in London; uncharacteristically so. A light rain had settled in during the afternoon, leaving the evening crisp and the ground covered in a dark wetness. When Harry stepped out of the small, chartered plane on the landing strip in London, he inhaled the scent and looked to the calm skies. He had been traveling almost non-stop for the last twenty-four hours and still had more travel ahead of him and tomorrow was Maddie's birthday. Tugging at the lapels of his tuxedo jacket; he slid the button into place and made his way down the small set of stairs unfolded from the chartered plane.

"Good evening, Sir," his driver greeted him at the bottom of the steps. "You look different than when I last saw you."

"Good evening Harrison," Harry smiled with a nod. "I changed into this about five minutes ago. Can't very well show up with wrinkles, can I?"

"No Sir."

"It rained while I was away."

"Only a bit. Should be clear for the rest of the night," he followed just behind Harry; ready to update him, ready to take orders.

"Good. We'll be back here and up in the air in less than two hours."

"Yes sir."

"Great," Harry paused, pulling his phone from his pocket and powering it up. He glanced at the car and Harrison read his mind.

"We have everything packed and ready to go, Sir."

"The Elie Saab?" Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Boxed and in the trunk; along with the shoes." Harry grinned; she was going to look ravishing in the red. He had even remembered to send Ella a thank you for helping with the sizes.

"Cartier?" He felt his heart skip as he went through the checklist.

"Bagged and in the backseat."

"Fantastic," Harry's smile stretched even further. "And the candy?"

"Same."

"Perfect," Harry clapped his hands together; pleased.

"And how was your trip to the states sir?" Harrison moved to open the car door for the young man.

"Quick," Harry chuckled; the anticipation rushing through his veins. He was ready to get on with
his night; ready to see her.

"Of course, Sir."

"It went well; very, very well. Thank you." With a quick glance at his watch, Harry slipped into the car; the door shutting behind him. As the car began to move, Harry dialed. It was less than three rings before she answered.

"Maddie my love..." He hoped that the excitement in his voice gave nothing away.

"Ugh..." She groaned and his smile faded to a frown; she sounded terrible. "I tried to call you. Where have you been?"

"I thought I told you. I've been training for the last twenty-four hours. I..." He took a breath; hating that he was lying to her. "I didn't have my phone on for a bit. I'm on my way there now."

"No. You can't come here."

"What? Why not?"

"I'm sick. I'm so sick," she groaned.

"Sick? What's wrong?"

"The flu. I can't keep anything in my stomach," she breathed slowly. "I'm sorry. I can't do dinner Harry. I can barely sit up without..."

"Oh baby..." He winced; her voice sounded drained.

"I'm so sorry."

"No, hey," he shook his head; his eyes moving past the red and gold bag on the seat next to him. "Don't worry about it. Let me just call and cancel...a few things. I'll be right over."

"No!" She exclaimed. "No...you don't need to come over. Stay away. I'm sick and I'm gross and you don't need any part of this."

"Okay."

"Okay? Really?"

"No not really. I'm on my way. Go back to sleep. I'll let myself in."

"Harry, no..." Her protest matched her voice, her body; weak.

"I love you Madeline. I'm coming over. Now. What do I need to bring with me?"

"With you?"

"Yes...what do you need? Soup?" She groaned. "Come on, love. What helps you feel better? I need to know these things."

"Saltines," she sniffed. "And ginger ale. Would you bring me saltines and ginger ale?"
"Of course," he smiled; pleased that she had surrendered her position, allowing him to help her.

"Just regular saltines, Harry. Not those...fancy, royal crackers you have..."

"Royal crackers?" He laughed.

"I want the cheap ones..." She thought for a moment. "You know, maybe you should call Ella."

"I can find a box of saltines all on my own."

"You don't need to do this. You really don't. You could go home and relax and..."

"Would you stop with that?" He cut her off. "I'm coming over. I'm bringing cheap saltines and ginger ale. I'll see you soon. I love you. Good-bye now..." And though he could still hear her protesting, he disconnected the call. His hand reached up to loosen his tie as he called out to the driver.

"Harrison?"

"Yes sir?"

"Doctor Forrester is sick," Harry shook his head; sad for her, sad for the loss of their night, their weekend. "I'm going to need to stop off before we go to her place. Also, would you please call ahead and cancel the flight, the hotel...everything?"

"Yes Sir," Harrison nodded. "The entire weekend?"

Harry looked to the bag next to him and nodded. "The entire weekend."

^^^^^When Harry arrived at Maddie's place, he opened the door and called out to her, "Madeline. It's me. Nathan's going to walk through and..."

"You hung up on me!" A small but firm voice called out from behind the closed bathroom door.

"Yeah," Harry sighed with a hint of a smile. "I'm sorry about that baby but you were..."

"I told you to stay away!"

"Yes well, I think we both knew better." Harry took a deep breath and nodded to Nathan who moved about his business quickly and efficiently. As he did, Harry settled the dress box and the bags off in the corner of the room; dropping his tuxedo jacket on top of them. He waited until Nathan walked past him before he closed and locked the door. Gathering the saltines and the ginger ale, he ventured down the hall to the bathroom; knocking softly, "Can I come in?"

"Would you listen if I told you no?" Her voice was tired. She had a point; he probably wouldn't. Shuffling the crackers to his other hand, he reached out to open the door. For the rest of his life, he would remember the scene that awaited him.

There she was, his beautiful girlfriend, curled up on the floor of her bathroom in oversized, mismatched pajamas; her head achingly close to the toilet. She had created something of a bed in
there; complete with her comforter, a pillow, tissues and her slippers.

"Oh baby..." He instantly felt bad for her, moving to step into the bathroom.

"Wales..." She whined, waving her hand at him as if she were shooing a fly. "I told you to stay away..."

"Don't be mad," his voice was soft as he looked around, trying to decide the best place for him. "I brought ginger ale and saltines—the cheap ones, just like you asked."

"Thank you," she moaned; sitting up slightly so that her head was closer to the toilet, her face turning colors. "You can just leave them and..."

"Please. As if I would ever leave you here like this," he moved then, sitting next to her on the floor; leaning against the tub and reaching a hand out to rub her back soothingly. "I'm sorry you're sick, love. What happened?"

"I don't know," she shook her head; her hands rubbing over her face. "It hit me this morning; like a truck."

"Do you want some of these crackers?"

"No," her face screwed up. "Not yet. I haven't had any success with water."

"So ginger ale is out of the question?" He held up the bottle with a weak smile.

"Mmm Hmm..." She nodded; her mouth twisting up as she sat up even further. "Harry you have to go..." She was more forceful.

"I'm not going anywhere..." He refused, even as Maddie shoved at his hands; moving quickly away from him and towards the toilet—emptying what little there was left in her stomach.

"Ugh..." She moaned as she finished; her head resting on her arm.

"I'm so sorry..." She turned slight towards his voice as he spoke. And there he was, Prince Harry of Wales, on her bathroom floor with one hand holding her hair from her face, the other on her back.

"What are you doing?" She felt tears in her eyes; a mixture of frustration and happiness.

"I'm...here let me..." He held onto her hair as she eased away from the toilet; flushing it as she moved. He let go of her hair and reached for a tissue. "Here, love. Let me get you some water..." He rose to his feet, filling the glass on the counter and handing it to her.

"I hate this..." She wiped at the tears in her eyes and took the water from him.

"I know baby," he looked down at her, wishing there was something more he could do.

"This is going to be the worst birthday ever..." She grumbled; looking him over for the first time since he had arrived. "Are you...I'm sorry. Are you in a tuxedo?" He chuckled and moved back to his spot next to her on the floor.

"Half of one, yes." He tugged at the bow tie; slipping it from around his neck and tossing it to the
"You had plans for us tonight," she sniffed; handing him the glass of water.

"You knew that," he smiled; setting it on the counter before leaning back against the tub, resuming his spot next to her. "Come here..." He reached for her pillow; placing it in his lap and patting it. "Come on, Madeline." Eyeing him suspiciously, she moved; settling her head there on the pillow in his lap.

"I knew we had plans but...not tuxedo plans."

"Tuxedo plans?" He laughed; tugging the blanket up around her.

"Where were we going to go tonight?" She snuggled up to him; her stomach settling a bit.

"It doesn't matter," he shook his head; his fingers working magic as they stroked the hair away from her face. "No need to worry about it now. Just relax. Close your eyes and relax." And, because she had very little energy left in her to fight him, she did just as he instructed.

Eventually Maddie's stomach settled enough that she allowed Harry to help her back to her bed. He fluffed her pillows, he tucked her blankets around her and then he went about tidying up her room. He tossed tissues, dumped her old water glass—replacing it with room temperature ginger ale, just as she had requested. He offered crackers, he offered tea, he offered to run to fetch soup or make grilled cheese, but she wasn't quite there yet. Moving her trashcan closer to her side of the bed, he flipped off the lights and slid in bed next to her.

Maddie was up no less than three times that night; rushing to the bathroom, trying not to wake Harry. But every time, he was right behind her; holding her hair, handing her tissues, refilling her water. He would sit on the floor next to her for a moment while her stomach settled and then he would help her back to bed; paying no attention to her protests, ignoring her pleas for him to sleep in the spare bedroom—if he insisted on staying.

And he did. He insisted. He stayed all night, right next to her. And when he woke the next day, he was quiet as he slipped from her bed. In his boxers and an undershirt, he made his way to her kitchen on a mission to brew tea and make her some toast. It had been a good chunk of time since she had last run to the bathroom and he was hoping that when she woke, she would finally be able to put something in her stomach.

It wasn't long before he heard her; her socked feet padding down the hallway. Tipping his head around the corner of the kitchen, he smiled wide.

"Happy Birthday Beautiful."

"You're still here..." She breathed; a smile tugging at her lips.

"Of course," he stepped completely from the kitchen then; looking her over, "you look better." She had pulled her hair back into a mess of a ponytail and was wearing a warm robe. She had more color in her face than she had the night before and her eyes seemed more at ease, less stressed. "How are you feeling?" He moved to her then; an arm wrapping loosely around her waist while his other hand ran up and down her arm.
"Ugh," her hands pushed weakly at his chest. "Better, but still...gross. You don't want to be near this right now, trust me."

"Madeline," he chuckled softly; refusing to move. "You forget what we've been through together, love." He pressed a kiss to her forehead, his mind flashing to that night in Bendal and the weeks in the hospital that followed.

"I suppose," she nodded; stepping closer to him and his warmth.

"Do you think you can handle some tea this morning?" Both of his hands moved to her shoulders; massaging slightly.

"I think so," she nodded. "It's worth a try."

"Great," he smiled; squeezing her arm. "Why don't you get comfortable on the couch and I'll bring you some tea and toast?"

"That would be great, thank you," she watched as he stepped away from her. "Harry?"

"Hmmm?" He glanced back.

"I mean it. Thank you," her smile was warm; genuine.

"Think nothing of it," he shook his head and went to the kitchen for tea and toast.

Maddie, taking a deep, lung filling breath, made her way into the living room; moving to her couch and pulling her large, comfy blanket off the back; draping it over her legs as she snuggled down. She could hear Harry moving around in the kitchen; the clink of glass, the opening of the refrigerator.

She looked around her, feeling like the last twenty-four hours had been lived in somebody else's body, somebody else's world. She looked out the window, seeing the rain was still settled over London, she looked at the mantle, her vases still sitting there—just as they had been on day 116. She smiled as her eyes traveled away; towards the sound of him stepping into the room and her eyes caught it. The pile of stuff Harry had brought with him when he came from the airplane to her place the night before.

"Here we are," he smiled down at her on the couch; holding out a cup of tea.

"Thank you," she took it; sitting up as her eyes focused just past him to the pile. "Harry?"

"Yes?" He sat her plate of toast on the table in front of her and went back to the kitchen for his own tea.

"What is all of this stuff?" She called out to him; sipping her tea very slowly.

"Stuff?" He called back.

"Under your jacket," she pushed her blanket off her legs and moved from the couch; sitting her tea on the table. "There's a box and a bag and..." Her eyes grew large as she moved his jacket aside, reveling the Cartier bag at the top of the pile.

"Ah..." Harry smiled as he stepped back into the room; finding her wide eyed with the
recognizable bag in her hands. "That is your birthday gift."

"Oh?" She arched an eyebrow. "My birthday gift is in this bag?"

"No," he chuckled, sitting his tea down on the table and pulling his jacket off the pile. He waved his hand at the stack. "That is your birthday gift."

"All of this?"

"All of it."

"Good God Harry, what were you trying to do?"

"Sweep you off your feet."

"And yet you managed to do that with just saltines and ginger ale." He smiled at her; leaning to kiss her shoulder.

"Do you want to open it?" He pulled the bag from her fingers.

"All of it?" She bit her lip.

"All of it," he nodded. "It is your birthday."

"Yes it is," she grinned.

"Come on," Harry's hand fell on the small of her back. "Have a seat and I'll bring it all to you." Because she was still exhausted, all of her energy drained from the day and night before, she did as he asked. Sipping slowly on her tea, she watched while Harry moved the items around; arranging them in front of her on the table.

"Are you going to walk me through it?" She waved her hand over the items. "Tell me how it would have all gone?"

"Sure," he nodded with a grin. Taking a sip from his cup, he clapped his hands together and moved to the big box. "This one would have been first." Maddie pulled the box onto her lap; slipped the bright gold bow from around it. Letting the lid fall to the side, she moved aside the tissue paper and pulled out a stunning Elie Saab dress in red and gold. Her mouth fell open, her eyes traveled from the dress to him in shock.

"Oh my...." Her hands ran over the soft fabric. "How did you..."

"Ella helped me with the size, so I'm sure it will fit."

"You were in a tux," she remembered vaguely from the night before. "And you were going to give me this..."

"Yes," he smiled and reached for another box. "And these." Maddie took the box from him; her jaw dropping even more.

"Louboutin?" She breathed; pulling out a pair of stunning gold shoes. "Harry...

"And then..." He held out his finger, the Cartier bag hanging in the air.
"I don't even know what to..." She shook her head; slightly overwhelmed by it all.

"You open it," he nodded to the bag. Doing as he asked, she took the bag from his hand, carefully removing the box and opening it up to an amazingly stunning watch.

"Oh my God..." She chuckled. "This is unbelievable. Harry. This is too much. It's..."

"Shhh..." He shook his head, pulling her hand into his to fasten the watch around her wrist. "It fits," he grinned. "But if you want a different metal or..."

"Shhh..." Her fingers moved to his lips, her eyes taking in the beautiful timepiece. "It's perfect." She held her wrist out to get a better look. "So, once we were dressed up..."

"We were going to dinner and the symphony," Harry reached into his tuxedo pocket and pulled out the two box tickets he had been holding onto.

"They symphony," her eyes grew soft. "You had a whole night planned..."

"Something like that," Harry shrugged; knowing she was starting to feel guilty—wanting to avoid that.

"Harry this is..." She looked around her at the discarded wrapping, at the elaborate gifts. "I feel so bad that we missed it."

"Don't," he shook his head; leaning forward.

"But I do!" She ran her fingers along the soft fabric of the dress; her wrist adjusting to the new weight there. "Maybe we can still do it. Maybe we can get tickets to tonight's show or tomorrow or..."

"No," Harry shook his head; his eyes sparkling.

"No? Why not? I'm sure there are tickets available. I can call the Royal Opera House and..."

"It wasn't at the Royal Opera House."

"Well where was it?" She snatched the tickets up from the table before he could pull them back; her jaw dropping as she read. "Oslo?! We were going to Norway?! For the night?!"

"For the weekend," he corrected softly.

"But..." She shook her head; stunned into wordlessness. "Why..." And then, in a very matter of fact sort of way, he blew her mind.

"You said you've always wanted to see the Northern Lights." He leaned up from his spot then, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. "We'll do it another weekend, I promise. I've heard they are better in the winter anyway," he reached for her cup. "For now...I'm going to get you some more tea and you...you lay down and relax. We need to get your energy back."

"Yes, sir," Maddie offered a weak attempt at a salute and did as he instructed. Letting the dress rest in the box, she moved back to her slumped position on her couch; watching as he moved from the room for more tea.
An entire weekend, well thought out plans—all down the drain because she had the stomach flu. And instead of sulking around or acting frustrated, he was there; taking care of her, loving her. Sighing, she settled in further. Pulling the blanket closer to her, she looked out at the room, listened to him move and thanked God for whatever it was that she had that kept this man coming back to her side.
Chapter 74

The thing with Harry was that he did things hard. He did things big. He worked hard. He played big. When he put his mind to something, when it became his focus, the intensity, the follow-through—it was something to be rivaled. It was something to be studied and extracted and bottled to sell. At least that's what Maddie told him when she watched him in action; with an impressed smile on her face. He didn't know 'half way'. Which was why it was no surprise at all when he told her what he wanted to do for his birthday, when he presented her with The Plan—a five day itinerary that included a private dinner with his immediate family, a wild, rip-roaring party with his friends, and finally a private getaway for the two of them. He did things big. Rearranging her schedule, swapping shifts with co-workers and calling in favors, Maddie was ready for his Friday-Tuesday experience; wherever it was that it took her.

So on Friday evening, as she dined on succulent seafood served under silver while Harry's father offered up a heartfelt speech to his son, she let Harry grip her fingers under the table and smiled at the blush that rose to his cheeks.

And when she found herself attending an elaborate private bash later that night at Leo's, drinking champagne and toasting him over and over again—she smiled, drank up, and danced until Harry was ready to call it a night. Danced until he took her hand, kissed her neck, and told her it was time for them to go.

And when, hours later, the two of them boarded a private jet to take them to Botswana for the weekend, she had to admit, she was a bit giddy with excitement. Having planned the flight for overnight, they would be well rested and ready to explore when they arrived in southern Africa. Harry had warned her ahead of time—yes, she had been to Africa before—but never to his Africa and never quite like this. Already she knew the trip was going to be extravagant, the likes of which she had only heard tale of. But what could she say? Sunday was his birthday—his thirtieth, no less—and the rules were the rules. He got what he wanted. She laughed to herself as she settled next to him, still tipsy from the champagne. She figured birthdays for Harry were probably not dissimilar from any other day in the life of a Prince.

Saturday

When Maddie woke from her sleep, later in the morning on Saturday, she had made a decision—Harry was a genius. They had partied big the night before; with all of his friends, his brother and sister, and a wide representation of his cousins and, because of the flight schedule, they were waking up just over an hour from their destination. There was a brief moment, a glimpse of time, when she was stepping into the shower on the private jet when she wondered exactly how much something like this cost. But, as the warm water rained down on her, she decided it best to let it slide. It was his birthday, his money and, as he had informed her at the beginning of the trip—they were doing this his way.

They arrived in the late afternoon at a camp resort in Botswana, one of Harry's all-time favorite destinations. The staff was unbelievably friendly; welcoming them with wide open arms and a willingness to do whatever it took to make their stay enjoyable. They were shown to the their luxury suite; the furthest from the main house—as far away from the other visitors as they could possibly be. Harry's detail would be staying in the suite between them and the main house; ensuring Harry's safety, ensuring their privacy.

They settled their items and took dinner on their deck, opting to watch the sunset over the delta
from their lounge chairs. When the sky was dark, when they could only hear the sounds of the water, the sounds of the wildlife, Harry rose to his feet, reached for a lantern and extended his hand.

"Come with me?" He nodded his head towards the main house that was connected to all the suites by an elevated walkway. Maddie finished her glass of wine and slipped her hand into his.

"Where are we going?" Her head leaned against his shoulder as they walked along the path, Nathan trailing not too far behind them.

"Every night after sundown, they have a...party," he grinned mischievously. "They dance and drink and sing and there are drums and...I'm one hundred percent certain you're going to love it."

Harry was right—on all accounts. There was dancing and singing and drums and she absolutely loved it. There was a great mixture of locals and visitors—visitors who were caught up enough in themselves, in their own vacations that they hardly bothered to try to recognize Harry. And, if they did, they were maintaining their cool about it. Later Ella would explain that the particular camp they went to generally caters to the rich and famous and perhaps those people aren't as fan-crazy about Harry as others. Whatever it was, that night came with a relaxed sort of abandon that they rarely felt in London with cameras just around the corner. And Maddie was ready to soak it up as much as she could.

As she danced around the group, always in contact with Harry, a constantly refilled glass in her hand, she watched the drummers with such affection. This reminded her of the very best parts of Bendal. She participated in the dancing. Upon the insistence of one of the drummers, she took a few hits with the stick—much to Harry's delight. And when the camp hosts directed their attention to some moving wildlife, Maddie clamped her hand over her mouth and watched in awe.

"Here you are..." Harry's voice was low, his breath tickling her neck as he stepped up behind her, new drink in hand.

"You're trying to get me drunk..." Her eyes were hazy as she looked up at him; having lost count long ago of her intake. "...take advantage of me..."

"Hmmm..." He smiled; holding his own glass steady as he spun her around and wrapped his arms around her waist. They began to sway to the music. "Maybe."

"You know you don't have to work so hard," she looked at her beautiful watch he had given her just weeks before. "It's midnight darling. It's your birthday. You get whatever you want..."

"Oh yeah?"

"Absolutely." Without another word, Harry finished his drink, took hers from her fingers and leaned over to set them both on a table. Then, with one big, sweeping move, he scooped her up and over his shoulder....walking towards the elevated walkway to their room. And though Maddie knew she should be protesting, knew she should be demanding to be let down—she was much too caught up in giggles to care.

"Good night everyone!" Harry called out with a wave behind him. There was laughter, applause, and a few low whistles as they disappeared into the night. He went big. He played hard.

**Sunday**
Harry woke in the morning with a well-detailed itinerary and a self-imposed mission to exhaust her, at least that's how it felt to Maddie as they day unfolded before her. Over breakfast, they were greeted by two elephants sauntering by; seemingly unaffected by their presence. Harry was amused by the way she stopped what she was doing and watched them—entranced. The wildlife—from the baboons who ran across their roof at night to the hippos with their loud calls to each other—was turning out to be her favorite part of the trip.

After they finished eating, they dressed and set out on a hike. It wasn't quite the summits Maddie was used to but the scenery was phenomenal and the animals they ran across were so new to her that she felt herself being challenge physically and mentally as her brain took in this new space, this new world. Harry had been right. His Africa was different than hers—than the one she had grown used to. Though they both now held a very special place in her heart. As they neared their destination, the outlook over the vast wilderness below them, Harry nodded a challenge in her direction and then they were running—racing to the end.

"Is your birthday wish to leave me breathless?" Maddie huffed; only a few strides behind him as they came to a stop. "Because, my love, you have succeeded."

"Maybe it is," his cocky grin emerged. "But I have more detailed plans for that later."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tossed back as he looped his arms around her waist. "You're going to wear me out Wales."

"Looking forward to it," he tipped his head to kiss her before he nodded his head to the side. "Come on. You have to see this..." Stepping out of her space, he pulled on her hands; guiding her to the outlook. And Maddie went; finding herself more breathless than before.

"Oh my..." She sighed; the wind whipping around them as they looked out. Miles and miles of grassland spread before them; trees and animals and the sky was unbelievable.

"Exactly," Harry agreed; his eyes following hers. "Exactly." But he wasn't quite done. They still had more to see, more to explore. He was pushing this day to the absolute limits. And he loved that Maddie wasn't backing down—showing no sign of flinching. She was game to follow right alongside of him—wherever that took them.

When they came back from their hike, they moved immediately to a driving safari where they encountered giraffes and hippos and cheetahs and Maddie was amazed yet again. She felt like a little girl; clapping her hands together and grabbing his arm in excitement. And as Harry watched her, he leaned back in his seat, letting the sun heat him from the outside as her enjoyment heated him from the inside. This was home for him—in ways that London never could be—this was home. And he told her as much that afternoon as they floated across the delta in a boat—just the two of them, with his detail not far behind in their own boat.

"This, right here, is my absolute most favorite place on the entire earth," he broke into the stunning silence to bring her into his mind. "I would rather be here than anywhere else..." His smile was comfortable, content, at home.

"Wow..." She understood, without explanation, why he felt that way. The peacefulness, the naturalness, it was heart stopping. And then he continued.

"At least up until about two years ago...when I realized what it was that was happening between us. And then, I wanted to be wherever you were."
"Harry..." She smirked at the smile on his face, dripping with smarm.

"So bringing you here...it's just." He took a deep breath and let it go slowly. When he spoke, his voice was soft and low; causing Maddie to turn and look at him. "I can't tell you how much it means to have you here."

"You are just on fire today, aren't you?" She let a joke slip over the lump in her throat.

"I'm on fire every day," he winked and leaned to kiss her. "Thank you for coming with me."

"It's your birthday," she nuzzled her nose to his. "How could I refuse?"

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When they finally returned to their room, to their suite, Maddie was exhausted. Harry had warned her, he had every intention of wearing her out that day and as far as she was concerned, he had accomplished his mission. They had hiked, they had safaried, they had taken a boat up the delta. And it had taken from her, physically and mentally, all day long. But she had never been happier. And all she needed now was a soak in their enormous tub and, being the gracious birthday boy he was, Harry started her water and hopped into the shower himself.

When he finished, Harry wrapped a towel around his waist, using another to pat at his hair, and bent to kiss her as she lay with her eyes closed; completely relaxed in the tub.

"Are you going to join me for a drink?" He smiled against her lips as she nodded.

"Absolutely. Can I just have like...five more minutes?"

"Take as much time as you like," he kissed her again.

Maddie allowed her eyes to peek open just enough to watch him walk away from her, appreciating how gorgeous he was—slightly tanned from their day in the sun, before she closed them and sank further into the water. She only stayed in a few minutes longer, preferring to be with him, preferring to celebrate his day with him instead of a bath full of water. She dried off, she adjusted the haphazard bun in her hair and she pulled on the soft, cotton pajamas she had brought with her. They weren't the sexiest things she owned but she knew that Harry found them unbelievably cute and they worked with the climate.

She felt better as she left the bathroom; refreshed. Her muscles had relaxed, her feet had recovered. Maddie stepped out into the suite, illuminated by lanterns and candles—so much better than the harsh lights they had left off since they had arrived—and her eyes searched immediately for him. Her smile stretched when she saw him. He was sitting in a chair with his back to her, pouring wine into the glasses on the table in front of him. She moved straight to him then, her fingers reaching out to run along the collar of his t-shirt, tickling his neck as she walked past him.

"Wine?" He grinned up at her; his eyes playful and alive in the soft light as he held up a glass.

"Thank you," she sighed, taking the glass from him and moving around his chair to the one directly opposite him. Sinking into the chair, she smiled across the small table between them through sleepy eyes and a smile that spoke of the long, hard day they had put in, the well-earned rest they deserved. "Do you have a frog in your pocket?" She asked him; studying his face thoughtfully.
"Sorry?" He laughed; his smile creasing the skin around his eyes. "A frog?"

"It's a...saying..." She waved her hand. "You look like you've just figured something out, or you're about to let me in on something..."

"Ah yes," he nodded, taking a big sip from his glass before sitting it on the table. Clapping his hands together, his eyes met hers, "I know what I want for my birthday."

"Oh?" Maddie was intrigued; having asked him long ago. Harry nodded and then, without moving his eyes from hers, his fingers tapped on the table, drawing her attention and her eyes downward.

And there it was; that small black box. That small black box that she swore wasn't sitting there just minutes ago when she had joined him. That small black box that could hold only one thing. Her eyes flashed up to his, her heart jumpstarting in her chest.

"Jewelry?" She whispered; even her voice knowing better. He didn't even flinch; didn't crack a laugh at her joke.

"You." He was calm, he was steady. He was sure.

"Oh my God..." Her voice was shaky, her eyes welling with tears. This was it. Her fingers flew to her lips while she tried to keep her cool, tried to keep her sense of humor, her wit.

"I've been..." Harry moved forward in his chair. "I've been thinking a lot about this moment; about how this would go. You know...I could go for sweet. I could pour my heart out to you, waxing poetic, and get on one knee and..." His voice caught on his emotions and he cleared his throat. "Or I could lay it all out there in simple terms; the pros, the cons...like a contract negotiation..." Maddie's laughter was soft across from him, bringing him back to her, back to the moment.

"Harry..." She moved in; her hand reaching out to him. "I..."

"Please. Please let me do this..." He captured her hand in his, pulling it to him; pressing it to his lips for a moment before he began. "My whole life I have been used to getting what I want. But this...this has been something that has eluded me. There was a point where I decided that I was probably going to have to sacrifice some of my high standards. That she wouldn't be as funny as I had hoped or as smart or as charitable. And then I met you...and I realized..."

"She wouldn't be as obedient as you had hoped?"

"No," he smiled. "I realized I wouldn't have to sacrifice anything at all."

"Harry..." She blinked at the wetness in her eyes.

"But you..." He grew teary; his fingers playing with hers. "Please know that I know the sacrifice that would come with a yes. I know how much you have had to give up just being with me. And I know how much more you'll have to give up so that I...so that I have to give up nothing. And I know how unfair that is. How unfair it will always be. I really don't know why anyone would ever say yes to such a thing... It's not an easy thing to do, saying yes to all of this. It's not a fair thing to ask of anyone. But. Today's my birthday. And the Forrester Family rules are..."

"You get whatever you want on your birthday."
"Exactly," he nodded, moving even closer; so that his knees knocked into the table. His face was bright. "I want this so bad, Madeline. I have never wanted something as much as I want this. As much as I want you. I have never loved anyone as much as I love you..." He took a shaky breath and then he smiled at her; a smile born of a life lived, a quest completed, a treasure found. "And if you say yes...if you are crazy enough to say yes..." She laughed, despite the tears in her eyes. "I promise that I will spend the rest of my life making the sacrifices worth it. I will love you. I will stand next to you. I will make you laugh. You will never have to want or need for anything..."

"My minty Christmas candy?"

"Absolutely." He nodded his head.

"Well, when you put it that way..." She tried for casual, tried for easygoing. But when Harry moved out of his chair, when he pushed the table to the side with a sweep of his hand, when his knees hit the floor and his hands scooped up both of hers, Maddie nearly lost her ability to breathe. This was really happening.

"Be my wife?" His eyebrows lifted, his eyes holding hers with the same soft, steady way his hands were holding hers. "Madeline...Maddie...I love you...with my whole heart. Will you? Will you marry me?"

Maddie had never been one of those girls who had spent her life thinking, dreaming, of this moment. She had never been one of those girls who had played it over and over in her head—this moment when a man would ask for her hand in marriage. In fact, she had always thought that when this moment actually came, she would feel a slight bit of fear; fear of giving something up, fear of taking on more than she could handle, fear of losing herself in somebody else.

But, looking down at Harry, she felt nothing but...freedom. Freedom and joy and happiness and love and safety and friendship and relief. She felt no fear. No apprehension. No loss. Even in the eyes of the sacrifices she understood were part of this role—she felt like she was gaining everything. Unable to find her words at first, she nodded; her hands moving to wipe at her eyes. And then, placing a hand on each side of his face, her eyes locked with his and he knew.

This was what winning really felt like.

"Yes." Her voice was clear, steady. "Absolutely, yes." Her lips sought his in celebration; kissing him over and over and over again. Harry moved back off of his knees and pulled her from the chair into his lap, her legs stretching around him. In a mix of laughter and kisses, they settled there on the floor; arms wrapped around each other.

"Really?" Harry pulled back, his eyes searching hers. "Really? You said yes?"

"I did," she nodded. "Great Britain is never going to be the same..." He threw his head back in laughter; loving the smirk in her eyes.

"She said yes!" He called out into the room, ecstatic. "She said yes! She said yes!" His voice grew louder and Maddie's hand moved to cover his mouth.

"You'll startle the baboons," she teased; sliding her hand away and kissing his mouth.

"You're going to be my wife..." His arms pulled her tighter to him.

"I'm going to be your wife." She settled closer.
"It sounds so much better when you say it," his voice was low as he kissed at her neck, her shoulder—heading down her arm.

"I'm going to be your wife," she repeated, loving the reaction he gave her. "I'm going to be your wife. I'm going to be your...hey..." She stopped as he pulled back suddenly; her hand clasped in his. "What is it?"

"We forgot something..." He kissed her fingers. "I forgot something..." He moved then, stretching around her to reach to the table. The little black box.

"Oh..." Maddie grew quiet; unexplainably nervous as Harry leaned back against the chair behind him; bringing the box between them.

"My mother left us an extensive collection of jewelry," he began his explanation with a soft smile. "Things that Kate and...and now you can have access too; things you can wear—things we can pass onto our children." Maddie felt her throat grow tight at the way he was speaking; of the past, of the future. "My brother gave Kate the engagement ring my father gave my mother and, when I told him that I was planning on asking you, we went to look at mum's stuff..." He took a deep breath. "But it just didn't feel right, you know? Asking you to marry me with something she had worn. My parent's marriage was...unhappy...and I kind of like the idea of us having a fresh start, not something that's already been worn by my mother. So I chose something else entirely." His fingers turned the box over and over again as he thought. "But, if you would prefer something from her collection, we can go there when we return and..."

"Stop," Maddie's fingers fell over his with a wide smile, halting the box in his hands. She leaned to kiss him. "I want this one. I want what you picked out."

Harry nodded—he knew she would. He kissed her again and snapped the box open. Maddie's eyes flashed wide for a split second when she saw it. It was beautiful; classic and pristine and absolutely perfect. Maddie's breath sucked in as Harry pulled the ring from the box; tossing the box back onto the chair behind him. His fingers held onto hers, "May I?" Maddie nodded and watched as he slid it into place; sealing the deal with a kiss to her hand, to her lips.

"Harry...It's beautiful..." She breathed; looking at the new addition to her hand, loving how it looked—what it signified. "I don't even know what to say..."

"Nothing," he shook his head with a gleam in his eye. "You said yes. There's no topping that."

"I love you..." Her arms wrapped back around his neck.

"Well okay..." He shrugged; his arms winding around her waist again. "That's a close second."

"I'm going to be your wife," her voice was low, seductive even as she looked down at him through lowered lashes.

"Say it again," his grin was cocky.

"I'm going to be your wife."

"Louder," he encouraged.

"I'm going to be your wife!" She yelled out; bringing them both into laughter.
"Come here," he whispered against her lips; his mouth opening, his tongue drawing her in. Just as his fingers slipped up under the hem of her top, the loud, familiar patter on the roof sounded out; bringing chuckles from the both of them. "You've startled the baboons."

"I like the baboons."

"I do too," he kissed her again. "So listen, before I take you here on the floor, claiming you in the name of Great Britain..."

"Ohhhh..." Maddie grinned; clapping her hands in excitement.

"We have two phone calls to make." He held up two fingers.

"Oh?" Her forehead creased.

"Your mother," he pulled his phone from his pocket. "She's been keeping this secret for me long enough..."

"Wait..." Maddie pulled the phone from his fingers. "She's been keeping this secret? My mother knows?"

"Of course she knows," Harry laughed. "She was the first to know. Right before your birthday, I flew to the states."

"For what?" Maddie was genuinely shocked, not only that he went to the states, but that she had no idea that he had gone to the states—that the press hadn't caught onto that.

"To ask her permission," it seemed so obvious. "What kind of man do you take me for?"

"A progressive one who doesn't necessarily need permission to ask a woman to marry him."

"I'm British Maddie. My grandmother is The Queen. I...I know how to waltz and the proper way to pen a Thank You note. There's nothing about me that isn't deeply seated in old fashioned decorum." His fingers brushed her hair back over her shoulder. "I flew to the states to ask for your mother's permission, her blessing. Which she gave, by the way..."

"Of course she did," Maddie sighed; he was just too charming for his own good—and for hers. "You know, she never said a word. She never even alluded to the idea..."

"I know," he nodded. "She promised me she wouldn't. So what do you say, should we call her, let her relax?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded enthusiastically. Harry plucked the phone from her fingers, found Hannah's contact information and dialed; handing the phone back to her. He watched while she bit her lip and waited for her mother to answer. "Mom..." Her voice went weak; a lump caught in her throat as her suddenly teary eyes rose to meet Harry's. "Mom, I'm getting married."

And Harry leaned back against the chair, his fingers falling on her thighs—still straddling his lap as she let her mother in on all of it; the trip to Africa, the safari, the hike. She told her about the baboons and the elephants, the dancing and the sunsets. And then she told her that he had asked. Yes—on his knee. Yes—with a ring. Yes—she said yes. After congratulations, after I Love You's, Maddie smiled and held the phone out to him. "She wants to talk to you." Harry took the
phone from her hand, sneaking in a kiss before he pressed it to his ear.

"Mom..." He smiled as he said the word; having not said it in a very long time.

"You don't have to call me that, you know," though it made her smile wide.

"I know that." But he loved the way it sounded; loved the way it made him feel and he knew his mother would want this for him—all of this.

"Welcome to the family, son." He hadn't thought his heart could feel fuller than it had just moments ago, but it did.

"Thank you." He swallowed back the lump in his throat. "We're going to call my father next and he's going to orchestrate this...announcement," Harry chuckled at the thought of what was about to unfold. "I would like to give him your number so that the two of you can talk, so that you can be on the same page. Would that be okay?"

"Of course," she agreed. "And I promise, I'll keep it to myself until I'm told otherwise."

"I'm sorry that you have to do that..."

"Don't be," she cut him off. "Look at Maddie right now...is she smiling?"

"Yes," Harry's fingers reached out to stroke her cheek.

"Your job is done. Don't worry about the rest. You two enjoy the rest of your trip."

"We will." Harry nodded.

"Good night Harry. And good luck," he could hear the smirk in her voice; she sounded so much like her daughter.

"Good night mom," his eyes twinkled as he said it again; ending the phone call and looking up to Maddie. "She told me to tell you to be nice to me."

"She did?" Maddie's eyebrow arched; seeing the sarcasm in his eyes.

"She did," he nodded; leaning forward to kiss her neck. "She said that you should listen to what I tell you...do as I ask..." His voice grew lower as his kisses grew hotter.

"Harry..." She sighed, her head tilting back; her body responding. "But..."

"No buts," he shook his head, his lips caressing her now bared shoulder in a way that made her skin tingle.

"Your father..."

"Shh..." Harry's fingers moved to her lips. "I don't want to talk about him right now."

"Hmm..." She chuckled against his fingers. "You need to call him. You need to...Oh!" Maddie exclaimed as Harry moved then, gripping her waist, moving out from underneath her; lowering her back down onto the plush rug beneath them—his lips returned to her collarbone as he stretched out over her. "Ohhhh..."
"I want to do this first," he smiled, his fingers reaching up under her shirt finding her skin soft and warm. And, though it took every last ounce of her strength, Maddie pushed at his chest lightly; pulling his face from the crook of her neck.

"Harry..." Her lip pulled between her teeth; barely grasping her ability to control herself. "Your father."

"Fine," he huffed; moving away from her. He sat up, his legs straddling her hips; pinning her to the rug beneath him as he looked down at her; phone in his fingers. "How long do you want love?"

"How long?" Her forehead creased her confusion.

"Before you become the main attraction in the circus that is my life?" His grin was slightly jaded. "When we get back to London, we're going to be pulled into a meeting where they lay it all out; how we'll announce it to the world, how you'll transition into...this." He shook his head. "After that, it's...there's no going back. So I just need to know...how long do you want? Before the announcement is made? You want a week? A week to be normal? A week to get settled? Two? Three? A month? You tell me. How long do you want?"

"I want..." She shook her head. "I...I want. Harry..." Her hands traveled up his flat stomach, tugging at his shirt; pulling his lips to hers. "I want to do this now. I don't want to wait. I don't think I can hide this. My poker face is terrible and I'm too excited. I..."

"You want to jump right in?" He wasn't sure if she was crazy or not, but he kind of liked the fearless look in her eyes as she kissed his jaw.

"Can I? Can we?" She really didn't know. "Can we just jump right in? Do we have to wait?"

"Ha!" He laughed; loudly, heartily. "Love, we can do whatever you want...don't you get it?" He pulled her lips to his; kissing her solidly, soundly. "You're going to be the Duchess of Sussex. We tell them what we want...they make it happen."

"Oh..." It came out as a gasp, a bit of a sigh; just how big that statement was.

"Okay," Harry nodded and dialed the phone. "We'll do it right away." His eyes were serious, his smile celebratory, as he waited for his father to answer. Maddie watched as his father answered and Harry's face lit up—the first words out of his mouth made her heart skip. "She said yes." Feeling blissful, feeling frisky, Maddie's hands moved up under his shirt, teasing the skin there; his eyes snapped to hers. "Thank you, Sir. Yes...yes." He shook his head at her as her fingers traced pattern on his stomach, inching closer to the waist of his shorts. "As soon as possible..." His fingers circled her entire wrist as he caught her, pulling her hand away from him with a wicked look in his eye. "Yes sir. We're flying back tomorrow night. We'll be back early Tuesday morning..." She grinned up at him as her other hand moved into his shorts, bypassing the tease altogether. His breath sucked in as he fought to control his reaction. "Thank you. I will. I love you too. Yes. I'll see you then." Harry was quick to end the call with his father, quick to toss the phone to the chair behind him and quick to pull her other hand into his grasp; stretching her arms up over her head. "You're a naughty young lady, Doctor Forrester."
"Oh?" She bit her lip; her body tingling with anticipation.

"And you have no idea what you're in for."

As Maddie's giggles filled the room, drifting out into the warm summer night, she took that statement in—in so many ways.

Harry, his mouth and hands working together, was determined to make her pay for her distracting ways; to make her moan and sigh and call out his name. He was determined to bring back the celebration, the love, the spiritedness that came with this moment. Despite what awaited them at home, this was a joyous night; one to be marked, one to be revered. And he had every intention of doing just that. It was, after all, his birthday.

He worked hard. He played big. And this, Maddie—his life with her, was going to be no exception.
"I don't want to leave..." Maddie sighed into his shoulder on their last day in Botswana. They were packed, the car was waiting and he had come out to the deck to fetch her. It was time to go; time to leave this beautiful paradise that had given her a future husband. And, as she thought about it, about leaving, she felt tears come to her eyes laughing at herself as it happened. "Ugh...seriously? What is with the crying?!"

"You like it here," he nudged her chin up with his fingers.

"I love it here..." She nodded; her head heavy. "I feel so good here...I could live here...I would give up everything I own if I could just stay right here..."

"Including me?" His grin was soft.

"I don't own you."

"Semantics," he shrugged.

"As if you wouldn't move here in a heartbeat."

"I would," he nodded, his hands moving along her arms. "You want to?"

"I really do." She sighed again; surrendering to reality. "Time to go?"

"Yes," he nodded.

"You still have that ring?" Her hands slipped around his waist, her lips tilting up to his.

"I do," he chuckled at her. "You know, I brought it all the way down here without any incidents. Perhaps I can be trusted to get it back to London?"

"Perhaps," her smile pulling wide as he kissed her.

"Forty-eight hours, Forrester," he swatted at her ass. "You can have it back in forty-eight hours."

"Forty-eight hours," she echoed, not thinking of the ring. Thinking, instead, of him; of moving on to this next phase of their relationship.

"Come on love," he reached for her hand. "London's calling." With a smirk and snicker, Maddie allowed Harry to pull her through their suite, towards the main house and the awaiting car. Their time in heaven was finished. It was time to return to England and all that awaited them at home.

When they arrived home, early in the morning on a cloudy Tuesday, Maddie was thankful they had decided to take the ring off until the announcement. Because, as they made their way from the plane to the car, a short distance that was behind the scenes in the Private Chartered area, Maddie counted no less than ten people who could have seen, who could have leaked. And the smile on her face was too much of a giveaway as it was.
"Thomas," Harry grinned at his Chief of Staff who was waiting with the car. Harry had told Maddie he would be there, he had called ahead to let the Palace know what was happening and he had done his best to prepare her for what they were walking back into.

"Congratulations Sir," Thomas grinned back, extending his hand to shake the young man's hand. Yes, he was his Chief of Staff. Yes, he was an employee—technically. But he had been around long enough to see the impact this woman had on Harry and he was genuinely happy for the both of them.

"Thank you," Harry's smile extended as Thomas patted his shoulder before turning the same bright smile to Maddie, he extended his hand to her.

"Doctor Forrester."

"Mr. Smith," Maddie smiled, taking his hand.

"Congratulations ma'am."

"Thank you very much," her cheeks grew rosy, her eyes sparkled and she sighed. Apparently she was going to have very little control over the visceral reaction that occurred when she thought of her brand new engagement.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked as the driver opened the door for them, the staff moving their things from the plane to the car.

"Clarence House," Thomas answered. "They are waiting for you there."

"Fantastic," Harry took a deep breath through smiling lips. "Okay my darling, are you ready for this?" He stood next to the opened door, hands clasped together in front of him. Maddie smiled sweetly at him; touched by the fact that he was still nervous—after all this time. Moving close to him, she was slow when she moved her cheek next to his—pressing a kiss there.

"I'm ready," she sighed, sliding past him into the car.

Harry watched as she took her seat and then followed her in, the door shutting behind him. As soon as Thomas was inside the car, they were in motion. Harry had spent the last part of the flight preparing Maddie for what was awaiting them when they returned. She knew they were heading to meet first with his father and then with the people who would be coordinating the announcement for the palace as well as a few, critical, others. He had warned her, things were going to be perfunctory. Yes, they were in love. Yes, they were engaged, looking forward to vows and pledges and spending their lives together. But this, a royal wedding, was so much bigger than just them. And Maddie understood. She hadn't spent the last few years as his girlfriend with her head in the sand. She knew what she was walking into—as much as she could. So, before the plane landed, she had slipped off to the bedroom, changed into a dress that was more business and less holiday—touching up her makeup and pinning up her hair. If she was walking into a business meeting, she figured it would help to be in business mode.

Harry smiled as he watched her watch the city fly by. She was focused on something entirely outside of the car. She was deep in thought, her mind miles from him. Her forehead was creased just slightly, her teeth biting tenderly at her bottom lip. Reaching across the leather seats, his fingers found hers—pulling them into his hand.

Her face snapped back to the car, back to him—her smile finding him and strengthening. Turning
her hand over in his, she held onto him. Her eyes met his and there he saw confidence, certainty; he saw Maddie—the woman he had met in Bendal, the woman who stayed on his mind for months after that first brief conversation, the woman who had taken a leap of faith and come to London, the woman who held his heart in hers.

In no time they were pulling to a stop outside Clarence House. Harry was out of the car first, holding his hand out to Maddie; wanting to be the one to pull her from the car, to pull her in. It was a silly thing to feel, but he felt it anyway. Maddie let him take her hand in his, leading the way from the car, up the steps, and straight inside his father's home.

Maddie knew that Charles and Camilla were waiting for them and she assumed that they would be there to congratulate the two of them, welcome them home from their trip. What she had not prepared for was the surge of emotions she felt when she saw them for the first time—the way Charles' entire face was smiling. She hadn't been prepared for the way Harry's breath caught in his throat when his father pulled him into his arms holding tight to him, even after pressing kisses to his cheek and congratulating him for the second time. She hadn't been prepared for the way Camilla would welcome her into the family, into this exclusive little club with a sweet tenderness that radiated from her core. She most certainly had not been prepared for the way Charles took her into his arms in a bone crushing hug. It was so unlike him, she thought, to break from his standard, controlled self and let his feelings rush out of him like that. With a lump in her throat, she hugged him back. He kissed her cheeks, congratulated her; welcomed her to the family. And then he kissed her hands and hugged her again.

Maddie felt tears in her eyes, even as he pulled away and looked the two of them over again. She could tell he wanted to stay there, in that moment. She could tell that he was struggling with his roles, with his responsibilities. There was a part of him that just wanted to be a dad; just wanted to celebrate with his son over scotch and cigars—to smirk and warn his future daughter-in-law about those crazy intricacies that came with being one of "them." There was a part of him that wanted what they wanted, to just let this be a moment of excitement and celebration; a moment where this young couple had decided to spend their lives together.

But he knew better. And so did Maddie—so did they all. It wasn't quite that simple and it certainly wasn't that free of complications. She could see the exact moment that duty won out; he cleared his throat and tamed his wide grin. Harry saw it too. Reaching for Maddie's hand, he glanced towards the stairs.

"They're waiting?"

"They are," Charles nodded. Harry pulled Maddie's hand tighter in his; drawing her closer to him.

"Okay love," his eyes twinkled as he looked to her. "Shall we see what they have lined up for us?" Because it wasn't really a question, Maddie didn't really answer. She simply squeezed his hand in hers and took a step towards the stairs. Camilla bid them good luck, opting to sit this particular meeting out and Charles followed behind them—mostly for moral support. He had given up long ago with trying to control the flow of things. This wasn't his moment, it was his son's.

"Now listen," Harry's voice was low as they ascended the stairs. "Thomas is going to be up here as well as somebody from the palace..."

"Ms. Edwards," Charles spoke up.

"Claire Edwards," Harry nodded. "She's a Press Officer from Buckingham." Maddie's nod was
small, quick; she was following along. "Who else?" He looked to his dad.

"A family attorney," Charles' eyes fazed out as he thought.

"An attorney?" Maddie was surprised by that; thoughts of prenuptial agreements running through her mind. Harry's eyes narrowed at his father as the same thoughts crossed his.

"To brief the two of you on your citizenship status and what your options are moving forward." Satisfied with that answer, they reached the top of the stairs and rounded a corner.

"Security?" Harry asked and Charles nodded.

"You'll meet with the head of Madeline's security team next." Maddie stalled for a step; mentally tripping on the words Madeline's security team. Harry laughed as he and his father stopped moving, watching her face process it.

"Does that..." She coughed into her fist and smiled at Charles. "Does that start right after the announcement?"

"No, dear," he reached his hand out to rest on her arm. "That starts right now."

"Wow..." Maddie felt the corner of her mouth turn up in a grin—this was getting more and more real with every step they took. Harry chuckled again, reclaiming her hand with his.

"I have to say, I feel a certain amount of relief knowing there will be somebody with you now...keeping you out of trouble."

"Ha!" Charles laughed; clapping his hand on Harry's back. "That's not quite how it works out now, is it son?" Maddie had to laugh at that.

"I suppose not," Harry agreed, drawing to a stop outside the conference room. He looked to Maddie as she ran her hands lightly over her hair and down over the skirt of her dress. "The people you are about to sit with are going to have a plan for us, an agenda. Keep in mind that they are professionals. This isn't their first announcement, this isn't their first engagement and they absolutely know what they are doing."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, taking it all in. Harry stepped closer to her then, invading her space. "That being said if they come up with something that doesn't sit well, something you're not too sure about, you need to speak up. This isn't a moment for body language or mind reading. You have to speak your mind and let me know what you want."

"Okay," she smiled up at him; her eyes steady and fixed on his.

"You sure about this love?" His voice was low as he teased her. "If you want to back out, now's the time."

"Hmm..." She grinned, tapping her finger to her chin. "I think I'll go ahead and give it a go, if it's all the same to you."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Harry lifted her hand to his lips and, with a nod of his head, the large, heavy doors were pulled open and there it was. Her new life; waiting for her at the large table. There were several people sitting at the table when they entered and every single one of
them dropped what they were doing and rose to their feet.

There was a moment, a brief one, when Maddie stalled; her feet declining movement as she suddenly recalled the last time she was in this room. Harry had called her in to tell her—he had been deployed. It only took her one second to recover; one second to pull her feet back in action. And in that second, Harry's hand found the small of her back; resting there with ease and comfort. He was right there with her; standing at her side full of support.

Thomas was the first to step forward; introducing Maddie to the group of people at the table. Maddie smiled, nodded, and shook the hand of each and every one of them.

Claire Edwards, Press Officer from Buckingham Palace, seemed to be in charge of the table; running the show. Though Harry's Chief of Staff was the heavyweight, Ms. Edwards was orchestrating the announcement. She assured them both that they were ready to announce as early as three in the afternoon the next day; that Maddie's mother had been brought in and would be informing the family an hour before they went live from Buckingham Palace.

Harry looked to Maddie with raised eyebrows, ready if she was. Squeezing his leg under the table, Maddie nodded and answered for the two of them. "We'll go ahead for three tomorrow afternoon."

"Excellent," Claire smiled and made a quick note in her notebook.

Maddie wasn't sure which part of the meeting that ensued was the most surreal. It could have easily been meeting the team of men whose job it was to stand between her and danger—the way they made copies of her keys while she sat there, the way they handed her a key fob with a panic button, or the way they informed her, quite simply, that they would be with her twenty-four hours a day until she moved into Kensington with her fiancé not long after the announcement.

It also could have been the stylist, Rosie Tellington, who took one look at her and instantly knew her sizes, her color preferences; already making a mental list of the dress options she would be sending to her the next morning at Harry's place. Or it could have been the lawyer who had delved knee deep into her visa, her travel history, her citizenship status. He made her aware that he would be filing with the UK Border Agency on her behalf, letting them know of her intent to marry. He suggested she take the two required tests for citizenship prior to the wedding and then wait until she had reached the three full years of residency upon which time he would submit her application on her behalf. Apparently quite a bit of things were going to be done on her behalf now that she was marrying into the family.

It could have been any of those moments. But, if she were pressed, she would have to say that the most surreal of them all turned out to be the one moment Harry had already warned her about. It all unfolded when Thomas suggested that Maddie and Harry lay low immediately following the announcement; perhaps taking a trip to Highgrove for a few weeks. Maddie had stated, quite naively in retrospect, that going to the country wouldn't work well with her upcoming work schedule. Thomas, being the consummate professional he was, covered his surprise quite well, nodding before turning his eyes to Charles who, in turn, looked to Harry. Maddie watched the exchange and caught up quickly.

"Oh." She felt a little embarrassed and slightly amused at the three grown men passing a look around the table—as if they were challenging the other to break the news. "I'm done now, aren't I?"

"Maddie." It turned out Harry was the brave one; leaning forward, his hand resting on hers.
"No," she held up her hand and offered him a sweet smile. "It's okay. I knew this was coming." She turned to Thomas then, her head nodding. "I understand—I get it. I just need to know, do you want me to give my notice now or wait until after the announcement?" Thomas glanced back at Harry and Maddie couldn't help the chuckle that breathed from her lips. "Ah...you want me to just not go back."

"Your employer would most certainly understand," Thomas explained; having sympathy for her predicament and, frankly, appreciating the innocence she came with. "You are working in London and the people here are quite familiar with the demands of the Royal Family."

"I understand," she nodded, taking a deep breath and schooling her face. "I am sure you are correct, my employer would understand. However...it would be ethically irresponsible of me to leave my clients without properly terminating our relationship." She felt Harry's hand squeeze hers; a show of support she imagined. "I will be happy to speak to my boss as soon as you would like and we can drastically scale back my hours. I won't take on new clients. I can stop being on call for crisis intervention. But I won't abandon the people on my caseload right now. That could do...irreparable harm. Once I process them and exit them, I will be done. But I won't just walk out the door."

There was a pause; a moment of silence where everyone in the room took a breath. Charles was the first one to move; turning in his chair to speak directly to her.

"Of course, dear," his voice was warm and calming as always. "We wouldn't want you to cause your clients any harm. How long do you think that will take?"

"Most of my clients will only need one more session, especially when they find out why..." She turned to face her future father-in-law. "But some may need two. I would say two weeks—at the very most." Charles smiled thoughtfully and then nodded.

"Two weeks then." Both Thomas and Claire made notes in their notebooks as Harry patted her knee with a smile. And the conversations continued.

It was a lot to take in, they knew that; they all knew that. Maddie was not the first prospective bride to sit at that table, or a table just like it. She wasn't the first to be surprised by the level of handling. But, all things considered, she was doing quite well. She was taking the additions to her life with ease, she was handling the subtractions with grace. And, as the meetings drew to a close, Thomas had a pretty great hunch that things were going to go smoothly.

So, after they finalized plans for the announcement the next afternoon—3pm at Buckingham Palace, a photo call with the cameras and a sit down interview with the BBC—Claire handed them a list of potential questions and told them to get some rest. Tomorrow was a big day, a day that was going to open up a flurry the likes of which Maddie hadn't quite seen yet. There would be many more meetings following the announcement; there was a wedding to plan, a bride to move—there were things that needed to happen. But for now, for this moment, they needed to focus only on the matter at hand.

Charles let them know that he would be hosting a dinner for them and the family at Clarence House immediately following the interview, to celebrate the news. And then, with a return to being a dad, he hugged and kissed them both and sent them on their way.

"You okay?" Harry was cautious as he watched her across the back seat of the car; recognizing the stun on her face, the shock.
"Mmm..." She nodded, swallowing as she turned a smile to him. "I'm great."

"Yeah?" He raised his eyebrows with a slight upturn of his lips.

"Absolutely." She nodded. Harry nodded and let it sit for one full minute before he chuckled and shook his head. "What? What's so funny?"

"You," he sighed. "I'm great? Really, Maddie? You're going to start lying to me before we're even married?"

"I'm..." She shook her head; searching for the right words to convey her feelings.

"Great?" He laughed. "You just sat in a room where a slew of other people, most of them unknown to you, told you that you were quitting your job in two weeks, that your things are going to be packed for you and moved to Kensington Palace, that two men who you don't know are going to start following you everywhere you go...you have a strange woman picking out clothes for you and ..." He leaned closer to her; pulling her hand into his. "Come on. Don't lie to me, love. Great?"

"Okay," she blinked at unexpected tears, her nerves getting the best of her. "Okay. I'm not great. But I'm okay." She smiled at him, squeezing his fingers. "I...I don't want you to think that I don't want to do this, that I'm not ready to do this..."

"I don't," his eyes, his voice, remained steady. He didn't. He knew she was there, he knew that she was ready.

"Good..." She sighed, tightening her hold on his hand. "Because I do. I am." She smiled then. "It's just...that was pretty intense."

"Yes."

"And a little crazy."

"A little?" Harry laughed.

"A lot," she breathed a little easier. "I mean, that woman and her insistence that I wear the exact shade of beige..."

"Bisque not Taupe." Harry's voice grew harsh, his face turning serious. "Bisque has pinky undertones. It will look better with your coloring and..." Maddie's laughter made him break, made him smile. She leaned to kiss him.

"Exactly..." She sighed, acceptance washing over her body; softening her posture, relaxing the professional face she had worn throughout the meeting. "I'm fine Harry." Her hand tucked into his arm.

"Promise?" He kissed the top of her head.

"I promise." She let a grin pull at her lips. "You know what I need?"

"No," he shook his head. "But whatever it is, I'll get it for you."
"Ella," she sighed. "I need to go to my best friend and tell her that I'm engaged. I need to jump up and down and be excited about that part of all of this."

"Let's do it."

"No," she shook her head at him. "You can't come with me." She laughed at the hurt look on his face. "I need girl time, darling. I need to talk about how romantic you are, about the wonderful things you said to me. I can't do that while you're standing there."

"Fine," he huffed playfully. "But you do realize you're taking Sampson with you? That's how it works now." He nodded towards the car that trailed them.

"So I've heard," she smirked; she smirked; tilting her lips up to kiss him. "I would really like to change into something else. Do you think they've already moved me into the palace or..."

"Ha!" Harry laughed; happy she was joking about it all, maintaining her sense of humor. "Not quite yet. Why don't we stop at Kensington and then you and Sampson can take a car to your place and then to Ella."

"Take a car..." Maddie shook her head slowly. "So this is how it is now."

"This is how it is now," Harry nodded; his hand squeezing her knee.

This was only the beginning.
Chapter 76

After a brief stop at home, Maddie was quick to discover the Security Team had already moved in; checking the place out, setting up a few things in the spare room she had offered for the night officer. Maddie changed into a simple skirt—choosing to go for a casual look she figured she would be avoiding for quite some time. With a glance in the mirror, Maddie offered her reflection a shrug and a sympathetic smile. With a security officer in the living room and a car waiting outside for her, life was already changing. There really was nothing much for her to do but smile and go along with it. And, at the end of the day, Harry was going to be waiting for her.

It was time to let the world in on their secret; one person at a time. She packed a small overnight bag and slipped out the door. It was a short ride to Ella's place, a camera free ride. And, as Maddie hurried into the building, up the steps to her place, she couldn't help the excitement that flowed through her veins. Knocking on the door, her foot tapped slightly as she waited.

"Maddie!" Ella's face lit up when she saw her best friend; swinging the door open. "I'm so glad you're here!"

"I'm sorry I didn't call. I just...are you alone?" Maddie asked, her eyes looking over Ella's shoulder into the apartment.

"Yes, Bishop is working. You want to come in? Have some wine? Tell me about your trip?" Ella stood aside.

"Yes," Maddie breathed a sigh of relief; ever thankful for a friend such as this. "Do you mind if my friend takes a look around first?"

"Your friend?" Ella laughed as Sampson stepped forward. "Sure..." She stepped aside, slightly confused. "You have Harry out there with you?" Maddie's eyes meet Ella's and she couldn't control her smile any longer, it burst across her cheeks as she shook her head.

"No. Just me."

"But then why..." Ella pointed to Sampson who had finished his scan of the place and had rejoined them in the entry way.

"Everything's fine ma'am," he smiled at Maddie and stood aside.

"Thank you Sampson," Maddie nodded as Ella's eyes grew wide; understanding hitting her like a freight train.

"Oh my fucking God. That's your Security officer! Get in here!" She tugged on her friend's arm, pulling her inside.

"Shhhh..." Maddie held her finger to her lips while Ella shut and locked the door behind her. Sampson couldn't help the smile that crossed his face as he moved to his post; ready if needed.

"Tell me that that guy means what I think he means!"

"I'm going to need you to be very, very quiet." Maddie warned, a smug grin tugging at her mouth. "Silent, in fact."
"Go." Ella nodded once.

"He means what you think he means." Maddie laughed as Ella clamped two hands over her mouth, one on top of the other, in effort to avoid screaming. Her eyes welled up with tears and then her hands slid from her face.

"He asked you to marry him?"

"He did." Maddie felt tears in her own eyes.

"And you said..."

"You think they send you out with security if you say no?"

"Oh my God..." Ella hugged her arms around Maddie again; pulling back only to look at her face. "When? Where?"

"On his birthday." The blissfulness overtook Maddie's face; her eyes shining. "In Botswana."

"On his birthday..." She cooed, her hand resting over her heart. "Come with me," Ella pulled on Maddie's arm, dragging her down the hallway to her room. She crossed the room in a few long strides, tugged the curtains closed and hopped onto the bed; sitting on her knees. "Get in here. Get in here and tell me every single last detail." Maddie giggled as she moved onto the bed with Ella; this was exactly what she needed.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything," Ella sighed dramatically. "Starting with...where's the ring?" Her eyes zeroed in on Maddie's left hand.

"Back at the Palace. It's locked up in a safe until tomorrow at 3pm."

"3pm?"

"When we make the announcement."

"You nervous?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "Though I know I should be, I'm not."

"Are you going to do the whole show? The cameras and the interview and all of it?"

"All of it," Maddie nodded, her mind spiraling out for just a second. "It's crazy, Ella. It's the craziest thing I've been a part of, and I've been a part of some pretty crazy things."

"It's only going to get crazier," Ella was deliriously happy as she broke the news to her friend. "I know," Maddie nodded. "I have you though...to keep me grounded. Right?" Her eyebrows lifted and Ella could see just the slightest hint of nerves. She was quick to nod, quick to assure her.

"Absolutely." She pulled at Maddie's hand, bringing her along as she laid back into the heap of pillows. "Now. No more talk of the palace. Tell me how he did it. Did he get on one knee? Did he
hide the ring in your dessert? Did he cry?” Maddie laughed as she settled in next to her best friend and began the story she would continue to tell over and over again, to their friends and family; every time with the same, giddy smile on her face.

The two friends were still lying in Ella's bed when they heard Bishop unlock the door and call out into the apartment for Ella. With giggles, she informed him to her location and in two seconds he was standing in her doorway, watching the two of them with an amused grin.

"Hi Bishop," Maddie waved to him with a wide smile.

"Madeline," he nodded, looking around the room before his eyes focused on Ella. "Okay. Where is he?"

"Who?" Ella's forehead scrunched up.

"Harry."

"Harry?" She laughed.

"Look, I know that this..." He waved a finger to Maddie and back to Ella. "Is a particular fantasy of yours..."

"Hey!" Ella threw a pillow at him as Maddie giggled.

"But it is not happening. Not as long as I'm around." He winked playfully at Maddie and crossed his arms over his chest. "Now. Where is he?"

"He's not here," Ella shook her head.

"No?" Bishop raised his eyebrows.

"It's just me," Maddie raised her hand. Bishop's focus narrowed on her, allowing for a quick glance back towards the door.

"But there's a shadow outside. I just assumed..." His speech faded as realization dawned on him. His grin stretched out across his entire face, his eyes sparkling at being brought in on a secret. "That shadow's with you." He pointed to Maddie; smug and sure of himself.

"He is."

"And Harry is..."

"At Kensington...clearing out a few drawers, I suppose," Maddie couldn't help but laugh at her own joke.

"He sent me a text telling me to come straight there..." Bishop shook his head slowly, his mind catching up and then he settled his focus on Maddie. "Get out of bed love."

"Excuse me?"

"I want to hug you and kiss you and wish you the best..." He took a deep breath and let it out
slowly. "But I cannot get into a bed with my best friend's bride... with a future Duchess. Now get out here and let me kiss you."

"Well, when you put it like that..." Maddie teased, lifting herself off the bed. The second her feet hit the floor, Bishop had her in his arms. "Oh..." She let out a puff of air as he squeezed her tight. She could see Ella over his shoulder, watching with soft eyes.

"Congratulations," his voice was low, slightly rough, as he pressed a kiss to the side of her head.

"Hey..." Maddie was gentle with him as they parted, her eyes searching his. "You okay?"

"I am," he nodded, taking a deep, cleansing breath.

"You sure?"

"I just..." He chuckled lightly. "Before he met you, Maddie..." He looked down at his hands, debating his next move; what he was going to say, how much he was going to reveal. "That year before he met you, he was just... not in the best mind. You know? I don't know that he thought he was ever going to...." Bishop swallowed and shook his head. "It's harder for a prince. Everyone thinks it's easier. But it's not. And you've made him incredibly happy. I'll love you forever because of it."

"Wow..." Maddie felt tears gathered in her throat. "Who knew that Bishop would end up the most emotional in the group?" She ruffled his hair with her fingers before leaning in to kiss him. "I'll love you forever too."

"Good," he smiled sweetly for a beat and then he broke; his cocky, smarmy, self returning. "Okay ladies. Enough with this. Put on your shoes. We're going to the Palace."

"Oh we are?" Ella raised her eyebrows as Bishop leaned to kiss her; to greet her properly.

"Absolutely." He nodded. "There is no reason we should be celebrating here while Harry is all alone at Kensington. It just doesn't seem right." He kept talking as he led them down the hallway. "I'll grab some champagne. You put on your shoes."

"Okay," Maddie couldn't help but giggle at Bishop's determination, at his love for her soon to be husband. So she did as he instructed; slipping her shoes back on her feet. "Hey Ella... when Bishop said this was a particular fantasy of yours..."

"Oh God," Ella groaned; rolling her eyes.

"Did he mean you and I? Or just you and Harry? Or the three of us?" Bishop chuckled at the conversation. "Because, while there is no way I let you at Harry... you and I..." Maddie wagged her eyebrows at her friend who burst into laughter.

"Not funny," Bishop narrowed his eyes at the two of them. "It is not funny to kid around like that." But the laughter refused to fade. "Come on. Let's get Maddie's shadow and go find our boy." Linking her arm through Ella's Maddie continued to grin at Bishop as they followed him out the door.

Having made it back to Kensington, Maddie was still in shock at the entirely new ease of access
she had to the property; the way the gates just opened, the way she was waved through with a nod and a smile. Trying not to think too much of it, they went to Harry—who was thrilled to see them. He let Ella hug and kiss him. He let Bishop hold him for a few extra beats; thankful for the love and friendship he had with him. And then they opened the champagne.

"Oh my God..." Ella's mouth twisted up as she read through the list of questions that had been sitting on the low table in the living room.

"What is it?" Maddie glanced in her direction as Harry and Bishop returned from the kitchen with full glasses.

"These questions," she waved the paper in the air. "Are they really going to ask you if you plan on having children?"

"I think so," Maddie sighed; accepting a glass of champagne and a kiss from Harry. "Are they going to ask us that?"

"Most definitely," he patted her ass and sank down onto the couch; pulling her hand so that she went with him.

"Where did they come up with some of these?" She smiled up at Bishop as he joined her, passing off a drink.

"The Press Officer gathered them up," Harry shrugged. "Some are from the questions they asked Will and Kate, some she added based on press inquiries. I doubt they'll ask all of them but, it should be a good estimation."

"Hmmm..." Ella took a sip from her drink and scanned the list again. "Want to practice?" She looked up at Maddie with raised eyebrows.

"Practice?" Maddie smiled.

"Yeah," Ella nodded, taking another drink. "I'll ask you two the questions and you can practice how you're going to answer."

"You know what, that's not a bad idea," Maddie looked to Harry. "What do you think?"

"Whatever you want love," he drained his glass and sat it on the table in front of him.

"Okay," Maddie situated herself in her seat and nodded to Ella. "Go ahead."

"Okay..." Ella cleared her throat and sat up tall. "First...Congratulations." Ella's voice was deep, rich and made the three of them laugh out loud. Maintaining her professional demeanor, she continued. "How about you start by telling us all about the proposal..." She crossed her hands in her lap and looked to Maddie and Harry expectantly.

"Well..." Maddie turned to Harry then. "I don't know what to...what do you want to tell them?"

"What do you want to tell them?" He countered; reaching for his drink.

"Okay, now I'm nervous." She laughed lightly and took a deep breath. Harry patted her knee and turned a charming smile to Ella—who still sat in character.
"I asked her on my birthday on a trip to Botswana. It was private and intimate and perfect for us."

"And did you say yes right away?" Ella smiled at her best friend.

"I did," she nodded with a smile; that was easy enough.

"That's a very beautiful ring," Ella looked at Maddie's ring-free left hand before breaking character for a moment, "though I wouldn't really know that since I have yet to see it. Ahem." She narrowed her eyes at Harry.

"You want me to go get it right now?" Harry chuckled at Ella.

"Yes."

"Fine." Harry moved to stand.

"No!" Maddie put her hands out, one on Harry's knee, one on Ella's arm. "Stay put. This is important. This is important." She hurried before Ella could speak again. "I know you started this for fun but this is more important than the ring right now. Tomorrow I am going to go on TV and...THIS is what the world is going to know." She turned to Harry then with wide eyes. "What do we want that to be? Is it easier to be totally honest? Do I want to open myself up to review from the public? Do they need to know that you were on your knees? Does it help that you had tears in your eyes or that you flew to the states to ask my mom..."

"You flew to the states to ask her mom?" Ella's eyes went soft.

"You knew that," Harry shook his head at Ella.

"I know, but hearing her say it..." She clutched the list of questions to her heart. "You should definitely tell them he did that. People are going to go nuts when they hear that."

"What else is on the list?" Maddie's hands released the two of them and her eyes focused on the sheet in Ella's hand. "Please continue."

"Okay," Ella nodded, shifting back into her seat. "Harry...it is well known that your brother proposed with your mother's engagement ring..."

"Yes," he nodded, his fingers reaching out to twine with Maddie's.

"Is this ring a family ring as well?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "Well, I suppose that it is now."

"Good answer," Ella smiled at Harry. "Now, did you ask for her mother's permission?"

"I spoke with Mrs. Forrester on numerous occasions and had her blessing before we went to Botswana."

"Now Doctor Forrester," Ella turned her attention to Maddie who had relaxed considerably into her seat. "Can you take us back to the beginning? How did the two of you meet? What did you think of each other? What was your first impression of Harry?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie smiled as she looked down at her hands in her lap; her whole body warmed
as she remembered meeting him. Her eyes rose to look at Ella, "We met in Bendal, in Southern Africa. I was there working with Doctors Without Borders and Harry was there opening up a Community Center. I asked him..."

"Asked?" Ella arched an eyebrow playfully.

"I asked him to help me unload a truck full of food and he very graciously did." Maddie narrowed her eyes at Ella; skipping over her jokes. "I thought he was...kind."

"Kind?" Harry laughed. "You thought I was kind?"

"You were kind."

"Wow. Kind." Clearly Harry was unimpressed.

"Sorry man," Bishop frowned playfully.

"What's wrong with kind?!" Maddie looked from face to face to face. "What do you want me to say? That my first thought was...damn, I hope that kid has on sunblock because this sun is going to fry his ginger ass?"

"Ha!" Bishop busted out laughing.

"I think I prefer kind," Harry laughed along.

"Would you rather me tell the world how I thought your smile was ridiculously charming? How, after I realized you were actually a Prince, I was incredibly embarrassed at my not knowing? How about how I found it difficult to form complete sentences around you?" Harry's laughter faded as Maddie moved closer to him on the couch; her leg stretching out across his lap, her head tipping to the side. "Did you want me to say that I found you witty and funny and full of this...attitude that made me want to..." She trailed off, biting at her lower lip. "I thought about you daily after you left that first time....and then you brought me my candy." Her fingers reached out to the buttons on his shirt. "You want me to tell them how romantic you are? How you dropped everything to fly to Bendal to kiss me? How still, to this day, you stash my candy everywhere...so I'm never without it? You want me to tell them all that?" Harry's eyes were scattered as he watched her; his heart pounding as he wished desperately that their friends could just disappear.

"I..." He stammered.

"I do," Ella breathed; unable to help herself. Bishop allowed a small laugh to slip from his lips as he nudged her lightly. "Sorry," she blushed slightly. "I just...I really do. I think you should tell them that."

"Okay now," Maddie laughed, pulling her hand and her leg away from Harry—straightening up in her chair. "My first impression of Harry was that he was gracious. He was caring and humble. He mixed with the townspeople with ease. He was particularly wonderful with the children. I remember being drawn to him...from the very beginning." Ella was beaming as she watched the two of them on the couch, feeling every bit the role of a fan, of a viewer who might be watching to see what this couple was all about. And she knew, if the palace was hoping to paint Harry as moving away from his playboy ways, as becoming more of a family man...they weren't going to have to work very hard at it.

"That's wonderful," Ella cleared her throat, forcing herself back into her role. "And you Sir, what
"Was your first impression of Madeline?" Harry blinked, his lips twitching into a smile as his mind went back. Moving forward in his chair just a bit, his hands came together in front of him and his smile widened.

"My first impression was that she was..." He let a breath of a laugh out. "She was beautiful."

"Aw," Ella's head tilted.


"How is beautiful worse than kind?" He turned to her with wide eyes.

"Because at least kind speaks to your character. Beautiful is on the outside. It's superficial..." She sighed. "Beautiful."

"Hold on," he moved to face her completely. "Let's just... I was in Africa, one of my favorite places in the world. You were working for an organization that helps the sick and underserved, more specifically children. You were this incredibly sexy woman who was dressed down and unloading a truck of food...and when I asked you for directions, you looked right past the title and ordered me to carry boxes..." He shrugged, unwilling to budge. "Fuck me if I find that beautiful."

There was a small beat of a moment before Maddie's lips twitched; cracking into a smile and the room eased.

"That's perfect," Ella nodded to Harry.

"Oh yeah?" He laughed; his hand moving to rest on Maddie's knee.

"Well, I'd leave out the fuck me part, but..." Bishop smirked. "But other than that, it was pretty good."

"In all seriousness," Harry sighed. "Meeting Maddie changed my life. She was a fast friend in a world where friendships are hard for me to establish; difficult for me to trust. She was a confidant and very quickly I realized that my feelings for her were more than just that. I'm thankful for a lot of things that happened that day. I'm thankful for a lot of things that happened that day. I'm thankful that she was there, that my friend Khenda asked me to be there for the opening, that I was a little lost and needed to ask her for direction. It was an Aristotelian confluence of events that worked out, immensely, in my favor." He clapped his hands together and raised his eyebrows at Ella. "How's that?"

"Damn..." She shook her head. "You're good at this."

"I've been doing this for a while," he shrugged, rising to his feet to fetch the bottle of champagne. "Maybe you should toss a few more at kind over there."

"Toss whatever you want," she took a deep breath and looked at Ella. "I'm ready."

"Okay..." Ella scanned the list. "Ah. Here we go. Doctor Forrester, you're an American citizen..."

"Yes. I was born and raised in the US; in Colorado in fact. I grew up on a farm with my parents. My mother still lives there today."

"And you're a doctor?"
"I'm a Psychologist," Maddie corrected sweetly. "My specialty is child psychology but I'm licensed to practice clinically."

"And you were working in Bendal with Doctors Without Borders as a Child Psychologist?"

"I was. Well, I was working mostly as a general psychologist, but I spent much of my time with the children in the area."

"And then you moved to London."

"I did."

"And you continue to work as a Psychologist today."

"I do," Maddie smiled. "I work at a Children's Hospital and I volunteer at the Veteran's Hospital a few days a week; working with returning service men and women and their families."

"Excellent," Ella smiled and looked at the question on the sheet. "Now that you're marrying a member of the Royal Family," she smiled at Harry. "I would imagine that it would be difficult to maintain your employment; especially once you're a full time member of the family. Do you plan to stay at your current job?"

"Hold on," Harry moved towards Ella; looking over her shoulder. "Is that really on there?"

"It is," Ella pointed.

"I can't believe they're going to ask about your job," he shook his head.

"Of course they're going to ask about her job," Ella looked at him with puzzled eyes. "She's the first full time working commoner to marry into the family..."

"I'm not sure I like you calling her a commoner," Harry grew slightly defensive.

"But she is," Ella defended. "She is a commoner, Harry. She's an American. A full time working American and if you think that they aren't going to call her that..."

"And she's not the first," Harry countered. "Sophie was..."

"True," Ella nodded. "But if you think that the situations are anywhere near the same, then you haven't been paying attention. Come on Harry..." Her voice went soft. "You're...you. You're a Prince. You're third in line to the throne. You're the younger, handsome, playboy brother of the future Monarch. You're a bigger story than Edward and Sophie." The room was silent for a moment as Harry nodded slowly. She was right. He knew she was right.

"Ask me again," Maddie smiled at Ella encouragingly.

"Okay," Ella nodded. "Do you plan to stay at your current job?"

"You know...I don't." Maddie paused for a second of thought, her lips pressing together in a smile. "Though, I tend not to look at it as though I'm leaving my profession all together. There are many, many ways to serve the populations that I currently work with; children and military families. Up until now, I have been serving them by sitting in the room, practicing. But I would
not have been able to do that if there weren't researchers and fundraisers and marketers and writers and...there are many, many roles in my profession. And now my role is changing." She allowed her smile to deepen. "No. I won't be in the room anymore and I will miss that. However, Harry and I can continue to serve those very same people; bringing attention to causes that effect children, bringing attention to the issues that face our military men and women. We can bring funding to the researchers who turn data over to the writers who turn techniques over to the practitioners. I won't be in the room any longer but I have every intention of continuing to be involved with the people I've served throughout my professional career." The look on Harry’s face was a mixture of pride and adoration with a tiny bit of smug mixed in there.

"Holy shit," Bishop laughed. "Maybe she should handle all of your press from here on out."

"Right?!" Harry laughed, leaning to kiss her. "I think you're ready love."

"Me too," Ella nodded, smiling up at Harry as he patted her on the back; moving past their very brief tat.

"Really?"

"Yes," Harry nodded definitively.

"Yes," Ella echoed, tossing the list of questions to the side. "Now...can I please see that ring before I..."

"Yes!" Harry let out. "Yes. You can see the ring. I'll go get it and then we..." He waved his finger to Maddie. "We have some phone calls to make."

"Oh?" She raised her eyebrows.

"Your family?" He leaned to kiss her. "Don't you have a whole host of cousins to call?"

"No," she shook her head. "If I call them now, they are going to want to go on and on and...I have to focus on this interview tomorrow. Once that's over, I'll talk to them. But not tonight. Tonight I need to be focused...and you guys get that. They won't. So I'll let my mom tell them tomorrow and then I'll call them tomorrow night."

"Okay," he was fine with however she wanted to handle it. "That leaves just one call." His eyes met hers and they both smiled wide.

"Collins." She answered.

"Khenda." He nodded.

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Announcing their engagement to Khenda and Collins had gone exactly as they thought it would. They were beyond happy for them; over the moon. Collins let out a loud yelp, bringing a cry of surprise from Isaiah, while Khenda grew quiet, reflective; sharing a solemn, touching moment with Harry while they both thought of his mother. They offered their congratulations, their love and then they promised their silence—though neither of them could wait to see the interview on television the next day.

After they hung up with their friends, they returned to the small celebration, opening more
champagne and—finally—sharing the ring with Ella. When Maddie finally decided it was time for them to go, time for she and Harry to rest, they shared hugs and kisses and went along their way.

Harry held onto her fingers as they moved towards the stairs, finding he was having difficulty not touching her throughout the evening.

"How are you doing love?" He asked her as they climbed slowly.

"I'm..." She let out a long breath and met his eyes. "I'm great actually. Really, this time. I'm great."

"You ready for tomorrow?" He pulled her fingers to his lips.

"I don't know." Her voice was small. "Harry...what if I mess up?"

"You won't mess up," he shook his head.

"What if I do?" She tugged at his hand.

"Then you mess up," he shrugged. "Unless you show up naked or...I don't know...yell blasphemous things at the interviewer...I think you'll be fine."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed at the image in her head. "You'll still love me?"

"I'll still love you."

"You'll still marry me?"

"I'll still marry you."

"Okay..." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Then I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be for tomorrow."

"I'll take it," he smiled, comfortable with her answer; with the lack of tension he saw in her eyes. "You know...I did want to talk to you about one of your answers." He took another step but she halted; coming to a complete stop on the stairs.

"I said you were kind!" She huffed with a grin. "Is it really a bad thing to be kind?"

"Ha!" He laughed, stepping back down to the stair she was on. "I wasn't talking about that."

"Oh?" She raised her eyebrows; deflating. "What were you talking about?" With a smug grin, he pulled on her arm, bringing her to him.

"I thought of you every day too..." His voice was soft as he wrapped his arms around her. "After I left you in Bendal that first time. I thought of you every day."

"Oh?" Maddie smiled up at him; her eyes sleepy.

"I couldn't form complete sentences, or thoughts for that matter." His head dipped to kiss at her neck.

"Hmmm..." She felt her skin flush; his shirt bunching under her hands as she pulled him closer. "I have a confession..."
"Tell me," he ordered; his mouth moving up to that sensitive spot just below her ear.

"I..." She pushed at him; forcing him to pull back from her neck, forcing him to meet her eyes. She pulled her lip in between her teeth and smiled up at him through lowered lashes. "I had a dream about you. Back then. I had a...dream...about you."

"Oh..." That caught his attention. "What kind of dream?"

"You know what kind of dream," she shifted slightly; her body rubbing against his in a way that drew a moan deep from his throat. "I was so nervous the next time I saw you; worried you would be able to see through me...worried you would be able to tell that I had imagined you...naked, that I had imagined you tearing off my clothes, that I had imagined you taking me..." Harry’s mouth closed over hers, unable to be still any longer. His hands were hot against her as he pressed her closer.

"Tell me more," he whispered against her lips, his hands running over the curves of her body, pulling up the fabric of her skirt as they moved.

"I can't," she flushed pink; partly from embarrassment, partly from the way he made her body tingle. "It's too...silly."

"I like silly," he grinned; his eyes shining when his hands successfully made it under her skirt, finding the soft skin of her thighs. "I loooooove silly."

"I can't..." She shook her head; her voice slipping from her lips.

"Maddie..." He groaned, his fingers moving to the thin slip of fabric that was between him and where he longed to be. "I bet I can get it out of you."

"Oh?" Her breath hitched, her heart thumping in her chest. "I would like to see you try."

"I bet you would," he laughed, his hands moving quickly from under her skirt, moving to pull her face to his; holding her lips against his. Maddie sighed into his mouth, her hands reached up to grip his arms in hopes of steadying her loose knees. But his arms were already moving, snaking around her waist as he began to lower them both to the stairs below them.

"Harry..." Nearly breathless, Maddie allowed him to sit her down on one stair, her feet resting two stairs below. Moving to stand in front of her, his mouth never left her body; kissing her neck, her collar bone, her jaw as she leaned back on the stairs behind her. With strong, dominant hands cupping under her knees, he moved her legs apart, making a home for himself there.

And right there, on the grand staircase of Harry's place at Kensington Palace, the future Duke of Sussex moved his hands up under her skirt—this time with more purpose, this time with more steadiness—this time with his lips close behind. Maddie let out a giggle when his red hair disappeared under the material of her skirt and she gasped when he found his mark. And, though the next day still held a ball of nerves for her and, to some extent him, neither of them thought about it again that night.

And yes. He did manage to persuade her to disclose her dream.

And then he made every effort to recreate it.
Chapter 77

The day of the announcement reminded Maddie of the very first New Year's Eve party she was allowed to attend. Not the kind that her parents threw, where she went to bed but snuck down to watch the revelry without ever being seen. But the kind where she dressed up, where she drove somewhere—where there were boys and girls and music and she wasn't expected home until the next morning; where they would drink wine coolers and Boone's Farm Wine Flavored Product that somebody's older brother had purchased for them and snuck into the hotel room and flirt by tossing their hair.

Now it was a completely different party she was joining; to say that it was on a new, higher, level was a massive understatement. At the end of the day, a completely different ball was going to drop, but the buildup was the same. The nerves, the anxiety, the excitement that stretched to her toes, the way her breathing was lighter, her heart rate faster. The hustle to get ready, the bustle of the people around her, the craziness of hurrying to wait; the anticipation that something big was about to happen and the entire day centered around this one moment.

And it was. This entire day, this particular countdown was centered around one great big moment; when the biggest ball of Maddie's life would drop and the party would really begin.

It all began first thing that morning when Maddie woke up, warm and snuggly—next to him.

FIVE...

"Good morning sunshine," she smiled up at him; stretching out a yawn.

"Good morning love," he leaned over to kiss her lips; lingering for a moment—enjoying the laziness of the morning—knowing it was soon to change. "Sleep well?"

"I did," she nodded, snuggling back into her pillow. "You?"

"Hmmm..." He nodded and took a breath. "Thomas called."

"Oh?" Maddie grinned. "Does he want me to call him back or did he leave a message?"

"Funny," Harry smirked, his finger tracing over the bridge of her nose. "The stylist..."

"Rosie," Maddie offered.

"Is sending over dresses now. They should be here in the next fifteen minutes."

"Are they taupe?" She couldn't help the edge in her voice as she tipped her lips to kiss his fingers still hovering over her face.

"Bisque."

"I have to get out of bed now, don't I?" She watched as he tossed the blankets off his legs and stepped out of bed.

"You don't have to," he shook his head. "But dresses are on their way and your friend...what was her name?"
"Tara," Maddie laughed. "She's Penelope's sister's best friend's roommate. She's a professional, Harry. She works at a salon in town and she was very sweet to me while you were away. She's going to do my hair and makeup for this little thing I'm doing at three."

"Ah," Harry shrugged, not necessarily needing the details. "Does she know that's what she's doing?"

"Not really," Maddie smirked as she pushed the blankets aside; groaning as she moved into a sitting position. "Penelope's going to bring her here without telling her. I'll give her the rundown when she arrives."

"Anyway," Harry moved to her side of the bed, his hand resting at the base of her neck as he leaned to kiss her. "People are on their way here to dress us. I'm going to get into the shower. Do you want to join me? Or call up for some breakfast?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie's lips pressed together, her eyes twinkling in thought. "Shower. Then breakfast."

"That's my girl," he grinned, his hand moving over her body down to squeeze her ass. "Think we have time to play out that dream again?"

"Ha!" Maddie giggled as she moved past him towards the bathroom. "I doubt it."

"Damn it." He snapped his fingers.

"Don't worry love...I've had other dreams." With a sexy, come-hither nod, she slipped through his door; Harry hurrying behind her with a purpose.

"Doctor Forrester," Thomas's knock preceded his voice as he stepped into the dining room where Maddie was just finishing up her coffee and toast.

"You're never going to call me Maddie, are you?" She let go of the hope with a sigh; as if things would get less formal as they continued on this path to marriage.

"No ma'am," he shook his head. "Ms. Tara Wharton is here to see you."

"Oh!" Maddie clapped her hands together as she rose from her seat. "Thank you Thomas. Okay sunshine..." She leaned to kiss Harry. "I'm off to make myself more beautiful."

"Good luck with that," he raked his eyes over her appreciatively. With a roll of her eyes, she bounded from the room, the excitement taking over her overall disposition.

"Tara! Penelope!" Maddie's smile was wide as she greeted them. They stood in the entry way, Penelope looking completely comfortable holding onto a large case of what Maddie assumed was Tara's equipment—and Tara, looking completely out of sorts. Her features softened when she saw Maddie.

"Things are making a bit more sense now..." She breathed a little easier. Maddie grinned at her, leaning in to hug her hello.
"Welcome to Kensington," she smiled. "Have you been here before?"

"Only on the regular tour," Tara shook her head, eyes still wide.

"Ah yes," Maddie nodded, turning to kiss Penelope's cheeks. "Thank you for doing this for me."

"Any time," Penelope kissed her back.

"Okay," Maddie took a deep breath and turned back to Tara. "I bet you're wondering why you're here."

"A little bit, yes," Tara nodded, her eyes taking in the room, the ornateness of it.

"Come in, let's sit," Maddie led them to the couches in the sitting room and smiled; taking a leap of faith. "Tara...I'm about to let you in on a little secret and I'm going to trust that you'll keep it to yourself because...because you've been incredibly sweet to me in the past and your work is amazing and...and I like you."

"Oh-kay," Tara smiled nervously; glancing at Penelope who simply smiled back. Maddie took a deep breath.

"This afternoon at three, Palace officials are going to announce my engagement to Harry..."

"Oh my God," Tara couldn't help the words that fell from her mouth; her hand moved to her lips embarrassingly. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Maddie smiled sweetly. "The thing is...I need somebody to style my hair, to do my makeup. And...I would like it to be you. You can't tell anyone beforehand. In fact, you can't leave here until press time. You have her phone?" Maddie looked to Penelope.

"In my purse," she patted the clutch that rested on the couch next to her.

"You would have to work here. I've requisitioned one of the bathrooms upstairs where you can work. I would pay you..."

"You don't have to..." Tara began, but Maddie cut her off.

"I do have to. I would pay you for your time and services and...after the announcement, the Palace will release a statement detailing what I was wearing and who did my hair and everyone who paid any attention to that would know that it was you, that it was your salon." She took a breath. "You can say no if you want to but..."

"Yes," Tara cut in. "I...of course I will. I'm absolutely flattered that you thought of me, that you trust me. I'm in."

"Fantastic," Maddie clapped her hands together in relief. "Now. We can head up to the bathroom and get to work. Do you...either of you...need anything to eat or drink or..."

"No thank you," Penelope shook her head, shrugging out of her jacket and laying it over the arm of the couch. She was going to be there for a while; she was getting comfortable.

"Actually," Tara cleared her throat, her mind already at work. "Some water would be lovely, thank you."
"Of course," Maddie nodded, moving to rise to her feet.

"Don't move," his voice called out from behind her. All sets of eyes turned to see Harry in the doorway, leaning against the frame watching them with a bemused smile on his face. "I already asked for some water to be sent in." He pushed away from the frame and moved over to them. With his charming smile, he held his hand out to Tara who stared up at him with wide eyes. "I'm Harry. You must be Tara?"

"Yes...sir..." Her voice was slightly shaky as she rose to her feet to shake his hand. "It's an honor to meet you."

"You as well," he held her hand in his for a moment before turning to kiss Penelope's cheeks. "Maddie has raved about your services for quite some time. Are you on board for the circus today?"

"It seems as though I am," she smiled and looked to Maddie. "Would it be possible to see what it is you're wearing this afternoon?"

"Absolutely," Maddie nodded and turned to Harry, her hands falling on his shoulders. "Okay Sunshine. We're heading upstairs. I think it's probably best if you lay low for a while."

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded with a smirk, his hands running around her waist in such a way that Maddie thought maybe he had forgotten they had company for a beat. "Ladies, divert your eyes..." He gave them the smallest moment's notice before his mouth moved over Maddie's. Tara and Penelope shared a small, slightly uncomfortable smile before the moment was interrupted by the arrival of the requested water.

"Okay..." Maddie pushed at his chest, her fingers running along her freshly assaulted lips with reverence. "Okay. Let's head upstairs, shall we?" Turning a blushed smile to the ladies, she stepped away from Harry. Gathering their things, Penelope and Tara followed behind.

"Have fun!" Harry called after them; a chuckle rumbling from deep inside his chest.

**FOUR**

"Madeline, my darling..." Harry called out as he stepped back into his room. "It's almost time to...holy shit."

"What?!" Maddie turned from his mirror with concern in her eyes. "What is it?" Her eyes looked down over her dress, at her hose, her shoes. "Harry..."

"You look..." He bit on his lip, his mind at work.

"Beautiful?" She teased.

"Stunning," he countered; stepping into the room. "You look stunning."

"Thank you," she let out a breath, her eyes scanning him. "You clean up pretty well yourself, Wales." He looked dapper in his dark suit.

"Do you like my tie?" He pulled at it as he moved towards her. "It's bisque-colored."
"Is it?" She laughed while he stepped into her space; looping his arms around her waist.

"Mmm. Hmm." He nodded, his eyes growing soft. "Any chance you want to skip this thing and tell me about another one of your dreams?"

"Tempting," Maddie sighed. "But I'm guessing you just came up here to fetch me."

"The car will be here in minutes. Here, let me," he took the necklace she was working on and moved to fasten it around her neck. "There you go."

"Thank you," she took a breath, her fingers resting over the pendant that sat against her décolletage.

"You okay?" He studied her.

"I am," she nodded. "Tara wanted to spray my hair one more time and then I'll be ready to go."

"Okay," he smiled; leaning in to kiss her; a feather lite kiss to her lips, her jaw, her ear.

"I found it!" Tara called out. "Oh God!" She stopped, her hand rising to her eyes. "I'm so sorry! I thought...Oh God..." She groaned as Harry stepped away from Maddie, laughing loudly.

"Come on in," Harry tried to lighten the situation. "I was just stepping out so that the two of you can finish up in here." He winked at Maddie as Tara lowered her hand and offered a smile. "Ten minutes before go time, love."

"Yes sir," Maddie offered a small, mocking salute as Harry slipped from the room.

"I'm so sorry," Tara shook her head as she moved quickly to Maddie's side, various items juggled in her arms.

"Don't worry about it," Maddie waved her hand towards the doorway. "Now, what do you have for me?"

"I made a little bag of emergency items," Tara held up a small baggie. "There is extra lip tint, some cotton swabs and a few removal wipes."

"Removal wipes?" Maddie peered at the bag. "What are they for?"

"They will take the lip tint off without taking the rest of the makeup off."

"And why would I want to do that?"

"They aren't for you," Tara's cheeks blushed as a small smirk pulled on her lips. "Forgive me but...I'm not entirely sure he's not going to try to ruin your makeup between now and three and I would hate for him to go on TV with tint all over his face and..."

"Thank you," Maddie flushed slightly as she smiled at her. "You're absolutely right in packing these. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now...hold this over your face," she handed her the shield. "I want to spray you one more time."
"I don't understand it," Maddie smiled at him across the leather car seat as they were driven to Buckingham.

"Don't understand what?" Harry reached for her hand.

"Why I'm nervous," she shook her head.

"I understand it completely," Harry breathed, situating his tie with his free hand.

"But..." She took a breath. "I've been in high pressure situations before Harry. I've...I've been interviewed by hospital panels, I've been in front of people from all over the world. For God's sake, Harry, I defended my Dissertation in front of fifteen professors at Columbia University!"

"You did," he nodded; his smile sweet and proud.

"I shouldn't be nervous about this," she shook her head again. "I wish that I weren't nervous about this."

"Okay..." Harry took a breath and let it out slowly. "Tell me. Were you nervous before you defended your Dissertation?"

"Yes."

"And you got past it?"

"Yes."

"How?" He held his hand out. "How did you move past it?"

"I..." She bit her lower lip as a wide grin crossed her face. "Ha! I went with a friend for a shot of tequila."

"You had a shot of tequila before you defended?" He chuckled at the thought.

"Yes," she leaned back into her seat. "We just...we picked a place and had just one shot. It took the edge off enough without being obvious..." Her eyes returned to him. "I miss college sometimes."

"I would imagine," Harry lifted her hand to his lips before he moved forward in his chair. "Thomas. We need to make a stop."

"I'm sorry sir?" Thomas turned to face Harry.

"On the next block, there's a pub. Laundry's, I think. Can you stop there please?"

"Harry?" Maddie tugged on his sleeve.

"You want to stop at the pub, sir?" Thomas clarified.

"Yes. Thank you." Harry sat back in his seat as Thomas spoke to the driver.
"What are you doing?" Maddie's eyes narrowed.

"Hmmm..." Harry's face grew smug as the car slowed to a stop and his door opened. "Come with me..."

"Harry..." She warned.

"I'm buying you a shot of tequila." He held his hand out. "Now come on love, we don't have much time." Maddie blinked once, thinking that he was insane and then, with another blink she held her hand out and took his. Stepping from the car, she followed closely by his side as they hurried into the pub—their car ready and waiting at the curbside.

"This is insane, you know," she spoke low as he opened the door for her.

"Stopping for tequila or marrying me?" Harry followed her inside.

"I'm starting to think a little of both," Maddie offered a wink.

"God I love you," Harry groaned, his hand finding her ass in a firm pat as they stepped up to the bar.

The bartender was an older man, at least Harry's father's age. He was inviting and polite and looked at them slightly funny when Harry ordered two shots of tequila. Though, Maddie wasn't sure if it was because he recognized Harry or if he was confused by their level of dress. Either way, he brought them their shots, accepted Harry's cash and overly generous tip and wished them a good evening as they breezed back out the door.

They were only in there for five minutes; not enough time to cause a sufficient scene. Later that evening, the bartender would see snippets of the interview, see the pictures from the photo call and he would tell his wife that he had served shots to the two of them shortly before those photos were taken. And she would laugh, pat his arm affectionately and insist that he was mistaken.

But in that moment, when they hurried back into the car to continue onto the Palace, the shots had the intended affect. Maddie had relaxed. She was at ease and smiling and, when Harry held out one of her mints that he pulled from his pocket, her eyes turned warm and soft.

He was so perfect for her it was sickening.

THREE...

From the moment they returned to the car, they were full speed ahead. All Systems Go. It was time. The press was assembled and waiting, they had been let in on the news and now all that was missing was Maddie and Harry. A photo call. An interview. A world ready and waiting to see the couple together officially for the first time. A world waiting to hear her speak for the first time, to see if he really looked at her the way it appeared he looked at her in the pictures that had been anonymously snapped throughout the tenure of their courtship.

They flew by the remaining buildings, through the final intersections. They zipped past the press vans waiting outside. They slid seamlessly through the gates, under the arches and, before Maddie could say Buckingham Palace, they were pulling to a stop. The driver and Thomas were quick to exit the car, opening the doors for the two of them.

Taking a great breath, she stepped from the car. "Thank you," she smiled to the driver who
offered a curt, professional nod. Shielding her eyes with her hand, she looked up at the sky; it was a beautiful day. She could feel his eyes on her then, even before she turned to face Harry, she could feel him watching her.

"Love?" He called out with that wide, beaming smile. Maddie turned towards his voice; her hunch was confirmed. "If you're looking for a way out..." His smile twisted into a smirk.

"I was just thinking..." She sighed; rounding the car to him. "It's a beautiful day."

"It is," he agreed as she stepped to his side.

Instantly her hand was in his. Instantly they were moving forward. They were greeted by Claire Edwards who smiled brightly as she shook Maddie's hand and dipped to a curtsy in front of Harry. And they were ushered quite hurriedly, through the grand halls. Maddie had to hold back a laugh because what she really wanted to do was to stop and take in the décor, to thoroughly study the paintings that hung on the walls. But they were on a course now; heading towards a destination and Maddie was quite certain Ms. Edwards would not approve of her lazily perusing the masterpieces. Though she adored the building and all it held, today was not about sightseeing. Today was something else entirely. Maddie felt a warm chill shudder over her skin as Harry's fingers tightened around hers. They were shown to a room off to the side; something that the Royal Family probably considered small, though was twice the size of Maddie's first apartment.

This is where they would wait. All this hurry. To wait.

The doors were pulled closed behind them and people were everywhere. Claire was speaking to Thomas, bringing him up to speed on the announcement that had been made almost an hour earlier. The stylist was there, moving silently around Harry with a lint brush; straightening his tie, smoothing out his shoulders.

She turned to Maddie then, the same brush quick at work as she checked her hem, checked her hose. When Rosie dipped down to run a cloth over Maddie's shoes, Maddie's eyes met Harry's over her bent back—a bemused smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. Harry bit back a chuckle and shook his head. It reminded her of the time she had watched while the gardening staff at Highgrove cleaned and buffed the statues outside. Maybe that's what she was to Rosie; a statue.

Maddie's eyes turned from him then, seeking the bright light that was streaming in the enormous floor to ceiling windows. She took a deep, clarifying breath and tried to focus; through the gauzy curtains, the heavy, bullet proof glass, to a tree in the distance. Her mind clicked then, into work mode; what she needed to remember, phrasing she wanted to use. They had mere minutes left and she wanted to make sure she had it all fresh in her mind.

"Excuse me," Harry's voice called out; Maddie's eyes shifting back to look at him. "Can I have the room for a moment please?" And just like that, without any disagreement or question, the room was emptied. It was just the two of them.

"Look at you," Maddie's smile was a combination of nerves and surprise. "Clearing rooms with a snap of your fingers." He allowed a small chuckle as he studied her face; moving towards her. "Is everything okay?"

"No," he shook his head slowly; a warm, lazy smile on his face. "Not okay. Everything is perfect." His voice was low, drawn out; his accent heavy and charming. "There's just one thing missing."
"Oh?" Her eyebrows arched softly; slowly. Her hands reached out to his lapels as he stepped up to her. "I can't imagine what. The whole world is out there waiting for us and..."

"Hmmm..." Harry's lips hummed as he looked her over and then his right hand rose, lifting her left one from his lapel gingerly; bringing the tips of her fingers to his lips to kiss them.

"Hmmm?" Maddie's head tilted slightly to the left as her index finger stretched to tap his nose.

"This..." With his free hand, he reached into his coat pocket; pulling out that now familiar small black box.

"Ah..." Maddie felt tears well in her eyes even as her smile deepened. "I'm surprised Ella didn't jack it on her way out last night."

"She tried," Harry laughed; pulling the ring from the box and tossing it to the side. "But there are too many checkpoints between my place and the outside. And Nathan is hard to outwit."

"Good job Nathan," Maddie chuckled.

"Great job Nathan," Harry agreed. "Now..." He held up the ring between his index finger and thumb. "Do you want to hear my speech all over again?"

"Maybe the highlights," she winked as he stretched out her fingers, her hand flattening out between them.

"Forty-eight hours, love. You've had two days to think it over; to come down from your Botswana high and realize..."

"Shush," her right hand moved to his lips. "Put that ring on me Wales. I've spent the entire morning being primped and curled and teased and ironed and...then there's Rosie with the lint roller. I sat in that meeting and agreed to leave my job, to leave my country. I want to take your name. I want to take your title. I want to be your wife." Her voice caught as she said the words. "Now...before I cry and ruin all this makeup, would you please..."

"Okay. Okay," Harry was nodding as he fought with his own emotions. Without issue, he slipped the ring onto her finger and met her eyes. "Watch out for Ella..." He sniffed. "I'm not entirely convinced she's done trying for it."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed; sending her tears on retreat. "Don't worry about me. I'm scrappy. And I have Sampson now..." Their laughter faded as their eyes locked.

"I love you Maddie. I really do..." That low, deep voice was back.

"I love you too sunshine," she smiled; blinking at her watery eyes as her hand lifted to rub at his cheek. His face turned in her hand to kiss her palm. His hands reached for her waist; pulling her to him in a hug. His arms were warm around her; protective. Just as Harry decided to ignore the makeup warnings and kiss her and just as Maddie opened her mouth to either chastise or invite him, there was a firm knock at the door.

"Come in," Harry called; not moving his eyes from her.

"I'm sorry Sir," Thomas called, stepping into the room, the posse behind him. The chaos returned. "They are ready for us."
"Thank you," Harry's hands dropped Maddie's waist; pulling her hand to his lips once more. "Let's do this?"

"Let's." Maddie nodded.

And just like that, they were pulled from the room.

TWO...

"Do you have any idea how much I want to kiss you right now?" Harry whispered to her as they were ushered through the halls again.

"Don't you dare," Maddie's eyes narrowed playfully. "Tara spent hours getting this done and I left those little makeup remover wipes back in that room."

"If I send Thomas for them can I kiss you?" If he wasn't so damned cute, Maddie would want to slap him.

"After the photos," she offered.

"It's a date," he winked as they rounded a corner and came to a stop. Claire moved to stand in front of them; her voice low.

"They are right inside these doors." She pointed behind her with her thumb.

"How many?" Harry asked; businesslike. Maddie loved watching this transformation; Harry moving into his public persona, pulling it together.

"Thirty-five print and camera," she glanced at her clipboard. "Twenty video at least."

"Holy..." Maddie's hand flew to her mouth, catching herself.

"You know," Harry chuckled at her slip. "If you want to change your mind, now's the chance. It's not too late." Claire looked up to the couple with wide eyes.

"Actually," she shook her head slowly, unconsciously. "We've already released the statement and..." Her eyes caught Harry's narrowed ones and her mouth clamped shut.

"He was kidding," Maddie shot a side glance to Harry. "I'm not changing my mind."

"Okay then," Claire cleared her throat, slightly embarrassed. "Now. I'm going to open these doors and you're going to walk to the middle of the room, under the portrait of Mary of Teck."

"My Great-Great Grandmother," Harry winked at Maddie; hoping to keep the nervousness at bay.

"Yes I know," she shook her head with a grin and Claire continued.

"Mr. Smith is going to walk through before you. He'll wait on the other side of the room. Once the photo call is over, he'll step forward and you'll follow him out. He'll be there for the interview." She pulled her eyes away from her clipboard and looked them both over. "Do you need anything at all? Water? Anything?"
"No, thank you," Maddie smiled.

"No," Harry shook his head. Claire, finished with them, waiting for only a signal, turned her body from them, giving them a moment. Harry leaned in to Maddie, his voice lowered. "Do you remember what you said to me the first time we met?"

"Yes," Maddie's entire face smiled at the memory.

"You said, you look a little lost..." He watched Maddie take a deep breath in as Claire nodded to the go signal and moved to the door handle.

"And you said..." Maddie took another breath and forced her eyes from the door to him. "I suppose that I am. Do you think you might be able to point me in the right direction?"

"I did," he chuckled.

"Okay," Claire's voice cut into their private moment. "We're moving."

"Oh my God..." Maddie breathed.

"Listen to me," Harry's voice became slightly rushed. "I wasn't lost."

"What?" Her head snapped to him.

"I wasn't lost. I knew exactly where I was, exactly what I was doing..." His eyes locked with hers.

"What?" She repeated.

"I saw you and I had to meet you. Your smile was..." He trailed off in thought; this moment of stillness among the chaos. "You knocked me sideways, love. There was this crazy moment when all I wanted was for my children to have your smile. It made no sense and it scared me witless."

"Harry..." Maddie simultaneously hated him and adored him. Her eyes filled with tears and her heart thumped in her chest.

"Now I want them to have your heart, your spirit, your..."

"Stop. Please. Or I'm going to break down..."

"What's about to happen, Madeline...you're not lost. You know exactly where you are, exactly what you're doing. This is what was supposed to happen..." The doors swung open then and Claire nodded to them. It was time to go.

Maddie blinked at her teary eyes and let her smile rest on her face. She took half a step forward, barely a step at all, before Harry's hand halted her. Her eyes turned to him quickly and he smiled wide.

"We walk together, love," his hand took hers, tucking it warmly into the crook of his elbow. "From here on out, we walk together." He pressed a quick kiss to her head, whispered, "I love you."

"I love you too."
"I know."

And then, with a collective deep breath, a shared smile, they took that first step together.

**ONE...**

It was just like that first New Year's Eve party. All of the anticipation, all of the planning, all of the buildup—leading to this one fresh, new moment. As cameras clicked and flashbulbs flickered, Maddie's fingers pressed into Harry's arm and she smiled wide.

The ball had dropped. The party was starting.

If Maddie had to guess, she would have wagered that there were easily 200 photos taken that day. 200 photos of her standing next to Harry; her arm tucked into his while they smiled and answered the few, quick questions that were allowed during the brief photo call. She would have guessed that they turned out fine; she hadn't sneezed or yawned or had a coughing fit so there was precious little that could be terribly wrong.

But that next morning, when the papers hit the stands, the leading photo—the one that was printed and reprinted, blogged and re-blogged, discussed at great lengths—was not one of the 200 taken during that photo call. In fact, it was one that only a few of the photographers managed to get. It was one that neither Maddie nor Harry knew existed until that next morning.

As they had followed Thomas through the doors, smiling their final good-byes to the group of reporters, they slipped out of the room. As soon as they were out, almost immediately, Harry turned to her, his hands sliding easily in place at the sides of her neck, tilting her face up to his. His lips took hers with pride and love and a bit of ownership. And as Maddie leaned into him, sighing into his mouth and letting her body press to his, little did either of them know that a few, the lucky few, photographers had snapped a few photos. They were a little shaded, the couple slightly silhouetted from the distance, but it was clearly them. They were clearly celebrating. And the world fell in love with them. For the rest of their lives whenever a documentary ran, in print or electronic media, it almost always contained that picture. It was sweet, it was beautiful; it was that kind of iconic.

Maddie barely had time to thumb at Harry's lips, making sure he was free from the tint on hers before they were whisked into the next room. There they met another Tom; Tom Bradby, the same man who had interviewed William and Kate. He had done a good job with theirs and Harry respected and trusted him. Introducing himself to Maddie, he shook her hand and smiled. He was incredibly inviting and open, making Maddie feel instantly at ease in his hands. Of course, she guessed that was his job—to make her feel comfortable, encourage her to open up. He explained the mechanics of it all; the cameras, the microphones, how it would all unfold. He allowed them both some time to get the feel of the room before Maddie stepped out with his producer who would "mike" her up. The woman was sweet, friendly, as she helped Maddie with the wires and the microphone and when Maddie stepped back into the room both Harry and Mr. Bradby rose to their feet. After checking to be sure they were both ready and that they didn't need anything, he gave a nod to the camera man and they jumped right in.

The interview lasted only twenty minutes and it went off spectacularly. Later, after he had transcribed and edited, it was played over networks Nationally and Internationally. It was written about all over the world; dissecting Doctor Madeline Forrester—her answers, her demeanor, the way she sat with her body turned slightly in Harry's direction, the way their eyes met conspiratorially when answering a few of the questions, the way Harry's hand crept dangerously close to resting on her knee more than once. People were learning about her for the first time—shaping their opinions. And there was a lot to gather from those twenty minutes.
For instance, viewers would learn that Harry truly believed that meeting Maddie's family was far more anxiety producing than Maddie meeting his.

"For the most part my life has been chronicled, one way or another, in the media since the day I was born. All they had to do was initiate an internet search with my name and every untoward thing I've ever done is there for them to read about. You know...you don't want to be the man that her mother already thinks is a terrible match for her daughter." Harry chuckled lightly.

"Thankfully Maddie's family is wonderful and they held off on forming an opinion about me until they met me—for which I will be eternally grateful."

"And the opinion was clearly a positive one," Mr. Bradby suggested.

"Clearly," Harry laughed before jokingly raising his eyebrows to Maddie.

"Absolutely," Maddie confirmed.

Viewers would learn that Maddie had in fact met the Queen on several occasions and that she found her to be warm and welcoming and a well of knowledge. Maddie beamed with pride as she explained how wonderful it had been to have the Queen ask about the work she had done in Bendal, about the people she had met.

"It is incredibly evident that Her Majesty is deeply invested in the people she serves, even in those one on one interactions." And, Harry assured the world, he absolutely had The Queen's, as well as Mrs. Forrester's, blessing before proposing to Maddie.

They had the interviewer, and later the television audience, laughing out loud when, in response to the question "Do you want to have children?", they both answered an immediate, simultaneous, and emphatic.

"Yes."

There were discussions about how they met, the impact of living on separate continents, Maddie's decision to move to London. And then he asked about Maddie's plans for her future citizenship. Yes, she would be becoming a citizen. She would be going through the same process as anyone applying to become a citizen. The Border Agency had been notified previous to the interview that she intended on marrying. She would be taking the required English Test as well as the British Life Test and would complete the required time quicker than she had originally thought, as Bendal fell under the United Kingdom and her time there counted as well. And yes, she would be relinquishing her US citizenship; she was excited and ready to join the commonwealth, to be a part of the great people she was ready to serve.

They talked about Maddie's work; both in the past and what lay ahead. Harry watched with pride as she virtually recited her practice answer verbatim. They talked about all the wonderful things that came with an engagement, the celebratory feel, the excitement in their families, the proposal. They talked about the formalities, the research questions; Maddie's history, who she was, what kind of role she wanted to have in the Royal Family. They even talked about the sad pieces; the absence of Harry's mother, the absence of Maddie's father—the impact those losses had on this moment.

In the end, the vast majority of the viewers would come to the conclusion that not only did Maddie seem to be an excellent match for Harry—the love between them was abundantly clear both in what they said and didn't say—but she was also looking to be quite the match for Great Britain.
She was bright, hardworking, charity-minded, and she had this personable nature about her that put a great many minds at ease. There was something for everyone. There were elements of the fairytale; a Prince finding his love, moving her to England to live in a castle. There were elements of modern times; with a PhD, she was easily the most educated member of the Royal family and on top of that, she had an extensive and respected work history. Yet with all of that, she still managed to come across as likable, relatable; somebody the viewers could see themselves talking to. As they reached the end of the interview, Mr. Bradby set his notes to the side and offered up the last question.

"And finally, Harry, you famously made the comment that you've longed for children since you were young and that you were searching for somebody to fulfill the role, somebody to take on the job. What made you decide that Maddie was the one to fulfill the role?"

"That's easy, Tom," Harry smiled wide. "I'm massively in love with her. I am. I can tell you all of the reasons she makes sense for me; how funny she is, how smart, how she has this way with children that impressed me from the beginning. You know...we've talked about her work with children and our service men and women and her devotion to family and friends...all of those are great reasons. But in all honestly, it's so much simpler than that. I love her. And she clearly, though not quite as understandably, loves me. I can't imagine being without her. I don't know that there was ever really a decision making process on my part she just...she has to be the one. There's really no other way around it."

"Wow," Maddie was beaming as she looked at him. "And you said you were bad at these things." And as their shared laughter faded, Mr. Bradby stepped in, drawing the interview to a close.

As the cameras clicked off, the room fell at ease and Harry turned a wide, thankful smile to her. "And there you go..."

"There I go," Maddie let out a breath; relaxing into the couch, his arm moving around her shoulders with familiarity, his fingers stretching to stroke her neck. "I think I did okay."

"Okay?" Harry laughed. "You did better than okay."

"Yeah?" Her eyes slid from his to Mr. Bradby who sat across from them with a warm smile; a smile of a man who had a good feeling about the two of them.

"It was wonderful," Mr. Bradby nodded. "You were very eloquent and your answers were great."

"Thank you so much for saying so."

"You're welcome," he nodded to her and then to Harry before he turned business. He explained to the new couple what would happen next, when the interview would air and then he thanked them again. With a wish of good luck, Mr. Bradby and his crew were out the door and Mr. Smith, Ms. Edwards and crew were back in. They were ecstatic about how well the interview had gone—as ecstatic as two very English individuals who worked in service to Her Majesty could possibly be. As they rushed in, full of words of appreciation and applause, Maddie watched as the look on Harry's face faded slightly; barely. His eyes grew slightly dim, the corners of his mouth turning down just so. It was hardly noticeable. But it was enough that she noticed.

"I'm sorry, Thomas?" Maddie turned away from Harry for a moment, looking up to the older gentleman who was grinning down at them—pleased with how things had gone.

"Yes, Ma'am?" He answered; quick to service.
"Would you mind...can we have the room for just a moment please?"

"Of course Ma'am," he nodded and looked to Harry. "I am actually finished with all that I need. I can file the press release and, unless there's anything that you need?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "I believe we're done for the day." He was happy that the formalities were over, that they could move on to the personal part of the day.

"Thank you, sir," he nodded to the others; gathering their things. "You're due at Clarence for dinner in just under an hour."

"Thank you Thomas. Thank you for everything today."

"You're welcome," he smiled his good-byes; shaking first Harry and then Maddie's hands before he followed his crew out the door. And just as fast as they came in, they had left. Maddie and Harry were alone. Knowing the conversation they were about to have should remain private, she shut and locked the door behind them.

"Look at you..." Harry's smile was contrasted by a sad, far off look in his eyes as he leaned back against the couch. "Clearing the room with a snap of your fingers..."

"Hmmm..." She smiled, reclaiming her spot next to him.

"You want to call your cousins now? Your mother?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Not yet," she shook her head; her hand moving out so her thumb could rub his cheek. "Hey Harry...what's wrong?"

"Nothing," he shook his head, his hand reaching up to grab hold of hers, pulling it down into his lap.

"Harry..." Her voice went soft, her eyes vulnerable. "We just announced our engagement and you look so...sad." She was quick to the chase; cutting through the air of propriety that had existed in the room during the interview. "Are you sad?"

"No," he shook his head. "I'm not sad. I'm sorry. I'm not sad." He leaned down, kissing her hand in his lap.

"Then what is it?" She twisted her fingers into his hair.

"I feel..." He chuckled bitterly, sighing dramatically. "I feel like I just handed you over."

"What?" She was confused.

"Like a lamb to slaughter." His words matched the momentary dark flash across his face.

"Harry," she shook her head. "I don't..."

"I'm sorry, love," he reached out to stroke her face. "It doesn't matter. I shouldn't be...I'm sorry. Let's just..."

"No," she shook her head, a small laugh pushing through her lips. "You don't get to avoid me.
"Ha!" He laughed; the darkness fading. He thought for a moment; moving in his seat so that he sat more upright, meeting her eyes as he tried to explain. "Very few things in my life have ever really been just mine. I...by most accounts, I have...everything. But it's been at the expense of sharing it all with the world; living my life in the press. And I have been okay with that, I suppose. But you..." He sighed. "You are the one thing I want to keep...that I want to keep for just me. But to be with you, I have to turn you over to all of it; make you vulnerable, offer your head on a platter. It's ridiculous really. How, in order to have you, I have to give you up...to everyone."

"Harry..." She wanted so bad to make this look on his face disappear.

"We announced our engagement and I am...God Maddie, I'm so happy about that." His eyes were full of love. "I am. I love what that means. That you can finally be with me officially, that we can marry and start our lives together. But I also have to recognize, you have to recognize that tonight, just now...we made you a public figure and..."

"Stop," Maddie cut in; sweet but firm. "Would you just stop? I...I'm not stupid."

"What? Wait."

"And I'm not naïve."

"I didn't mean that."

"Like a lamb to the slaughter?" She raised her eyebrows with a bitter laugh. "Come on, Harry. I may not have known who you were when I first met you, when we unloaded that truck but...I know now. I have known, every day since then. I knew who you were when you took my number. I knew who you were when I kissed you, when I told you I loved you. I knew exactly who you were when I moved to London, when you proposed." She took a deep breath. "I remember the press coverage from Will and Kate's announcement, from their wedding. Hell, I remember it from your parents'. I know they are coming for me."

"Maddie..."

"If you really wanted to avoid that, you made some egregious errors along the way."

"No. I..."

"You should have let me stay in Bendal."

"Hold on..."

"You should have never laid any claims to my heart."

"Madeline."

"You definitely should not have asked me to marry you."

"Please don't say that. It sounds absurd."

"You please don't say that. You sound absurd." She poked his chest with her index finger. "They are coming for me Harry. No matter what we do now. They are coming. It's unavoidable. Unless
you want to build a time machine, go back to that day and keep right on walking past that truck full of food."

"No," he breathed, shaking his head. "I don't want to do that. I just feel...so incredibly selfish right now."

"Then be selfish," she shrugged; her eyes dancing again as the grin from before returned.

"Be selfish?" He raised his eyebrows, his smile peeking through. "That's your moment of clarity. Be selfish?"

"Yes," she nodded; moving towards him, her entire demeanor shifting from a properly betrothed future royal to a disarmingly suggestive lover. "I plan on being selfish."

"Oh?" He relaxed as she hiked up her skirt so that she could straddle his lap. His eyes flashed wide before they settled on amusement. "How is it that you're going to be selfish love?"

"Well..." She sighed deeply; forcing her body to settle closer to his. "If you hadn't noticed I just laid claim...international claim...to the world's most eligible bachelor..."

"Oh God," he groaned, his hands finding home on her thighs.

"That's right ladies," she giggled, her arms winding around his neck. "Put away your signs, your letters, your baked goods..."

"Baked goods?" He laughed but she ignored him.

"He's mine." And then with a devilish gleam in her eye, she tilted her mouth over his and claimed her man. Neither of them had another thought in that moment; barely a memory of the dinner they were due to attend. As Harry's hands moved further up her legs, disappearing up under her skirt, he groaned into her mouth and pulled back.

"Jesus Christ, Madeline..." He looked down to where his hands halted on her thigh; his eyes taking in her thigh high stockings with the clips that led up to a lacy garter belt. "You've had this on the whole time?"

"Mmmm..." She nodded, biting her lip. "That's another way I made it through my Dissertation."

"Sexy lingerie?"

"When I feel sexy and smart at the same time...I feel like nothing can beat me."

"You must feel that way all the time," he couldn't help it as the cheesy line rolled off his tongue.

"Do you feel better?" Maddie's fingers ruffled the hair at the nape of his neck.

"I do. I do. Also..." His hands moved to her waist, pulling her closer to him; his lips finding their place on her neck. "I feel...aroused."

"Harry..." She started to protest, gave birth to the thought, but her head tipped back with a moan. "We can't..."

"You told me to be selfish," his fingers worked up her back, searching for the start of her zipper.
"But your family is waiting," she lifted a weak arm, pointing to the door.

"They aren't expecting us for at least forty minutes," he assured her.

"But we're in Buckingham Palace and..."

"Shhh..." His lips pressed silence against hers; his fingers finding their mark and pulling at the zipper. "You locked the door, remember." The top of her dress slacked, making it easier for his eyes to take in the top of her sexy lingerie ensemble. His breath sucked in; making sort of a hissing noise through his lips. "How did you celebrate?"

"I'm sorry?" She was caught off guard by his question, the feel of him underneath her overtaking her senses.

"When you successfully defended your Dissertation..." His fingers pushed back the neck of her dress, drawing tantalizingly slow patterns on the tops of her chest.

"Oh..." She chuckled; a mischievous, naughty sort of laugh. "I...ahem. I had wild...crazy...sex...with guy number two." Harry's fingers came to a halt, his eyes snapping from her soft pink skin to her face. She watched as he took that information in, watched as his competitive nature took over, watched as his territorial side won out. She bit her lip in nervous anticipation; knowing exactly what she had just unleashed.

"Well..." He smiled; cocky, smarmy. "That settles that." With an arm gripping tight around her waist, his lips returned to her neck—hotter, lustier than before—and his free hand went back under her skirt, tracing past the tops of her stockings, teasing up the lace of her garter belt and finding home at her core—the warm center of her body—from where he drew her surrender.

Fuck it, she thought as she braced herself for the passion infused, fast paced, breathless jaunt she was about to take. Fuck it all. This was her day. She was being selfish.

"I cannot believe we just did that..." Maddie was shaking her head as Harry zipped her dress up, placing kisses on the back of her neck as he finished.

"Believe it," he grinned as he straightened his tie.

"Look at you," she turned to face him; her palms running over the skirt of her dress, smoothing it out. "You're positively giddy."

"What do you want me to say?" He shrugged, pulling his jacket up over his shoulders.

"You don't have to say anything," she reached out to smooth his lapels. "But it wouldn't hurt for you to wipe that cocky smirk off your face. We're about to go have dinner with your family."

"Ah, come here..." His hands pulled at her waist; drawing her close. His eyes met hers and all traces of guilt, all hints of sadness, had been washed away. "You're perfect for me, you know?"

"Because I had sex with you on a couch in Buckingham Palace?"

"Yes," he laughed; his head bobbing in a nod. "And because you knew I was feeling bad,
because you knew I was being stupid, because you straight up told me to knock it off..." He kissed her; sweet and loving. "You're perfect for me."

"Well that works out well for the both of us then," she smiled and sighed; pulling his hand from around her so that she could look at his watch. "Okay my darling...we need to go. I have no idea what time it is, but we need to go to Clarence and..."

"Don't worry, we have plenty of time," Harry nodded; an element of propriety returning as he looked himself over, checking buttons and zippers.

"Am I okay?" Maddie spun around as she checked herself. Harry watched as she moved; seeing not one thing out of place. He had been careful with her hair, mindful not to do any lasting damage to her clothes.

"Amazing," he breathed; capturing her hand in his as they moved towards the door. "You ready for tonight?"

"Are you kidding? I've had a shot of tequila, the interview is over, I'm...satisfied..." She smiled wide; eyes bright and eager to celebrate. "I'm ready for anything."

"Ha..." He chuckled, his eyes drifting for a moment to a far off place where she had no idea what was in store for her. And she really didn't. "We'll see about that."

And, as Harry unlocked and opened the door, holding it as Maddie stepped through, the day of welcoming her into this whole new world, his world, was only just beginning.
One thing Maddie had failed to remember on their way to Clarence for the small family dinner was that this was The Royal Family. A small family dinner did not mean Harry's immediate family gathered around a table serving themselves from their favorite meal—she couldn't believe she had let herself entertain that idea for even a second. What a small family dinner meant in this new world was Harry's immediate family eating an impeccable meal served on fine china with crystal glasses and shiny silver. This was no casual dinner. This was how you were welcomed into The Family.

When they stepped through the door of Clarence House, visibly relaxed and holding hands, Maddie was surprised by their reception. There they all were; waiting for them. Charles and Camilla, William and Kate—just stepping into the entryway as Maddie and Harry cleared the threshold. And when Charles greeted them with a wide grin and began applauding, the others followed suit; clapping with bright smiles and a few hoots. Maddie was certain her cheeks were flushed, showing her embarrassment, her surprise. And when Harry dropped her hand in order to join in on the applause, she shook her head at him—biting back a few choice words for leaving her to take the lauding on her own.

She would later learn that this is what they did now; this is how they celebrated what had just occurred. Nobody in the world understood like the people in this room what it was like to sit before those cameras and answer those questions. Nobody in the world understood like they did what it was going to feel like the next day and the day after that when the world began to probe into their relationship, their lives. They knew it was a big day, a big step and though much of what came with it was intrusive and overwhelming, they had decided years ago to try to make the transition as special as they possibly could.

Maddie laughed at herself as she was pulled into the room; all four of them moving at once to hug her, to congratulate her, to kiss her cheeks and compliment her on a job well done. William, hugging her close and calling her sister before turning to congratulate Harry on his unspeakable luck. Kate, squeezing her hands, asking about the ring, the proposal, wondering when they could get together with a bottle of champagne and share the details. Camilla, her warm smile making her eyes sparkle as she hugged Maddie to her, offering her support, her guidance—anything Maddie needed. And finally, Charles—Maddie wondered if it were possible for a father to look more proud of a son as he pulled the both of them to him at once, celebrating the expansion of his family once again.

The dinner was perfect—even if it was fancier than some weddings Maddie had attended. They talked about the interview; impressed with her ease in front of the camera. They talked about wedding plans—though they hadn't even begun to think about it. They asked about Botswana, about their trip. They talked about Maddie's family, how Charles had spoken to her mother that afternoon just before the interview, how Maddie had called her cousins during the down time between the interview and dinner. She could feel the love around the table; the welcoming aura in the room. Despite the silver, the china, the crystal—despite the titles and the stylings—this was her new family and they were making every effort to make her feel welcome and supported...and loved.

Following dinner, there was dessert. Following dessert, there was champagne. Charles rose to his feet and welcomed his new daughter to the family—to which they all drank happily. Following champagne, there were after dinner drinks in the study. As Maddie sat next to Harry on the small couch, his arm draped lazily behind her, she felt warm, content; at peace. The hard part of the day...
had passed. She had made it through the interview. She had spoken to her mother for a while, received calls of love and warm wishes from her cousins, her grandmother, her uncle. All of them made her smile widen, all of them drew tears to her eyes. She just assumed that was her new state of being—wide smile and teary eyes. And now Harry's family was embracing her as one of them.

What a day it had been.

"How are you doing love?" Harry's voice was low as his finger reached out to draw a line down the side of her neck. The evening was drawing to a close and Maddie knew from experience that Charles and Camilla were nearing time to retire to their room.

"Hmm..." She smiled, leaning into his palm as it opened against her skin. "I'm doing really well; incredibly well."

"Good," he smiled.

"So," William cleared his throat, drawing their attention to where he sat across from them. "We're thinking of heading back to Kensington." His eyes met Harry's for a moment before he blinked. "Do the two of you want to share a car?" Harry's smile reached his eyes as he sat up straight, turning to Maddie.

"Sure," she sighed. "It's been a long day. A hot bath and some sleep would be nice."

"Hmm." Harry shook his head, looking as though he was biting back laughter. "I suppose it would."

"I suppose it would," William agreed with a similar smile. Something was up. Maddie was almost certain something was up; especially after Kate nudged William in the ribs, giving him a quick shake of her head before they both smiled sweetly in her direction.

She was missing something.

Without thinking about it, without a conscious intention to do so, she slipped into observation mode. She watched their interaction, the silent conversation that was happening between them as they said their good-byes to Charles and Camilla. She made note of the way Harry smiled at her as if in anticipation of something, the way Kate's lips turned up at the corners. And, as the four of them slid into the car, she was almost certain something was up. Though her three companions seemed to be in on something she was not, she decided her working day was over. She was going to relax. With a deep breath and shake of her head, she let it slide for the moment; settling in the car next to Harry who immediately pulled her hand into his.

"It's a beautiful night," Kate commented casually, her eyes shifting towards the window.

"It is," Maddie agreed. When she turned her eyes towards the street, when she watched as the car pulled out into traffic, she sat up straighter; surprise registering on her face. "Hold on..."

"See..." Harry pointed to her, his eyes looking accusingly at William.

"Where are we going?" Maddie turned back towards them.

"I told you," Harry chuckled; shaking his head.

"Told you what?" Maddie looked at William and then to Harry. "Told him what?"
"You owe me twenty dollars," Harry held his hand out to his brother. "I told you she would notice in the car."

"Notice what?" Maddie was starting to get a little irritated as she looked to Kate who smiled across the car at her. "We went the wrong way. Kensington is..." She looked to Harry. "What's going on?"

"Well..." Harry sighed, snatching the money from his brother's hand before he turned to face her. "The thing is...we're not going home quite yet."

"We're not?" Maddie's forehead crinkled as Harry reached into the small bar to open a bottle of chilled champagne; something she hadn't even noticed when they stepped in.

"We're not." William confirmed, smiling at his soon-to-be sister.

"Here," Harry handed her a full glass. "You're going to want to drink this."

"Oh?" She snickered, glancing up at Kate who nodded encouragingly. "Okay. One more time. What's going on?"

"Nothing," Kate shook her head.

"Nothing," William smiled curtly.

"Not a thing," Harry sighed, his eyes meeting hers with that wild, loose look that spoke the exact opposite of his words.

"But I'm going to want to drink this?" She raised the glass.

"Oh absolutely," he assured her. Yes, they were full of shit—of this Maddie was sure. Nothing was not what was going on. But, it was incredibly clear that they were not quick to let her in on this secret and, for the moment, she was going to have to be okay with that. And then, because she could think of nothing better to do, she raised the glass to them and tipped it back; letting the chilled, bubbly goodness slide down her throat and into her stomach.

"I think you're going to have to do it," William spoke to Harry.

"Do what?" Maddie's eyes slid to her future brother-in-law.

"Oh come on," Kate rolled her eyes. "I don't think it's that big of a deal."

"What isn't that big of a deal?" Maddie turned to her. Yet they all continued to ignore her questions as the two brothers had an unspoken conversation.

"Fine," Harry sighed; agreeing with William. He turned in his seat then, facing Maddie as she watched him cautiously. "Hey."

"Hey," her voice was flat, her mouth twisted into half a smirk. "You want to let me in on something?"

"Not really," he shook his head with a grin; reaching for her hands. "You know I love you, right?"
"Is what's about to happen going to make me question that?" One eyebrow arched.

"No," he shook his head again.

"Then yes. I know."

"And you trust me?" He bit his lower lip as the car seemed to collectively hold its breath.

"Yes," she breathed.

"Okay," dropping her hands, Harry reached into the pocket inside his jacket and pulled out a long, dark, slip of fabric—just long enough to be...

"A blindfold?" Maddie's voice went high. "Have you had a blindfold in your pocket this whole time?"

"No," he laughed softly. "It's something I picked up along the way." Maddie could hear Kate giggle across the way from her, but her eyes stayed trained on him.

"You're going to put that on me, aren't you."

"I am," he nodded, pulling the fabric between his hands; stretching it out. His eyes locked with hers as he promised, "I will not let anything bad happen to you tonight. I will be right next to you the whole time..."

"You're still not going to tell me..."

"No," he cut in with a stern shake of his head. "You're going to have to trust me, love." Maddie held his eyes for a beat; blinking her eyes and nodding with a sigh.

"Fine." She smiled a warning look at him before closing her eyes. "Fine. Put the blindfold on. I trust you." And then, with a kiss to her lips, Harry tied the slip of fabric around her eyes; gentle but firm. There was no way she was seeing through this. Settling back into her seat, Maddie chuckled. What an odd situation she was in; driving through London with the future King and Queen; blindfolded. God help them if they were seen. Maddie felt Harry take her hand in both of his, bringing it to his lips.

"It won't be long, love."

And it wasn't. They made six more turns, drove just a few miles, and they were pulling to a stop. Harry's hand was firm on her arm, holding her there with him as Will and Kate stepped out of the car. Remaining in contact with her the entire time, he moved from his spot beside her to the spot Kate had just vacated opposite of her; his hands resting on her knees.

"We're here."

"I gathered," her sass was in top form at having been robbed of her eyesight. "Are we going to get out or..."

"Just one minute," he patted her knees and waited.
"Okay," William's voice called into the car. "We're ready."

"We're?" Maddie's voice grew nervous. "Who is we? Harry..."

"It's okay," he leaned in; kissing her lips, stroking her hand. "We're getting out of the car, love. I'm going to need you to come with me."

"Or..." She was starting to feel a little nervous. "Or you and I could stay in this backseat with this blindfold." Harry chuckled at that; as did a new voice outside of the car—one she was suddenly quite curious about.

"Not tonight," he kissed her hands. "You ready?" Maddie took a deep breath in, letting it out slowly before she nodded.

"I'm ready." With great care and a gentle touch, Harry helped Maddie step from the car, making sure she was steady on her feet before he dropped one of her hands—holding tight to the other.

"Look at that," the voice belonged to his eldest cousin. "Remember how long it took to get Kate out of the car?"

"Hey!" Kate called out; a rumble of laughter flowing around Maddie.

"Was that Peter?" Her senses were on high alert as she tried to adjust to this new setting.

"It is," Peter called out; even with her eyes covered, she knew he was smiling. She could hear it in his voice. "Congratulations Maddie."

"Thank you."

"You're ring is beautiful," Autumn spoke up.

"The interview was fantastic," Eugenie offered as what Maddie assumed was her hand reached out to pat her arm reassuringly.

"I..." Maddie shook her head with a light laugh. "I don't understand what's...are you all here?"

"Yes," Zara's voice was friendly. "We're all here."

"Okay then," William clapped his hands together; addressing the group as though he were about to lead them on a journey. "Let's head inside."

"Harry..." Maddie's voice was small as she turned to where she knew he was standing.

"I have you, love," his voice was close to her ear. "We're moving." And they were. The whole group began walking with purpose. They were moving up stairs, through halls, over carpet and marble; calling out to each other as they moved. And Harry was right there with her the whole time, giving her direction, guiding her.

"Where is the bag?" Eugenie asked from somewhere in front of Maddie.

"I left it in the room," Beatrice answered from somewhere behind.
"The bag?" Maddie giggled; Harry's hand tightening around hers as Kate called to the group.

"Did we remember to bring the..."

"Yes," Autumn cuts her off. "Last time didn't work out so well without it. I remembered." The group chuckled at the inside joke and Maddie pulled Harry closer to her. Though she trusted him, the lack of control she had in the moment was starting to make her nervous. It was surreal; relying on him so heavily. Before, it had been just Harry and Will and Kate. But now, clearly more of the family had joined them; though how many of them, Maddie was still unsure. She didn't know where they were at or what they were doing. And just as she was about to voice her concerns, they came to a pause. She could hear movement, somebody passing something to somebody else and then, she and Harry were moving; a door shutting behind them.

"Harry..." Her fingers pressed into his arm. "Where are we?"

"We're..." He chuckled lightly. "We're alone right now, you and I. We're in a room together. It's...private. And safe." He was soft with her, reassuring.

"What are we doing?"

"Well..." He sighed as she heard him unzip something. "I'm going to change you."

"Change me? Like...into a vampire?"

"No!" He laughed heartily, a rustling noise hitting her ears as he pulled something from the bag. "I'm going to change your clothes."

"What? Why would you need to do that?"

"It's part of..." He trailed off in thought. "It's just something that has to happen. Okay Maddie, I'm going to take your shoes off first, then your dress and then..."

"This is the least sexy striptease ever," Maddie chuckled as she felt Harry's hands on her calves, pulling her shoes off her feet; letting them fall to the floor with a clunk.

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"Honestly," William groaned; leaning against the wall outside the room his brother was in. "What is taking him so long?"

"Well," Peter shrugged with a growing smirk. "We did send him in with a blindfolded woman. And we told him to take off her clothes..." He let out a weak laugh as the cousins glanced around at each other. Beatrice was the first to move, pounding on the door with her closed fist.

"Henry! You have to come out of there you know! You can't just keep her in there all night!"

"Brilliant," William rolled his eyes with an amused chuckle. "We're bloody brilliant."

"Ah come on," Kate nudged him with her elbow. "You don't really think they're..." The giggle that ran through the group was all the more humorous when they took into account that, in all honesty, nobody was one hundred percent sure if they would or would not.

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The laughter could be heard through the door and was matched by Maddie's on the inside. "You know, they think you're in here taking advantage of me," she spoke into the darkness the blindfold provided her.

"In all fairness, the thought had crossed my mind," Harry finished with the remaining piece of her outfit and reached back into the bag. "Now what the hell am I supposed to...hold on..." He pressed a kiss to her cheek and moved to the door. Opening it just a crack, he held the item out to them. "Where exactly am I supposed to put this?" Zara's smile was smug as she answered for them.

"It's a bumper sticker Harry. Put it wherever you like."

"Fantastic," he slipped back into the room, the door shutting behind him. "Okay my darling...you are just about done..." He slid the Union Jack bumper sticker away from its backing. "I'm going to need you to turn around."

"Henry Charles..." She warned but did as he instructed. Biting his lip to keep from laughing he stretched the sticker across her ass; a long, soft rub to keep it in a place and a swift, loving tap.

"You're done." He stepped back, admiring his work, admiring his cousins' selection. "You look fabulous. They really outdid themselves this time."

"This time?" Maddie perked up at the new information. "So this is something you've done before?"

"Oh, ho..." Harry caught on right away, his focus snapped back as he pressed a finger to her lips. "Not yet love. Not yet. Give me your hand. We're moving again."

"I hate you sometimes," she grinned; holding her hand out to him. He had been so sweet with her; talking her through everything he did, making sure she was comfortable. She forgot sometimes, just how light-handed this tiger of a man could be. "But I love you all the same."

"I know," he laughed, pulling the door open. "We're ready!" He called out to them. As Maddie stepped back out of the room, she was greeted by applause, laughter, and few hoots. She felt her cheeks flush. There was no way this could be good. After snapping a few photos, they were leaving for another destination.

This time, as they walked, the group was quieter, their pace a bit slower. But it didn't take them long to reach their destination. Before Maddie really had time to determine where they were headed in relation to where they had been, they were coming to a stop. She listened intently as a door was opened; pushed almost—it must be heavy. And then, Harry was pulling her forward, slower than before. They took about ten steps into a room before they all came to a stop.

"Are we ready?" Harry glanced around the room; his fingers stroking Maddie's softly.

"Go ahead," Beatrice spoke softly to him.

"Madeline," his voice was low and warm as he spoke into her ear, his hands moving up around her to the tied blindfold. "I'm going to take this off now."

"Should I brace myself for a pie to the face or..."
"No," a few of them chuckled as Harry untied the knot, letting the fabric fall from her eyes. "Open your eyes."

Doing as he instructed, she took a deep breath and let her eyelids slip open. Her first sight was of him; his warm eyes, his charming smile. She blinked a few times, her eyes adjusting to the light as she glanced around. "Where are we..." She looked around at them; all of them. It was all of Harry's paternal cousins and their spouses. They were all there—with the exception of Beatrice's boyfriend David. She looked past them to take in the room and gasped; her hand flying to her throat. "Holy shit."

"Nice," Harry laughed.

"We're in the Throne Room."

"Yes." Harry nodded.

"At Buckingham Palace."

"Right again," he grinned wide; finding great humor in her realizations.

"What am I doing in the Throne Room at..." Her eyes looked down at her clothing and she stopped; adjusting her focus. "Okay. What in the hell am I wearing?" She heard snickers from the group and looked up at them; her mind working fast as she caught up. "This is a hazing."

"It's not a hazing," Eugenie spoke up with a comforting smile.

"It feels like a hazing," she waved her hand down at her short, cut off denim shorts with bib overalls and suspenders, the tiny tank top covered by a flannel shirt that hung open, at the bright red cowboy boots on her feet. She twisted to look at the bumper sticker on her ass. "It feels like I'm about to be jumped into the strangest street gang in the world. That's what it feels like."

"You're not going to be jumped," Eugenie shook her head.

"This is all about love, darling," Harry's hand stroked her arm, despite the glare she shot him.

"I'm not sure I'm supposed to be in here," Maddie shook her head, looking nervously at the center of the focus of the room.

"Why not?" Mike laughed.

"I'm an American for starters..."

"Not for long," Kate laughed. "Did you see the bumper sticker?"

"But..."

"Ahem," Beatrice cleared her throat, drawing attention to herself. The room quieted and focused on their redhead cousin who smiled sweetly and began. "Madeline Jay Forrester this...is your Proem."

"God, we sound more and more like The Skulls every time we do this," William chuckled under his breath to Peter.
"My Proem?" Maddie ignored him, focusing on Beatrice.

"It means introduction," Harry offered.

"I know what proem means," Maddie smiled up at him. "You're going to initiate me?"

"We're inviting you in," Eugenie spoke next. "All who have come before you..."

"Well, not all," Peter cut in. "It started with Autumn."

"And all who will come after you..." Eugenie continued.

"Really?" Zara spoke up. "I thought we would stop with the people in this room. I mean, are we going to do this with Jack and Louise? We'll be like..."

"Ahem," Eugenie's eyes narrowed at her cousins who quickly settled their laughter.

"We've all done it," Mike clarified. "Everyone of us in this room who has joined the family. And now...it's your turn."

"I..." Maddie turned her eyes up to Harry. "You warned me about the press ten thousand times, but not once did you tell me that this would happen."

"We don't talk about this," he smiled down at her with a light shrug. "I was sworn to secrecy."

"Okay..." Maddie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. In their strange, wacky way—they were trying to make her feel a part of them. And she knew Harry would never put her in a bad spot. She trusted him. She trusted them. "Okay. Fine. I can take a hazing. I'm a big girl. What do I have to do?"

"First," Zara stepped up; moving closer to the center where Maddie stood with Harry. "We have a set of rules..."

"Of course you do."

"We never, ever, EVER talk about this. Ever. Not to the outside, not to each other. We only talk about Proem during Proem. Once tonight is over, it never existed."

"Kind of like Fight Club?" Maddie joked, but the room remained serious. She glanced at Harry who squeezed her hand in his and nodded with a smirk. He knew it sounded crazy but he loved it, they all loved it. It was one of the very few things in their lives that was absolutely theirs. And now, he was sharing it with her.

"You have to do everything we ask," Peter spoke up. "You have to participate in the entire evening. You have to complete the tasks with fidelity; answer our questions with complete honesty."

"And you have one Free Pass," Beatrice offered. "You can pass on only one thing the entire night; something you don't feel comfortable doing, a question you don't want to answer. But, if you pass, whatever the request was still has to be completed...by Harry." Beatrice pointed as Harry waved his hand; watching as Maddie processed it all.

"And, at the end," Eugenie smiled. "You have one wish."
"One wish?"

"You can ask anything of us..." Autumn spoke up quietly. "And we'll do it. As a sign of faith, a show of support..."

"Family," William offered.

"We can call bullshit on any of your answers," Jack pointed out; remembering his experience. "So if you're lying...there will be consequences." Peter, William, and Harry all rumbled with laughter at something Maddie didn't quite understand.

"I'm sorry. Questions?"

"There will be... an interview portion."

"Of course," Maddie sighed. "You're going to roast me. It's an entire night devoted to embarrassing me."

"No, love," Harry pulled her hand to his lips. "It's an entire night devoted to...welcoming you to the family."

"An entire night?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows.

"An entire night." Kate nodded.

"But once it's over, that's it. You're in." Beatrice finished up. "You're one of us."

"Any questions?" William asked her.

"Yes," she nodded. "Am I supposed to be a farmer? Is that what this is?" The room erupted into laughter. "Is this really what you think a farmer looks like? You really should know better."

"You should have seen Mike's outfit," Autumn giggled.

"The pink tutu!" Beatrice pointed her finger to her cousin as the room rumbled with the memory. The laughter settled down as Harry stepped closer to her, holding out his hand.

"So what do you say love? Can you abide by those rules? Can you play with us tonight?" He saw the same fun, spirited craziness in her eyes that he knew often occupied his. His hand stretched out to shake hers. "Are you in? Or are you out?"

"Oh I am in," she grinned, slipping her hand into his with a firm shake. "I am absolutely in." Harry's face stretched with a wide smile.

"Forgive me for the secret?" His eyebrow arched.

"I'm thinking about it," her head cocked to the side teasingly.

"Kiss me," he pulled at her hand, pulling her lips to his. His arms wrapped around her, pressing her close.

"Okay, okay," Zara laughed as Harry struggled to step away from Maddie. Beatrice and Peter
stepped out of the circle, finding the items they had stowed there. As Beatrice began to hand around champagne glasses, Peter opened up a bottle of champagne.

"This," he smiled warmly at her as he filled her glass first. "Is a vintage bottle from the year you were born..."

"Really..." Maddie couldn't help her grin. Even in the ridiculous clothes she was wearing, even though she had been tricked, blindfolded and brought here against her will, she felt warm; safe. She had no idea what this night had in store for her but, from the looks on the faces around her, it was bound to be something she would never forget. Peter's voice boomed when he spoke.

"Madeline Jay Forrester. Tonight is about bringing you in; embracing you with the arms of the family—and all that comes with it. We may not be without skeletons, without tarnish. But we're family—through and through. And now we're yours. In the spirit of great fun, in the spirit of the Proem, we welcome you." Peter lifted his glass; everyone followed suit. "To you we bring love and forgiveness, support and acceptance, faithfulness and undying loyalty..." Peter's eyes met Maddie's. "And to those who try to hurt you...a swift and unified wrath."

"Wow..." Maddie felt a small lump in her throat as every one of them raised their glasses to her.

"To family," Peter smiled.

"To family," the group echoed.

"To family," Maddie's voice was soft as Harry's hand found her shoulder with a squeeze.

As they all tipped back their glasses, enjoying this very specifically selected bottle of champagne, Maddie could see the excitement in their eyes, their faces alive with all that laid ahead of them that night. They had every intention of putting her in all kinds of awkwardness before the night was over—of this she was almost certain. She finished her glass with a grin and flashed a smile around the crowd.

"So..." Her eyes twinkled with excitement. "What's first?"

"I..." William stepped forward with a knowing smirk. "I am very happy you asked. Everybody follow me."

"Come on love," Harry held his hand out to her. "The night awaits."

*Oh God,* she thought. *Here we go.* Taking Harry's hand in hers, she followed as the group fell into step with William; leaving the Throne Room behind them. She wasn't entirely sure if she should feel as excited as she did or if she should be more nervous—but either way, this was bound to be a night she would never, ever forget.

To Be Continued....
The group was relatively silent as they followed William out of The Throne Room and into the halls of Buckingham Palace. Maddie stayed tight to Harry's side; her hand tucked through his arm as they moved. They went up a set of stairs, rounded a corner and stepped into one of the many magnificently ornate rooms. Crossing to a large fireplace, the group slowed to a still; all eyes forward. Maddie looked up at Harry with quizzical eyes. His smirk was smug, his eyes dancing with all he knew lied ahead of them. William, leading this particular leg of the journey, stepped forward, twisted a candelabra counterclockwise. And then, with a light push to the wall behind it; the entire wall began to move. Maddie's eyes flashed wide and she leaned to whisper to the man who had brought her to all of this.

"Zoinks Shaggy, that was amazing..." Harry cracked a grin as his family shuffled around them.

"Come on, love," he pulled on her hand; stepping through the low archway into what was, for all intents and purposes, a hidden passageway.

"This is straight up Scooby Doo stuff. You know that right?" Maddie tugged on his arm and he laughed as they moved through the corridor. For more than a minute Maddie was certain she was dreaming, that she had slipped into some alternate reality, some time in history when hidden tunnels and escapes were the norm. When they reached the end of the small corridor, there was another push. With two small steps, they were standing in a large game room; complete with couches and TVs, a fully stocked bar, a billiards table, shuffleboard, darts. There was music playing, food out on the bar and a few doors to other rooms; a bathroom, maybe a bedroom. Maddie wasn't entirely sure. In the middle of the room as a large, comfortable chair that Maddie just knew was for her. There was a small table next to it and all of the other seats were positioned towards it; like an audience to a stage.

"Okay," William clapped his hands together, more relaxed now that they were there. "Maddie, would you join me over at the bar?"

As if I have a choice, Maddie thought as she let go of Harry and smiled wide. "Absolutely."

"We're going to start off with a drink," his hand reached out to her shoulder; pulling her in. Jack, Kate, and Mike had all rounded to the other side of the bar and in front of them were three overturned silver buckets, the kind that normally had ice and champagne in them. "Jack, Kate, and Mike were the last three to marry into the family and they have each created a cocktail for you underneath these buckets. You get to choose which one you want to start with."

"Hmmm..." Maddie tapped her chin with her finger as she scanned the three of them; noticing the slightly wicked look in Mike's eyes, the bright way Kate was smiling at her. "I'm going to go with...Kate." Her hand reached out to tap the bucket as Kate clapped her hands in excitement.

"I am so glad you chose my drink because it has some meaning behind it." Kate's eyes were bright and cheery as she pulled her silver bucket up dramatically. "Champagne. In a flask."

"A flask!" Maddie bounced on her feet, remembering the baby shower they attended where they would have easily given all they had for a flask of something. Reaching for the beautifully designed flask, she read the inscription along the bottom. "Oh Baby! Hahahaha..." Maddie's laughter was joined by Kate's as she pulled an identical flask from behind the bar.
"Our names are along the bottom so that we can tell them apart..." Kate lifted them up and Maddie grinned noticing that she had inscribed them as Kate and Maddie—not Catherine and Madeline. It warmed her soul that such details were coming out of this night; the champagne from the year she was born, the flasks with their nicknames instead of their royal ones. It made the night more than just a hazing. It made it a welcoming.

"Thank you so much," Maddie leaned across the bar to hug her. When she pulled back, Kate unscrewed the lid to her flask and lifted it to Maddie.

"Welcome to the family, sister."

"Thank you," Maddie lifted hers and, tapping the flasks together, the two women drank down some of the wonderful champagne stowed inside. "Okay..." Maddie spun around, facing the rest of the family as they situated into the chairs circling the main chair. "Hit me. What's next?"

"Right this way," Beatrice waved Maddie over to the very chair she had assumed was hers. As she moved forward, walking through the other family members, she felt Mike pat her on the back, she heard Kate wish her luck, she saw Harry offer a wink from his chair in the back where he would watch the whole thing unfold.

Maddie moved to the chair and took a seat, stuffing her flask into the pocket of her bib overalls. As Peter and William arranged some shots onto the small table next to her chair, Beatrice began her explanation. "We have a list of questions we're going to ask you—they are quite different than the ones asked of you this afternoon..."

"I would imagine," Maddie sighed into her chair as the group chuckled.

"We will take turns asking questions. Everyone has at least one and anyone can tap in and change places at really anytime. Whoever is holding the scepter..." Beatrice lifted this large, gold monstrosity from the chair across from Maddie and waved it in the air. "Whoever has this is the interviewer." Maddie nodded her understanding. "You must answer every question with absolute honesty. Anyone in this room can call bullshit on your answer. You can make an argument and the interviewer will make a judgment. If he or she decides that you were lying, you have to take a shot. If he or she decides that you were not...the one who called bullshit has to take the shot. Does that make sense?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded again, her smile stretching even further as she looked at the shots lined up; wondering exactly how the others who had been in her position had done in this particular seat.

"Oh!" Zara rose from her chair and waved a small, white handkerchief. "This is your free pass. You only have one but you can use it to avoid answering one of the questions, if you wish."

"Yes, thank you," Beatrice smiled. "If you wave the white flag, your lovely fiancé will take over for that question." Harry waved his hand at her.

"Use it well," Zara winked as she handed the piece of material over to Maddie.

"Thank you," she snatched it and stuffed it into her pocket next to the flask.

"Okay..." Beatrice took her seat as everyone else settled; drinks in hands, smiles on faces. "Any questions? Need anything?"

"Nope," Maddie shook her head, sending a look in Harry's direction. "I'm ready."
"Let's begin," Beatrice laid the scepter across her lap and looked down at the notecard in her hand. "We've all heard the story about how you and Harry met. We were wondering...even though you didn't recognize him, did you fancy him right away?"

"Ha!" Maddie couldn't help the laughter that burst through her lips, jumpstarting the laughter from the group. Her eyes met his as she thought about it. "I don't know that I did. I...he was a good looking guy. He is a good looking guy. I just...I wasn't even thinking about stuff like that at the time."

"So it wasn't love at first sight?"

"No, I guess it wasn't."

"What can you do?" Harry shrugged as Beatrice continued.

"We know that you asked him to unload a truck full of food..."

"Ordered!" Harry called out, opening a bottle of beer and taking a swallow.

"Anyway," Beatrice rolled her eyes. "How soon after that did you find out who he was?"

"Immediately. My friend Ella recognized him and came over to tell me what a fool I was."

"Once you found out he was a prince...did that help or hurt his image?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie squinted; her mind working to get back to that time in their lives. "I don't know if it did either, really. It didn't change much to be honest. I guess...I don't know. I guess that knowing that he was a Prince and that he still unloaded the truck and that he wasn't pompous at all with me...that was a good thing. So maybe it helped?"

"Okay," Beatrice nodded; taking a breath. "Who would you say made the first move?"

"He did." Without a doubt.

"Bullshit," Harry called out. The crowd chuckled as they turned to him.

"Excuse me?!" Maddie sent an accusatory glare his way. "You did."

"No, no, no." He shook his head with a gotcha look on his smug face. "You kissed me first and you know you did. You even made fun of me about it afterwards..."

"She didn't ask who kissed who first. She asked who made the first move; two different things."

"Hold on. Now...Maddie...you kissed him first?" Beatrice's focus was divided for a moment.

"I..." Maddie sighed as the others began to chuckle amusedly. "Yes. I kissed him first. But only after he dropped everything and flew to Bendal to do just that." Harry shrugged, leaning back in his chair. She was right. He would own that.

"So...when you say he made the first move..."
"He did."

"Explain," Beatrice waved her hand.

"The first time I met him, I told him what my favorite candy was and when he came back the next time..." She turned to Harry then; the others snickering at them. "Listen, Ella had been in Bendal for years and she had only seen you visit once and then you met me that day and you were back in Bendal in a month. And you were there for a whole week. And you brought me a bag of my favorite candy. And you asked for my phone number. And you..." She shook her head at the cocky look on his face and turned back to Beatrice who was grinning wide at the exchange. "He made the first move."

"She's right," Beatrice decided with a nod. "Come and get your shot Henry." Applause rang out as Harry moved through the crowd. With a wink to Maddie, he lifted a glass from the table and swallowed it back.

"How are you doing love?" He sat the empty glass down.

"Pretty good Sunshine." Laughter rumbled around as Harry made his way back to his seat. The family was clearly enjoying this portion of the night.

Bea laughed and continued with her questions. "Now this kiss. Was it good?"

"It was okay," Maddie shrugged defiantly. His family rumbled with laughter.

"Bullshit!" Harry called out with a smirk and a shake of his head. "That was an amazing kiss and you know it."

"That's fine," Maddie shrugged again, reaching for one of the shots in front of her. "I'll take a hit for that one." With a smirk she drank the shot. "The kiss was okay. I'm sticking with that answer."

"Fair enough," Beatrice turned to the group. "Next?"

"Me," Autumn rose to her feet, squeezing Peter's hand before dropping it and moving to the hot seat. There was scattered applause as she kissed Bea's cheek and took the scepter from her.

"Maddie."

"Autumn," Maddie smiled sweetly; having liked and respected Autumn since the day she met her at the polo match.

"Speaking of kissing," Autumn's grin was Cheshire like as she settled into her seat.

"Oh here we go," Maddie sighed.

"Geographically speaking, what would Harry say was the most unusual location the two of you ever kissed each other?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie's lips pressed together as she thought; her eyes watching Harry as though she could pull the answer from his mind. "Unusual? I...We've kissed in Bendal. Off the coast of Greece...Australia...I don't know. I'm going to say at thirty-thousand feet in the air. We've kissed quite a bit in the air; over the Atlantic, over the continent of Africa..." Autumn glanced to Harry who nodded with a smile; that was an acceptable answer.
"Great. Now. You do know that your wedding is going to be in London..."

"So I've been informed," Maddie kidded.

"If you were in a different situation and the two of you could control more of your wedding details, where would you be marrying?"

"That's a good question," Maddie's facial features grew soft. "We haven't really talked about it but...we went to this beautiful wedding on the coast in Australia right at midnight on New Year's Eve....I would say something like that. A destination wedding with our families and our dearest friends. That would be nice."

"It would," Autumn smiled warmly.

"Or you know...London and a thousand of our closest friends..." The laughter that ignited at Maddie's casual toss out was full of sympathy and understanding. The enjoyment in the audience continued to increase with every question that was asked and answered. Maddie took another sip from her flask.

"What would Harry say is the one thing you could do to make him the happiest man on Earth?"
Maddie's cheeks flushed slightly and the snickers among the group only made it worse.

"Easy now," she rolled her eyes. "Everybody stand down..." She met Harry's eyes and he winked at her—he knew what his actual answer would be—she had already done it. "I'm going to say...." She winked back and went for it. "Eight babies."

The room went up in a roar of laughter as Autumn's eyes grew wide. Among all of the chaos, Harry held her eyes; despite Mike's light punching of his shoulder. Maddie lifted a shot glass from the table and raised it to him in a toast. With his bottle of beer in the air, he nodded to her and they drank to that.

"Please. Please Maddie, look at me..." Autumn leaned forward, forcing Maddie's eyes to hers. "Spend the weekend with my two before he makes you sign anything." And the laughter increased. Maddie barely had time to pull herself together before Mike was sitting across from her, scepter in hand.

"Mr. Tindall." Her cheeks felt warm, flushed—probably from the long day, from the alcohol intake.

"Doctor," he grinned and Maddie relaxed. She had always felt a special affinity for Mike.

"What do you have for me?"

"What does Harry do that makes you laugh the hardest? The thing that never fails?" Maddie's grin stretched out her cheeks; flashing her teeth and making her eyes crinkle at the corners.

"He raps."

"Raps?"

"Raps. With an American accent and everything." She could see Harry biting his lip as he shook his head.
"Raps what?" His whole face twitched at this new bit of knowledge.

"Old school stuff; Run DMC, The Beastie Boys. A little Jay Z..." Maddie shrugged, her eyes lighting up as she drew up images from memory. "He does an excellent Shoop by Salt-n-Pepa."

As Harry turned bright red, his cousins were rolling with laughter; clutching their sides. Mike, trying desperately to hold onto his control—saving his chiding for later—shook his head and bit his lip.

"You know..." Mike leaned forward, waving for Maddie to do the same. "If you want...we can make him do it now." Maddie laughed, loving the way he was willing to conspire with her. But she shook her head.

"Nah..." She sighed. "I think that's something I want to keep for me."

"Okay," he nodded, continuing on. "How long have the two of you been together?"

"A little over two years."

"Two shots for you." He moved two glasses out in front of her. "One for every year. Harry!" He called without turning to look. Maddie watched as Harry stepped up to her, applause following behind him. He lifted two glasses from the table.

"We have to do a shot for every year we were together?" Maddie looked up at him, pulling one of the glasses into her fingers.

"We do," Harry nodded. "You should have seen Will and Kate do this round. We about lost them both." As the group laughed at the memory, he held his glass out to her. Together they drank down two shots each and, after leaning to kiss her, Harry returned to his seat.

"Jesus," Maddie breathed. "I'm going to be toasted after this is over."

"That's the idea," Mike winked and asked his last question. "Could you tell us about your first date?"

"Yes!" Maddie clapped her hands together excitedly. "Officially, we went out in Tetbury on the motorcycle. We had dinner and drinks and we had wine in the tree house at Highgrove." She sighed happily at the memory.

"And unofficially?" Mike raised his eyebrows.

"Unofficially..." Her mind wandered. "The celebration of the new Community Garden in Bendal. The night I was shot." And the once chuckling room went completely silent. Drinks paused in the air, smiles faded from faces. All except for Maddie—who let out the tiniest bit of a laugh. Mike caught it and nodded thoughtfully—having always felt a special connection to her.

"Well. That was some first date." His face was classic; calm and collected.

"It really was." Maddie tried for stoic but failed; leading the group in a round of laughter. Smiles returned, drinks continued on their journeys.

"Thanks doll," he leaned to kiss her cheek. "I'm all finished."
"Thanks Mike," she grinned at him as he left his spot, handing his scepter off to Jack who smiled at Maddie apologetically. He was the newest to this and Maddie could tell it made him a little uncomfortable. She tried to make him feel more at ease with a grin and nod as he sat.

"I just have a few...generic questions," he shrugged. "They are easy and...kind of lame."

"That's okay," Maddie chuckled as Eugenie tossed a pillow in her husband's direction.

"Okay...if you were stranded on a deserted island...what three things would you take with you?" Out of the corner of her eye, she swore she saw Eugenie roll her eyes, but she focused on Jack and smiled at him—what a crowd this was. Thank God she was tough...a weak skinned person would have a difficult time with this group.

"Harry." To which she received groans. "Sunblock." To which she received a couple of nods and a knowing, shared secret glance from Harry. "And...a book."

"What book?" Jack followed up.

"I don't know. Anna Karenina? I've wanted to read it and I haven't really had the time. But if I were stranded..." She waved her hand and he nodded.

"Okay..." He looked down at his notecard. "If you could have a conversation with anyone, alive or dead, who would it be and what would you talk about?" Maddie's breath sucked into her lungs as the question settled over her. Her eyes flew to Jack's and she knew; he had no idea. There was a light murmur in the crowd and Maddie was instantly able to discern who among them knew about her father and who among them did not. It wasn't the first time she had thought of her father that day, far from it. Taking a breath, she forced a smile to her lips. Harry leaned forward in his seat; his beer completely abandoned as he focused on her face.

It all happened so fast. Maddie's mind spiraled. She thought about the question for a moment; knowing that Jack meant no harm, knowing he probably wasn't anticipating the way her heart stopped in her chest. For a moment she considered going with funny and saying Bishop—knowing it would get a rise out of Harry, knowing it would bring laughter to the group. She thought about going with an obvious sort of answer and saying George Clooney. Who didn't love George Clooney? Or maybe a great thinker who could provide her with some profound bit of knowledge.

But when she stopped searching for "the right" answer, the honest answer began to flood her heart. And Harry, watching her intently, saw the moment that it did. He saw the emotion on her face. Misreading it for upset about her father, he spoke up.

"Pass on the question Maddie," his voice was loud, clear, as he moved through the chairs towards her. "I'll answer it."

"No." She shook her head. She looked down at her hands and then up at Jack whose face had drained of color as he caught on; something was wrong. Offering a small smile, Maddie took a deep breath. "I...I would have dinner with Harry's mother. I would tell her...I would tell her thank you. I would tell her that she did an amazing job with her boys. I would tell her they were happy and they had grown into wonderful young men and that I had every intention of looking after Harry. I would tell her that her grandkids will know all about her...Tell her to say hello to my father..." Her voice trailed off as the lump in her throat rose.
"Oh my God..." Jack shook his head, wishing he could go back in time and kick his own ass.

"Jack!" Eugenie's voice was harsh as she chastised him.

"I'm sorry..." Jack whispered to Maddie, ignoring everything else around him.

"Oh no," her hand went out to him as she blinked back the tears. "It's okay. It is."

"I didn't know. These are just questions I got from a deck of cards and..."

"It's fine. It's..."

"My turn," Harry cut in as he stepped up to them. As Jack moved quickly from the chair and Harry shifted in, Maddie's eyes met his and her lungs hitched at the emotion that was on his face. His hands reached out to take hers. "This isn't supposed to be like this. I'm sorry." He kissed her hands, even as she shook her head.

"Stop," she whispered. "It was just a question."

"Are you okay?" He ached inside—not for her answer but because she had come with him tonight, trusted him not to put her in harm's way and here she was answering questions about something that hit so close to home.

"I am," she nodded. "I promise."

"You want to stop?" He moved closer to her. "I can call this off. We can go home."

"No!" She shook her head. "I want to stay. I want to do this. We're having fun."

"Okay," he smiled and moved closer, pulling his lips to her ear. And then, meeting the exact goal he intended, he sang in a whisper, "Here I go, Here I go, Here I go again. Girls what's my weakness?" And Maddie burst into a fit of giggles.

"Men," she whispered in his ear and kissed his cheek. Her eyes pushed the tears out as her stomach clenched from laughter. Though the rest of the room was looking at her with mild concern, Harry had eased up; laughter in his eyes. It took her a minute to calm down, a moment to level out.

"Are you sure you're okay love?"

"Yes." She nodded; moving on.

"Okay," he smiled again; leaning up to kiss her, to rub his thumb along her cheek.

"I'm so sorry," Jack spoke up just to her left. "Is there anything at all I can do to make it up to you?"

"No," Maddie laughed. "Wait. Actually..." She leaned over and plucked up two shot glasses. Keeping one to herself and handing one to him, she raised it in the air. "To Harry's mother. And my father."

"Salute," he nodded slightly; his voice catching in his throat. And then Harry watched as the two of them downed the shots. If that was good enough for her, it was good enough for him. As he
rose from his chair, he offered Jack a pat on his back.

"Okay," Maddie cleared her throat and looked out at the crowd; slightly subdued with a few teary eyes and she clapped her hands together. "We can't end on that note. Who's next?"

"I am," Peter stood, his eyes meeting Maddie's with the warm, wonderful friendliness that came naturally to him. There were a few hoots as he made his way towards her; applause in effort to lighten the mood again. "Can I get you anything?" He asked as he sat.

"Nope," she shook her head and sank further into the chair. "Thank you though."

"Okay," he nodded and cleared his throat. "Tell us...who was the first member of Harry's family that you met?"

"Will." Maddie's grin returned.

"And how did that go?" With a chuckle her eyes found her future brother's and he met her gaze with a warm smile.

"It went well. I was...I was in the hospital in Africa right after the shooting and I woke up and there he was; the Duke of Cambridge chilling by my bedside, bringing me water and ice chips," they all laughed at the image. "I was totally shocked. I knew I didn't recognize Harry right away but I knew instantly who Will was and I was shocked to find him there."

"What did you think of him?"

"I thought...he must be a great brother." Her answer was met with a few aw's while both boys rolled their eyes. "But really though. He had no idea who I was but his brother had asked him to sit with me. And he did. He was very sweet and funny. I thought it went well." She glanced to William to check in.

"It absolutely did," he nodded with a smile.

"Who were you the most nervous to meet?"


"How did that go?"

"Incredibly well," she sighed. "Every time I've spent time with her has been wonderful. She's...amazing."

"She is," Peter agreed. "Was there a meeting that went drastically wrong?"

"Ha!" Maddie tossed her head back. "I don't think drastically wrong but I did have one particularly embarrassing moment." She heard Harry snicker as she spoke.

"Do tell..."

"It was after the shooting. The day I was given clearance to resume...normal activities..." She blushed slightly. "I walked into Harry's place warning him of a...fun-filled evening...And out pops Charles. First time I met him I'm yelling at his son about the things I want to do to him. I don't
know if he didn't hear it or he pretended that he didn't hear it. Either way, it was mortifying."

"God that's wonderful," Peter shook his head with a wide smile and tears in his eyes. "I wish I could have been there for that."

"Yes you do," Harry called out, opening another bottle of beer.

"Okay..." Zara spoke up as she nudged her brother's shoulder. "You done?"

"Yes ma'am," he smiled up at his sister. "Thank you Maddie." He leaned to kiss her cheek.

"Thank you Peter," she grinned as he walked away, her eyes turning to Zara.

"Speaking of The Family..." Zara took a sip from her drink. "In your opinion, what is the worst thing about marrying into the Royal Family?"

"Oh wow..." Maddie lifted her flask to her lips to snickers from the audience. "I don't...I don't know."

"The paparazzi?" Kate offered.

"The curtseying?" Beatrice laughed.

"The weirdly secret initiation ceremonies?" Mike called out to rounds of laughter.

"No, none of that..." Maddie shook her head with a grin. "I think the thing that's going to be the most difficult for me is leaving my job. I love it. I love going there and working with people and...it's going to be the hardest part about all of this. Leaving my job." She could see Harry sigh in his seat at the revelation though it was no news to him.

"How about the best part?" Zara raised her eyebrows.

"Harry." Maddie's response was quick and met with a chorus of laughter and coos. "No no! Wait. I take that back! The bath tub at Kensington. Jesus. That thing is fucking amazing." Her alcohol intake was definitely having an effect on her word choice.

"Lovely," Harry shook his head. "I knew it would come to this."

"We both did," Maddie shrugged playfully as his cousins watched their back and forth with laughter.

"Okay Maddie...we're going to shift gears a bit," a strange, wicked sort of smirk moved onto Zara's face. "It's time to talk about sex."

"Oh God..." Maddie groaned as the laughter rumbled louder.

"We'll start out easy...is Harry your first?"

"Wow." Maddie shook her head, her cheeks warming. "No. He's not."

"Is he the best?"

"Absolutely." She answered without a thought, without a moment's hesitation.
"No bullshit call on that one?" Mike called out to Harry.

"No way man," he shook his head. "She speaks the truth."

"Well good for you," Zara winked at Maddie. "Let's talk...frequency."

"Oh Jesus."

"If the airlines awarded ten thousand miles for every time you two made love this past week, how far around the planet would you be able to travel?"

"Okay. Every time we..." Maddie sighed and began counting; lifting her fingers as she went. "One, two, three...four..."

"Oh come on..." Kate shook her head with a roll of her eyes; not the least bit surprised.

"Five..." Maddie pulled her other hand up. "Six..."

"Bullshit!" Mike called out, tossing a pillow at Harry.

"Six." Maddie finished. "So...sixty thousand miles. How far around is the planet?" Maddie asked.

"About twenty-four thousand miles," Peter offered.

"Two times. We could travel around the Earth two times. Two and a half." And the round of applause, the way Peter and Jack rose to their feet in an ovation, only added to the redness on Maddie's face. "What can I say? It was his birthday...we got engaged..."

"We're world travelers," Harry winked in her direction. "And that's a shot for Mike!" He pointed as his cousin begrudgingly made his way to the table, lifting a glass to Maddie in respect and drinking it back.

"Okay, okay," Zara called to her cousins. "Settle down you heathens. Who's next?"

"My turn!" Eugenie rose from her chair drink in hand, to take the scepter and the seat from Zara. "Hello Madeline."

"Eugenie," Maddie situated in her spot.

"Would you say that Harry is romantic?"

"I would," her heart warmed as her eyes met his in the crowd.

"What is the most romantic thing he's ever done?"

"Well..." She let out a long, slow breath; reaching for her flask. "There are a lot of things...it could be that he keeps my favorite candy all over the place..."

"All over the place?" Eugenie's eyebrows rose.

"His place at Kensington, his pockets when we go out..."
"Her sock drawer," Kate offered as she sipped from her glass.

"He stashed it all over my apartment before he left for Afghanistan," Maddie nodded to her future sister-in-law. "That's pretty romantic. Or...or it could be that he flew my mother to England so I wouldn't be alone at Christmas."

"Henry," Eugenie turned a warm smile to her cousin.

"Or it could be the trip he planned to Finland so I could finally see the Northern Lights..." Maddie pointed. "Though it is more romantic that he cancelled the entire thing without any grumbling because I had the flu..."

"Awww..." Autumn called out as Peter reached out to pinch Harry's cheek.

"Knock it off," Harry laughed as he swatted at Peter's hand. "She wanted the most romantic, love. Not an all-inclusive list..."

"Sorry!" Maddie laughed. "Sorry. Okay. The most romantic. Has to be..." She shifted in her chair and smiled up at him. "He doesn't know that I know this but...ever since my father died my mother has been smoking a cigar every Friday. She...she does it in secret and I think it's because it reminds her of how he smelled..." Harry's eyes grew wide as she laid it all out there. Maddie smiled warmly. "I never told her that I knew. I don't want her to feel...I don't know. I want her to have that if she needs it. But...when we were in the states, Harry smoked one with her. And then again when she was here for Christmas..."

"How do you know that?" Harry leaned forward in shock.

"You smelled like my father, Harry." She laughed. "Anyway. I think that's pretty romantic; holding such a special secret for my mother, smoking with her so she's not alone..." She let out a breath of contentment. "But Harry's big on those little things. So I shouldn't be surprised."

"Wow..." Eugenie sighed, looking back at her cousin with love in her eyes. Though Maddie was right, none of them should be surprised that Harry was this way with her mother—he was this way with all of them. "Okay...let's see. Autumn asked about the kissing..." Eugenie looked down at the card in her hand and back up to Maddie with a gleam in her eye. "Where is the craziest place the two of you have...you know."

"You know?" William laughed at his cousin's vocabulary.

"Had sex," she glared at him. "Where is the craziest place the two of you have had sex?" Her eyes shifted back to Maddie whose eyes snapped to Harry's.

His face grew smug with a fleck of humor in his eyes. He watched her lips twitch as she processed the question, as she went through their list of crazy locations. It was relatively short—he was too easily recognized for them to have gone out in public like that very often.

The corner of Maddie's bottom lip pulled into her teeth as she thought it over. There was the time they almost had sex in the Greenhouse. There was the time in the aforementioned bath tub when she returned from Bendal. There was the time in her office at Saint Joseph's. There was...

"Oh God," Maddie couldn't help the gasp that pushed through her lips as it hit her. Her eyes flashed wide as she looked to him and he laughed. He already knew. He was already there. The corner of his mouth twisted up with a smirk. He knew exactly what was coming.
Maddie lifted her eyebrows in question.

Harry lifted his in a challenge.

"Harry..." She warned.

"Go ahead, love," he encouraged; his eyes dancing with anticipation.

"Okay," she took a deep breath and, looking straight at Eugenie, she confessed. "The Drawing Room. Buckingham Palace. About six hours ago."

And the entire room burst into chaos at once. There were howls of appreciation, admiration; respect. Mike was clapping his hands and laughing out loud. There were stunned faces and shocked eyes. There was William shaking his head slowly with a humored glare in his brother's direction.

"Henry Charles Albert David!" Beatrice was out of her chair swatting at the back of Harry's head as he held his hands up in defense; catching her wrist.

"Harry!" Eugenie turned around in her chair. "I have tea with Granny in there!"

"So?"

"So!?!"

"If you think I'm going to apologize..." Harry shook his head, smirk firmly in place.

"Well, well, well," Kate's voice was low as she grinned at Maddie. "Madeline Forrester."

"What?! You wanted me to be honest. I'm being honest."

"I'm never going to be able to sit in that room again," William ran his hands over his face.

"I cannot believe you Harry!" Eugenie shook her head.

"Me?" Harry laughed as he reached out and snatched the scepter from his cousin's hand. "Madeline. How hard did I have to work to convince you to have sex with me in The Drawing Room?"

"Henry Charles..." She warned.

"How hard?" He kept his smile wide.

"Not very," Maddie confessed and the laughter increased.

"God I love you," he leaned to kiss her; despite how it riled the crowd.

"Okay, okay," William groaned as he moved forward. "Let's not add this room to the list. Have a seat baby brother." He patted Harry on the back with a grin; taking the scepter and the seat.

"You're almost done," Harry kissed her again.
"See you later," her hand reached out to pat his ass as he moved away from her, ruffling what was left of William's hair as he walked past him.

"Sister," he flashed a brilliant smile to Maddie.

"Brother," she flashed one back; feeling the effects of the shots and the champagne.

"If you had to pick one thing, and one thing only, that Harry does that made you think he might be gay, what would it be?" There were snickers around the room as Harry threw a pillow in his brother's direction.

"Well it most certainly isn't the way he can't keep his hands off me," she winked at Harry. "And it can't be the way he talks me into making love to him at the craziest times in the craziest of places..."

"Okay," William moaned with a wave of his hand as his cousins laughed at the two of them.

"I would have to say..." She thought for a moment. "Okay. There are some pictures..."

"Oh!" The crowd spoke as one.

"Stop," she warned. "Let's just say...Harry has a history of getting naked with his friends."

"I was drunk!" He called out through the laughter.

"And naked!" Maddie called back before offering a shrug to Will. "That's the only thing I can think of that would ever make me think that."

"Fair enough," he smirked. "Now. If Harry were a cross-dresser..."

"Oh come on!" Harry laughed.

"Which of your outfits would you like to see him wear because it would bring out his eyes?"

"Ha!" Maddie laughed as she thought of her closet. "God I don't know. I suppose I have this blue dress..." Her face lit up as she turned to Kate. "Actually I think he would look great in your blue engagement dress."

"That could be arranged," Kate offered with a laugh.

"Thanks!" Harry called out to her.

"Maybe for your birthday," Kate winked at Maddie who clapped her hands together, trying to refocus on William.

"Finally..." He took a breath. "What is the thing that Harry does that annoys you the most?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie thought for a moment and sighed. "I know you're looking for something funny but if I'm being honest, the only thing that really annoys me is when he says things or does things that make it seem like being with him is some sort of burden...that all that comes with him somehow carries more weight than how wonderful he is. That couldn't be further from the truth and that annoys me."
"Awww..." Zara cooed, smiling at Harry who was red in the face—unable to control the smile that pulled at his lips.

"That and...he wore socks once while we were having sex," Maddie threw it out there with a laugh.

"My feet were cold!" Harry called out in his defense, but nobody cared. They were too busy laughing. The room was getting more and more rambunctious as Kate moved to take the chair from her husband, the last of the group to hold the scepter.

"Madeline," she smiled her wide bright smile at Maddie.

"Catherine," Maddie grinned.

"I'm the last one up," she explained. "Following Will's question, what is the thing that Harry does that you love the most?"

"Well," Maddie paused to take a drink from her flask, her own mood growing more fidgety as the end neared. "He has a...great...big..."

"Maddie!" Kate's eyes narrowed.

"Heart," she finished with a smirk. "He has a great big, wonderful heart. He loves with everything he has and he cares so much about the people around him. Not just friends and family either."

"Speaking of the people around him..." Kate sat up tall. "For our final question. If something were to happen to Harry and you had to choose one of his friends to take his place in your life, who would it be?" And before Maddie could take a breath, Harry called out to her from the bar where he was opening another beer.

"Don't say it!"

"What?!" She laughed along with the group. "You don't even know who I'm going to say!"

"I do!" His eyes met hers as he returned to his seat. "I absolutely know. And I am telling you..."

"Don't listen to him," Kate waved her hand dismissively. "You have to tell the truth."

"Well..." Maddie sighed.

"Don't do it!" Harry shook his head. "Don't even say..."

"Bishop," Maddie exhaled and Harry groaned. "I'm sorry sunshine. It has to be Bishop."

"Thank you very much," Kate smiled, rising from her chair to kiss and hug Maddie. "You're all done darling."

"With this part," William warned, wide smile on his face.

"Fair enough," Maddie stood, stretching out her legs as Harry made his way up to her.

"You had to say it," Harry laughed as his cousins began to rise from their spots, moving around.
"I had to tell the truth," she grinned, moving towards him. "He's funny and sweet and..."

"No more," he pressed his fingers to her lips. "How are you? You doing okay?"

"I am," she nodded and looked around. "The interview is over."

"It is," he smiled, his hands running up and down her arms.

"Well that wasn't so bad," her fingers moved to play with the buttons on his shirt.

"Don't get too comfortable," he leaned to kiss her. "We're not even close to being done for the night."

"Oh yeah?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Mmm Hmmm..." His arms moved around her in a hug. "Bishop? Really?"

"Ha!" Her head tipped back in laughter. "Who did you think I was going to say?"

"I don't know..." He shook his head slowly, his eyes looking her over. "Maybe Ella..." His lips pulled into a smug grin.

"Niiiiice," Maddie giggled. "I'm going to tell her you said that."

"Bishop. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do about that."

"Make sure nothing happens to you," she shrugged, leaning up on her toes to kiss him again.

"Brilliant," he grinned; pulling her tighter.

"Okay, okay." William spoke up, drawing their focus to him. Harry let her out of his arms but held tight to her hand. "Very well done with the interview, Madeline."

"Thank you," she tipped her head to him.

"If you need a break; bathroom, water..." He waved towards the room, towards all of the amenities. "Now’s the chance. In about ten minutes we’re going to move on to the next part of the evening."

"Which is?" She raised her eyebrows expectantly; her eyes shifting from William to Harry and back again. The grins on their faces were telling. With a breath William smiled wide.

"A Scavenger Hunt."

To Be Continued....
Maddie was absolutely certain this night would go down as the longest night in her entire life. Her entire life. And it was far from over. The interview was merely the beginning; the prologue to the evening. It was one long, laughter filled, alcohol infused, rite of passage. A rite at which Maddie seemed to excel.

"A Scavenger Hunt?" Maddie was confused. "I'm sorry. I just...it can't be a good idea for me to go out in public dressed like this."


"Again. Like this?" Maddie's heart sped up.

"Don't worry darling," Harry spoke up. "The grandparents are at Windsor. It's just us. And the staff."

"Here's the camera," Beatrice held it out to Maddie. "Inside the Palace there are paintings or sculptures or some sort of historical artifact that match up with every one of Harry's four names. Your mission is to go out with this camera and get a staff member to take your picture in front of each of the four. Once you have succeeded, you return here with the camera." Though Maddie was slightly concerned that there would be any kind of evidence of this evening, the cousins assured her that the memory stick would leave the palace in Harry's hands—her secrets and her outfit to remain only in their minds.

The Scavenger Hunt was a cinch; a piece of cake. Her easy going nature and ever present respect for the staff brought them to her aide quickly and with humor. Not only did she secure the photos of Henry, Charles, Albert, and David, she found a Mountbatten, Windsor, and Wales just for fun. She killed at this game.

When she returned with her camera and a slightly cocky attitude that turned Harry on more than he cared to admit, they moved onto their own version of The Newlywed Game that she and Harry easily dominated. She showed her abilities to read him like a book and he showed off his artistic side by drawing an amusing set of stick figures in what he guessed—correctly—was her favorite sexual position.

"You're such an artist sunshine."

"Thanks love." The wink he sent in her direction made William groan and insist they move on. There was more fun to be had.

There was a curtseying competition where Maddie judged while the men tried their hardest to impress her. And when Mike won, surprising her with his flexibility and balance, he became her partner in the most ridiculous drinking game she had ever participated in. The rules were outlandish, the competitive spirit at an all-time high. And Maddie would swear for the rest of her life that William was half serious when he threatened to excommunicate Harry for his alleged cheating.

They even made it up to the roof to smoke cigars and look out at the city. It was moments like that when Maddie had to pinch herself; reminding her brain that this was real. This was her life, her new family, her future husband—who, in a moment of chivalry, offered his cold fiancé his pants.
"I'm freezing!" She shivered. "You couldn't have dressed me in more weather appropriate gear?"

"Sorry!" Beatrice giggled.

"You know they make these in pants," Maddie waved her hand at the tiny shorts.

"We thought Harry would like the shorts better," Eugenie sent a wink in her cousin's direction.

"So this is your fault," Maddie turned around to shoot him a glare.

"Here..." He held his drink out to her as his hands moved to the waist of his pants.

"Whoa....hold on..." Maddie laughed.

"Hey!" Zara called out, pointing in their direction. "Why is Harry taking off his pants?"

"Why does Harry ever take off his pants?" Mike chuckled into his glass as the rest of the group rolled into laughter.

"Laugh it up," Harry waved his hand. "But my bride is cold and..."

"Your bride?" Maddie felt her eyes grow teary. "Did you just call me your bride?"

"Yes?" He asked, unsure of her reaction.

"You are just too..." She sighed and moved then, wrapping her arms around his neck, still holding a drink in each hand. "Kiss me." She smiled up at him.

"Well okay," he abandoned his mission to turn over his pants and circled her waist; pulling her close. Then to groans and howls, he kissed her.

On the roof of Buckingham Palace.

It was moments like that when Maddie had to pinch herself.

The need for Harry's pants was quickly eliminated as the group finished off their cigars and returned indoors. The party wasn't quite over yet. Without question, the cousins were impressed with Maddie's drive, her willingness to step up, and the way in which she threw herself completely into the craziness. Not blinking or flinching or backing down.

Though she came close—only once. The one time in the entire night when she considered throwing in the towel and passing was when they told her it was time to prank call the Prime Minister. She had even tucked her fingers into her pocket, ready to toss.

But something made her stop and she didn't. They assured her the line was secure. They assured her he would have no way of knowing. They assured her that he was actually a pretty good sport. And then, after one mocking dare from Peter, Maddie snatched the phone from William's hand and dialed. After successfully waking David Cameron from sleep in order to fulfill her final obligation, she was rewarded with yet another bottle of champagne.

Just what she needed.
It was a wild, crazy night, full of hilarious antics and stories she would never have believed outside of this moment. It seemed that she wasn't the only one drawn to the truth at this Proem. So many things were brought to light. Eugenie had struggled her whole life with her weight, with the pressures to look a certain way. William had been envious of all of their freedoms, their ability to choose their life, to step outside of the destiny with which he was gifted. Jack had been terribly intimidated by the family, by the system. Peter loved not having a title, loved that his wife and his girls were without that particular set of baggage. Beatrice, who loved The Queen and loved the system, was actually quite ready for the downsizing that she knew came with Charles' eminent reign. She was ready to embrace 'normal.' It was important, significant, that this happened—that they opened up to her too. Because at the turning point of the night, at the moment when the silly began to give way to the solemn, Maddie felt closer to them all.

There was something about it all, something dark and the tiniest bit sinister—This moment with the younger generation of British Royalty. Yes, they were drunk and giggly—even William. Yes, they had been messing with her for hours, initiating her into this small, tight group. And Maddie knew it was all in good fun, it was all set in place to make her feel the slightest bit exposed, the slightest bit uncomfortable—all while in the safety of her new family. The only people who knew what it was like to feel the pressures she was about to walk into where she was more than slightly exposed, more than slightly uncomfortable. It was meant to make those moments where she was curtseying to them or they to her a little bit easier and not quite as serious. It was meant to be lighthearted and silly.

And it was.

Yet. At the core of it all was this strict adherence to tradition, these intricately woven details, this underlying cynicism, this jaded feeling at being forced into this secret moment. All of these tiny, seemingly insignificant, pieces came together inside of this raucous evening making it intense and heavy and just the tiniest bit dark.

It didn't help that there was this moment, out of the blue, when William gave a nod of his head and they all began to rise to their feet, filing out of the room—leaving her and Harry alone. It didn't help that, without a word, Harry had taken her by the hand and, with a candlestick in his other, led her through the hidden tunnel in relative darkness. When they emerged into the opulent room with the tricked out fireplace, his cousins were all waiting holding candles of their own. The loud, party nature had disappeared; replaced by a warm solemnity that told Maddie that something important was about to happen.

Without so much as a word, a peep, the group began moving. They walked slowly through the halls, the stairs, back towards the room it had all begun in. As they passed back into The Throne Room, Maddie felt chills. Yes, this was a game; all for fun. But at the end of the day, she was standing in The Throne Room of Buckingham Palace with the future King of England approaching her with a seriousness in his eyes that made her swallow back a lump in her throat and tighten her hold on Harry.

This was way too much for her champagne and scotch infused mind to handle. In the soft flicker of the candles, William smiled at her and Maddie held her breath. William broke the moment and turned to Beatrice with a sigh.

"Tell me again why it always has to be me."

"Because you're going to actually be the King someday," she huffed with a roll of her eyes. The light murmur of laughter that passed around them told Maddie this wasn't the first time they had had this particular conversation. "Now. Do it." Beatrice gave her cousin a firm, loving shove and
his attention turned back to Maddie.

"Madeline Jay Forrester..." The way he said her name drew breath from her lungs; so regal and stately. He was born to be King. His hand opened up before her, silently requesting hers. She glanced back to Harry who smiled, pressed a kiss to the one he held onto and let her go. With a deep breath, Maddie took her future brother's hand and forced her heart to calm down. When he moved, she moved with him. Her eyes grew more and more wide the closer they stepped to the end of the room, the reason for the room in the first place. She glanced nervously in his direction and saw it. A flicker in his eye, the tiniest twitch of his lips—his way of offering her ease. A smile drew to her lips as she regained her perspective.

This was still Harry's brother—the man who had brought her ice chips in the hospital in South Africa, the man who had delivered ice cream to her and his wife when they were too drunk to go out. They came to a stop about three feet before Maddie's line in the sand—the point at which she would throw her white flag and flat out refuse to cross. And he turned her back to the group. Lined up before her, in order of birth, were Harry's cousins—the originals, not the spouses.

In one hand they held their candle, in the other a small card with specifically selected quotes and on their faces, bright, wide, slightly sleepy smiles.

"Peter," William nodded to his eldest cousin. Peter stepped up to Maddie, standing in front of her as William passed her hand to him. He offered his warmest, most comforting smile before reading from his card.

"Be not afraid of greatness, some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Maddie instantly recognized the words of Shakespeare. Peter leaned in to kiss her cheeks and when he pulled back, he met her eyes, whispered, "welcome to the family." And then, in a show of what was to come, he let his head fall into a bow, kissed the top of her hand before passing it back to William and taking his place in line.

"Zara," William nodded to the next in line. With a bright smile, she moved to the spot Peter had just vacated, taking Maddie's hand from her cousin and reading from the words of Jim Butcher,

"I don't care about whose DNA has recombined with whose. When everything goes to hell, the people who stand by you without flinching—they are your family," Maddie felt tears rise to her eyes as Zara leaned in to kiss her cheeks. "Welcome to the family," she grinned as she slipped into the slightest of curtseys. Maddie felt a lump in her throat, her eyes shifting to Harry who seemed to be expecting that—seemed to be expecting that moment of panic when it hit her. This was what was to come; his cousins bowing to her, curtseying to her in his presence. His gaze remained steady, assuring, even as her eyes shifted back to Beatrice who now stood in front of her, holding her hand between both of hers.

"That's what people do who love you," her voice was soft, sweet, as she spoke the words of Deb Caletti. "They put their arms around you and love you when you're not so lovable." Her soft hands squeezed Maddie's as she leaned to kiss her. Her eyes stayed locked with hers as she dipped into a curtsey. Maddie took a deep, shaky breath. "Welcome to the family."

"Eugenie," William's voice was low, calling the last of his cousins to the front. Maddie blinked back tears as Eugenie took her hands and quoted Mitch Albom.

"This is part of what family is about, not just love. It's knowing that your family will be there watching out for you. Nothing else will give you that. Not money. Not fame. Not work." A kiss to each cheek. "Welcome to the family." A slight curtsey. Maddie thought she might cry.
And then Harry was at her side, taking her hand into his, pressing it to his lips. Her eyes met his and he smiled. It was his turn. Without reading from a card, he recited Charles Dickens, "You could draw me to fire. You could draw me to water, you could draw me to the gallows, you could draw me to any death, you could draw me to anything I have most avoided, you could draw me to any exposure and disgrace. But if you would return a favorable answer to my offer of myself in marriage, you could draw me to any good—every good—with equal force." Maddie wasn't sure if it was his intention to make her cry, to make her feel like he was proposing to her all over again. But regardless of his intent, her heart was swelling in her chest.

"Harry..." He kissed her hands. He kissed her cheeks. He took her lips with his. And then, with her hands held tightly in his, he turned them both to his brother.

William took three steps closer to that invisible line in the sand and with Harry leading her, Maddie followed. William took a step around a draped Prie Dieu. Next to Harry, Maddie knelt before him, this moment burning into her brain. There it would sit, alongside rituals of her past and those to come down the line. She wondered, for the briefest of moments, where this particular ritual would line up. Was it more or less important than the others? It felt momentous. It felt heavy. Her eyes shifted up to William who offered a warm, brotherly smile as he lifted a tiara—of the plastic and rhinestone variety—up in the air, floating over her head. The heaviness of the moment lifted as Maddie snickered at the juxtaposition of the tiara against the regalness of the room.

"Madeline Jay Forrester," William's voice boomed, squelching her laughter. "On this night, in this room, with these witnesses, I humbly congratulate you on the completion of your Proem activities. As you have shown your willingness to join in with us, we hope you have seen our willingness, our joy, to embrace you. It is in that spirit that we welcome you to the family." He smiled wide as he lowered the tiara to her head and spoke loudly and with great pride as he repeated the motto of England and the Sovereign, "Dieu et mon Droit. God and my right."

As Harry's hand held her steady, Maddie rose to her feet, the sweetest mixture of laughter and tears pouring over her. William took both of her hands from his brother, kissing the tops of them before he pulled her into a hug. "Welcome to the family Maddie." And, with two kisses to her cheeks, he stepped back—leading the group in applause. Maddie's face flushed as Harry pulled her into his arms; crushing her to him in a hug.

"I love you. You're amazing..." He whispered into her ear; kissing her cheeks as he did. He pulled back to look at her as the spouses came forward to hug and kiss her; Autumn, Mike, Jack, and Kate. All with wide smiles. All with bright eyes.

"How are you doing love?" Harry asked her as she was passed back to him.

"I'm drunk," she giggled, wiping at her eyes. "I am drunk and exhausted and... I will say this. You all sure know how to throw a party."

"We do," Harry laughed, the air of frivolity coming back to the room, back to the two of them. "And you know...it's not even over yet."

"No?" She raised her eyebrows. "Because the tiara on my head, and that little speech from your brother, seemed to indicate otherwise."

"Ha..." Harry laughed. "The work is over for you. But you know...a party isn't over until everyone ends up fully clothed and in the..."
"Pool!" Maddie interrupted clapping her hands together with excitement. "Oh God please tell me we're going to the pool!" She had been dying to see that pool since the very first tour she had taken of Buckingham Palace—way at the beginning, with Ella, when she first moved to London.

"You ready?" His grin stretched wide as he nodded. With wide eyes and a quick nod, Maddie took his hand.

And then they were running—all of them. With Harry pulling her along, leading the way, they ran through the halls, down the stairs, around the corners. There was laughter and yelling and a high spirit that was contagious.

And when they pushed into the room, Maddie had only seconds to take it in—the splendor, the opulence, the music, the drinks, the food that had been set up—only seconds. Because without a thought to any other option, she ran with Harry full force; jumping right into the pool. As her head bobbed above water, her tiara slightly askew, she felt Harry pull her to his side, and his entire family followed them in.

There was much fun left to be had. There were races among the cousins; across the pool and back. There was a spread of Maddie's favorite foods, Bernard's pizza, pistachio Macaroons. There were bottles of water and bottles of champagne—all from the year Harry was born. Maddie smiled as she slipped a cork into her pocket, needing some sort of memento, some sort of remembrance from this amazing evening and all of the detailed work that had gone into it.

Before the end of the night William had turned to Maddie and asked for her request, the request which all of them were lined up and ready to fulfill. She ran it over in her mind a few times, debating her move. She thought about asking them all to confess their most embarrassing moment, she thought about asking them all to answer the questions they had asked of her, she thought about having them all list their favorite things about Harry—just to make him blush.

But in the end, entertainment won out. As she sat on the stairs at one end of the pool drinking from her champagne glass, she watched as this entire generation of the British Royal Family participated in the most hilarious synchronized swimming routine she had ever seen. While the core group had some semblance of form—remembering their long ago routine—the spouses, the new additions to the family, struggled humorously to keep up. It was sloppy and funny and wonderful. Maddie clapped when they were finished and swam into the arms of her future husband. And when his attempts at kisses were met with a yawn, he called it.

It was time to go. Though the others were enjoying themselves, it was almost five in the morning and Harry's request was met with little resistance. They pulled themselves from the pool, wrapped up in big fluffy robes and called it a night. There was lots of love, a round of hugs, and then—with the memory stick from the camera secure in Harry's pocket—the newly engaged couple climbed into a car and made their way back to Kensington Palace to sleep off the night.

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They slept through the morning, straight into the afternoon and, had Maddie not set an alarm clock, had she not needed to shower and dress and head to the hospital for an appointment with Dr. Colvin, they would have slept straight into the evening. But the alarm rang out and Harry begrudgingly woke up enough to turn it off—a groan moving through his entire body.

"Don't worry darling," Maddie laughed lightly as she nudged him with her foot. "You can stay in bed but I have a meeting...to quit my job." And even in his hung-over, exhausted state, he caught the way her voice changed at the end.
"I'm sorry," he sighed, turning to look at her, his hand reaching out to stroke her hair back from her face.

"Don't be," she shook her head, offering a grin as she leaned to kiss him.

"Listen," his hand traced down her side, resting on her hip; tugging her closer to him. "About last night..." He wanted to check in; make sure she was okay—that she wasn't mad or upset or confused or any of the variety of things one might feel after being blindfolded, kidnapped, and coerced into a night of insanity. He had known from the others that sometimes the day after was not as easy as the night had been. He wanted to eliminate any bad feelings that might be left over.

"Shh..." Maddie's fingers pressed to his lips, her eyes narrowing playfully. "We don't talk about..." She leaned to kiss him again. "I don't know what you're talking about. I was here, all night, in your bed." 

"I..." He didn't know what to say. He had no words. She was in. She was playing the game. You don't talk about Proem. "You're right." He kissed her back. "What was I thinking?"

"I don't know," she shook her head, her arms snaking around his neck.

"Me neither," he pressed her tighter to him; his head dipping to kiss her neck. "What time is your meeting?"

"Four..." She breathed, her body arching into his. "Why?"

"I'm just wondering if we have enough time..." His mouth moved to her collar bone, her shoulder.

"Enough time for what?"

"For me to remind you..." His lips moved back towards her neck. "Of all the benefits..." They traced along her jaw. "That come with leaving your job for me..." His lips seized hers.

"Oh!" She cried out with a laugh as he moved; positioning his body over hers with a wicked grin on his face. "I think maybe there might be enough time for that."

"Excellent."

And all thoughts, from the night before, from what lie ahead, were quickly pushed from Maddie's mind as her body, her desires took over. It was moments like this that she needed to pinch herself.

This was her life now—all of the good and the bad that came with it.
Harry had been right.

He had warned her on her way out the door; despite how normal she felt, how it seemed as though very little had changed—everything had. When he finally released hold of her so that she could make it her meeting with Dr. Colvin—he had cautioned her of the eminent circus that awaited her outside of the gates of the palace. She was no longer the blonde girlfriend of a senior royal. She was the next royal bride, the soon-to-be wife of the third in line to the throne, the Peoples’ Prince. He tried to drive it home—how when they walked into that room full of reporters, when they sat down for that interview, she became public, they gave the world permission to lay claims to her. She was their future Duchess, after all. They had dropped a bomb on the world and Harry wanted to be crystal clear; people were going to be clamoring for photos of her. They wanted to see her, see the ring. They wanted to know what she was about, what she was like—they were going to be all over her. At least for a while.

He had been absolutely right.

They were waiting for her. She said a silent thank you to Harry for insisting she keep some clothes at his place—knowing that photos of her returning to her place in the clothes she wore the night before would have been all over. Having showered and dressed at Kensington, she went directly to her meeting at the hospital, her Security Officer Williams following along.

And the press attention began. Though they were well aware that they could not come on hospital property—there were throngs of photographers waiting for her at the entryway waiting to catch a glimpse, to see if she was returning to work or not.

Though there was a bustle of chaos outside, inside things could not have gone more smoothly. The meeting with Dr. Colvin could not have gone better. When she told him she was leaving, he was not at all surprised. He had seen the interview the night before and he had been around long enough to know how things worked, to know the complexity of her situation. He congratulated her, offered his support and helped her work out a plan to leave as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Her regular shift duties would end the next day. She could come in, say good-bye to any of the current in-patients she had worked with before and her Crisis Team coverage would cease immediately. Though he valued her services immensely, he knew from experience that the level of fame that was about to hit her was not the best fit for the hospital, or vice versa. She would be allowed to terminate with her current caseload based on her own professional judgment, doing what was best for her clients; transitioning them to another Psychologist.

And then she would be done. He told her they normally have a going away party for outgoing staff but—given her unique circumstances—he offered her an out. An out she did not want to take. She wanted to say good-bye, she wanted that moment, that closure. It was important for her, it was important for them. She didn't want an out. And then Dr. Colvin hugged her, told her he was proud of the work she had done and that he knew she would continue to serve the children and the families she had served at the hospital and before that in Bendal. Finally, with a warm smile, he offered an open ended invitation to seek his counsel or assistance on anything she might need in the future.

It could not have gone better. That's why—once inside the privacy of her own office—she broke down and cried. Even with all she had waiting for her, even with the life she was looking forward to with Harry—it was incredibly difficult to leave.
The very same process, the very same emotions followed her as she met with Gerald at St. Joseph's. Initially she had been thankful to have been able to have both meetings on the same day, thinking that getting them out of the way all at once would be easier. But, after seeing Gerald and spending more than a few minutes correcting her tear-stained makeup, she thought maybe she should have spaced them out. Making sure she looked presentable—correctly guessing that the press would be waiting for her—she stepped out of the Veteran's Services Offices and began her trip home.

The press, the paparazzi had multiplied overnight. It was insane. As they drove past newsstands, past store windows, her face was everywhere. It was the strangest feeling in the world, to see her own eyes staring back at her, to see her ring plastered everywhere. And those pictures would only be replaced with the official engagement photos that were soon to come. The headlines were laughable; comparisons to Cinderella already rampant. She felt the oddest sense of relief when laughter came to her. At least she wasn't crying. When the car pulled to a stop in front of her place, she and Williams were met with a barrage of cameras; a slew of people waiting to snap her picture. With a bright smile she passed by all of them into the safety of her own home. And once inside, once alone, she let out a breath, sank to the couch and let it settle; let it process.

Harry had been right. This was a whole new level of crazy.

As the evening gave way to the night, Maddie adjusted to the new reality, her breath coming easier. And she found that she was exceptionally thankful for her family—old and new. After a light dinner, she spent an hour on the phone with her mother, telling her about the difficult conversations she had just had—explaining how it would hurt to leave. Her mother knew; she knew her well. She also knew that Maddie had survived bigger life moments than this; leaving Bendal only slightly higher on the list. And this time Maddie did not need to be reminded of the flipside—of how wonderful the leaving would be.

She knew.

She managed to speak to every one of her cousins; fielding questions, taking jokes. They were excited for her and incredibly interested in the process of it all; what exactly it meant to marry a member of the royal family. And Jenna was beside herself knowing that soon she would be traveling across the ocean to attend the "wedding of the century". Maddie couldn't help but roll her eyes—though she was excited too. And after laughing as her grandmother informed her of the meticulous process she was going to have to go through in order to get a passport, Maddie said good-bye and finished her conversations with the US. Changing into her pajamas, she cuddled up on the couch with a large, fluffy blanket and a hot cup of tea and allowed her mind to wander to the frivolous night with her Great Britain family—letting the smile take hold of her face. Even if she couldn't talk about it, she could think about it—and laugh.

Finally, at the end of what felt like a very long day, when Harry called asking to come over to see her, she put up no disagreement. He passed by the photographers, smiled a hello to Williams, and kissed her; good and deep.

It was only the beginning. There were many moments to come; days, weeks, months as it all settled. But that night, with all that lied ahead, they went to sleep early.

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Leaving her old life took a toll on Maddie—oddly enough. This was not the first time her world had up-ended. She had left "old lives" before. She had gone away to college, all the way to Columbia in New York for her PhD. She had left the states and her family to go to Bendal. And
she had left Bendal for London. Though all of those transitions were difficult, this one had a finality to it, a surrender to another person, that the others had not had. No matter the lengthy list of reasons why Harry was worth all that she was leaving behind, the actual leaving still took a toll. It all unfolded in a wonderful, bittersweet, succession of events over the course of about a month that left her in a moment of silent reflection waiting for Harry.

Her last day at Saint Joseph's came first. It was seven days after her initial meeting; a Tuesday. And it was wonderful. The people she worked with, both military and civilian contractors, were excited for her. Though many of them had known that she was dating Harry, there were a few who were late to the party—and all of them shared in her joy. Everyone knew of Harry and respected him for his service and they were overwhelmingly excited not just for her, but for him. And, as she said good-bye to Gerald at the end of the day, they both knew, without a doubt, that they would be working on the same team again someday in the future.

Her last day at the Children's Hospital was ten days after her initial meeting; a Friday. The going away party Dr. Colvin had promised was perfect. There were treats, there were kind words from her colleagues and there was a large good-bye poster made by all of the children she worked with that brought her to tears. It was heartfelt, it was emotional and at the end of the day, when she stepped into Harry's place, she held the poster out to him and insisted he find a place to hang it—which he happily did.

Ten days. She had quit her job. She had ceased her volunteer work. Ten days and her career had come to a halt. It was all over—four days earlier than the estimation she had given to Charles on their first day home from Botswana. She had always been an over-achiever.

It was less than a week later when Harry approached her with the next step in the pilgrimage from her old life to her new. He wanted her to move in with him. Her initial reaction was shock—surely the British Royal Family, steeped in tradition as it was, would not condone them living together before they were married. But, when he tampered his laughter and explained to her that not only had it been done before—Charles and Camilla, Zara and Mike, even Will and Kate—it would have other more realistic benefits as well. At the very top of the list; it was easier to protect her at Kensington Palace. Though her safety had yet to be a serious issue, the paparazzi and the fans were getting consistently closer to her and her home was not nearly as secure as Kensington. So Scotland Yard would certainly be in favor of her living behind Palace gates.

Even still, Maddie debated the issue internally. Following four days of introspection, she consulted with those whose opinions mattered the most.

Her mother—
"It does make sense Madeline."

Ella—
"Are you kidding?! Move into the Palace! Dear God. I can't even with you sometimes."

Khenda—
"You know Collins and I have been living in twelve kinds of sin for years, right?"

And finally, with the clinching argument, Harry—
"You would have full time, unmitigated access to my tub..."
She was in. It was time to move into the Palace.

She turned in her notice at her place—or more accurately, the family attorneys worked out the details of ending her lease.

She packed her things—or more accurately the two boxes of intimate items she couldn't bear to allow the professional movers to handle.

And she moved into Harry's home.

Almost all of Maddie's household items had been purchased when she moved to London from Bendal and very little of them held any sort of sentimental value. As Harry already had an established, working home, Maddie had decided to donate the majority of her things to charity—finding that they simply did not need duplicates of so much of what she had. She said good-bye to her couch, her bed, her dining set. She let go of the small things; the silverware, the pots and pans. There were a few things she kept; the funky plates she had purchased at an Estate Sell with Ella one summer afternoon, the jars of marbles that helped her through Harry's deployment, her bright pink Kitchen Aid mixer her mother had bought her when she graduated from college. Though she knew that the Palace staff certainly had better mixers, she couldn't let it go. Those small items, along with her books and her clothes and the multitude of personal mementos she had gathered fit into eleven nice, neat boxes.

Eleven nice, neat boxes that now sat at her feet in Harry's entryway. It was moving day. Due to a mishap in scheduling, Harry had been kept late at a function and had missed all of the excitement. After the movers had settled the last box, Maddie thanked them very sweetly and turned to face her new life on her own.

With a heavy sigh, she went to the fridge, her new fridge, and retrieved a chilled bottle of champagne, her chilled bottle of champagne. She moved to take a seat on the stairs, her stairs, and stared down at all eleven boxes—wondering exactly where they were going to fit, where she was going to fit, into this new place.

And that's exactly where Harry found her when he arrived twenty minutes later—sitting on the stairs, drinking from a bottle of champagne, a look of contemplation on her face.

"Wow..." Harry breathed as he stepped inside; the door closing behind him.

"My thoughts exactly," Maddie chuckled; looking up to him as he beamed—unwilling and unable to hide his excitement at having her there. "Welcome home."

"I feel like I should say that to you," he dropped his briefcase to the ground, his suit coat following behind and his hands were already working on the knot of his tie as he moved towards the stairs. "Welcome home..." He bent to kiss her.

"Thank you," her smile was genuine as he stood in front of her, their eyes almost level.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be here for the move."

"It's okay," Maddie shrugged, taking a sip from the bottle before offering it to him. "It was only eleven boxes. And I didn't have to lift a finger." She chuckled again at the memory of the professionals sent to pack and move her things.
"Sure," Harry nodded, taking the bottle from her and drinking.

"Well, except for those two..." Maddie pointed to the two smaller boxes closer to the bottom of the stairs.

"What's in those two?"

"Let's just say that if somebody were to open them...they would think we have an incredibly active and kinky sex life."

"Ah!" Harry's grin widened. "We should take extra care of those boxes."

"We should," Maddie laughed. Harry watched her for a moment, watched as her eyes glanced around the room.

"Hey..." He reached out; his fingers cupping her cheek softly. "Are you okay?" Maddie sighed; heavy and deep.

"Yes. I am." She nodded; leaning into his palm. "I just...today I shut the door on everything I built in London that was just for me. My apartment was the last to go. Now it's just me...and these eleven boxes." She snatched the bottle back and took a drink.

"Yeah," he nodded; having expected a bit of sadness from her. He watched her for a beat, studying her expression. "This is you processing, no?"

"It is," she smiled—impressed at how far they had come in their relationship.

"Okay," he nodded again, his hands reaching to undo the buttons at his wrists, rolling his sleeves up as he relaxed. "Is there anything I can do or..."

"You're doing it," she leaned to her right, her head resting against the large, wooden rails of the staircase.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?"

"No," she shook her head; reaching out to grab his hand. "I want you to stay here."

"Okay." He squeezed her hand and nodded back to the stack of boxes in the entryway behind him. "Why did they leave them here? You could have told them where to put them. They could at least taken them up the stairs."

"I didn't know where to put them," she shrugged. "This is...wow. This is your place, you know. I didn't know where to put them, where to unpack. I mean can I really just put my books on the shelf in your office? Hang my picture of my family in the Team Maddie shirts next to the picture of you and The Spice Girls? Can I just plop my mixer down on the counter in the kitchen? What if it angers Bernard?"

"What if your mixer angers Bernard?" Harry couldn't help the laugh that came with that sentence. "Okay. Seriously. What box is the mixer in?" He dropped her hand and turned around.

"I don't know..." She watched as he opened one box, then another, then another. "Harry? What are you doing?" She laughed as he moved to yet another.
"I'm looking for...Aha!" His fist shot in the air with victory. "I found it." With a wide grin, Harry pulled her bright pink mixer from a box and walked out of the foyer.

"Harry?" Maddie followed his quick clip through his place, their place; towards the kitchen.

"Here." With a bit of a dramatic flourish, he put the bright pink mixer right in the middle of the counter, clapping his hands together with a satisfied smile. "Perfect."

"But..."

"But what?" He laughed. "Madeline. This is your home. Your home. Bernard works for you. God...Maddie..." He pulled her to him. "You can unpack. You can move things around. You...tell me where you want things and I'll put them there."

"Oh really?" Maddie laughed, feeling even more at ease. "You're going to unpack my boxes?"

"Or maybe you tell me where you want things and I'll have somebody else put them there..." He kissed her as her laughter increased.

"That's more like it," she hugged him tight; sighing into his arms.

"There's the smile I remember." He smiled down at her. "How's the processing going?"

"I think maybe I'm just about done processing," she took a deep breath, her eyes glancing to the pink mixer sitting bright and standing out in his elegant, professional looking kitchen.

"Yeah?" He raised his eyebrows. "You can take more time if you..."

"No," she shook her head. "This is...this is the happiest time of my life, Harry. The happiest. I just needed a minute to let it all fade. I'm fine now. Great, in fact. Just...one question."

"What's that?" His fingers toyed with strands of her hair, smiling as he pushed them back from her face.

"What do I...I mean. I know I need to unpack and at some point we need to talk about getting married..." Her heart swelled at the way his face lit up when she said it. Holding him closer she sighed. "What do I do then? Aside from hiring somebody to chase me while I run around Hyde Park?"

"Hmm..." He smiled, kissing her before he moved on. "How about this. You take tomorrow, the next day...however long you like to unpack. Move things around Maddie. Tell the staff to move things around..."

"Tell?" She lifted an eyebrow.

"Ask," he offered a shrug. "You can do whatever you like—whatever you like. There's nothing in this place that I'm terribly tied to where it rests. Do what you like. And then...when you're ready, when you're settled, let me know. I'll call Thomas and he'll take care of it. You want to be busy? We'll make you busy. Just tell me when. We'll hire a staff, we'll start to plan. I just want you to be settled first because Thomas takes his job incredibly seriously and if you tell him to make you busy..."

"He'll make me busy?" She guessed with a light laugh.
"Exactly."

"Okay," Maddie nodded and stepped out of his arms, taking his hands into hers as she moved.

"Okay," Harry smiled, letting her pull him with her as she walked backwards out of the kitchen. "Where are we headed now?"

"Well, I seem to remember you promising unmitigated access to a particular tub..." Harry's head tossed back in laughter.

"Of course, of course."

"Care to join me?" An eyebrow arched.

"Can we bring these two boxes with us?" He nodded towards the two small ones that she packed herself.

"We can," Maddie grinned, biting at her lower lip. "As a matter of fact..." She took a deep breath and took a shot. "It would be incredibly sweet...remarkably chivalrous of you if you helped me move a few more than just those two."

"And here we go," Harry chuckled with a shake of his head.

"I mean..." Maddie sighed, her shoulders rising and falling. "I did donate most of my things to charity. These eleven boxes are all I have and..."

"Okay, okay," he cut in, his hand held up in the air with a smirk. "You can stop with the...you know. I'll move them. Tell me which ones go where and I'll take care of it."

"Really?" She bounced on her heels.

"Yes really," he laughed again. "Tell me where they go and then you can go soak in the tub. I know that's why you're really here..."

"I love you," she cut him off; tossing her arms around his neck, pressing her lips to his. "I mean the tub is nice and all but it's you I'm here for..." She kissed him again. "Don't forget that."

"Hmmm..." He hugged her tight, his eyes scanning hers. "I already said I would move them you don't have to..." She kissed him again. "Maddie..." She kissed him again. "Okay look. If you keep doing that, I'm going to forget about these boxes, we're going to make good use of these stairs, and you're never going to make it to the tub." She giggled at the gleam in his eye, the cock of his eyebrows.

"I love you." Her voice was soft, genuine.

"I love you too," he kissed her once more before releasing her. "Now. Where do they all go?"
Chapter 82

Moving in with Harry proved to be amazing. The benefits completely outweighed any of the tiniest bit of uncertainty she had originally felt. Maddie loved waking to him every day. She loved being there at the end of the day to greet him. She loved the way her stuff looked next to his stuff; the way he cleared space for her in every corner of his home. There were adjustments that were made; negotiations that were held over tea. But the two of them meshed well; their lives intertwined well.

For a moment, for about a week, she found herself wishing she could be a housewife; wishing she could stay home and bake and cook and put on some lovely ensemble to greet him; something that would surprise him, inspire him to drop his case and take her in the entry way, forgo dinner and make use of the kitchen counter, or the fluffy rug in front of the fireplace.

Yes. She could get used to this.

A week had passed, a week of adjustments and settling. The first day Harry had asked Bernard to stay away, allowing Maddie to have the entire home to herself. She finished unpacking, she moved some things around and then...she explored. By the time Harry made it home that night, she knew where every last kitchen utensil was and she had managed to cook up a decent pot of pasta and sauce. Though the second he saw her in the black and red lingerie she had chosen to surprise him with, the pasta and the sauce were forgotten.

It had taken six days. Six days passed before Maddie was finished with her mapping of Harry's place. Six days before she had figured out where things were, how things worked—six days of following Bernard around the kitchen with a smile, six days of trying to get him to call her Maddie, to tell her the secret to his pizza. Six days before she felt more at home than a guest at Harry's home.

It was the night of Day Six when Maddie finally spoke the words that would pull her right out of this state of lounge she had been in since she moved.

"I'm ready." Her voice was loud and clear and cut right into Harry's thoughts. She was standing in the doorway to the living room, leaning against the frame and had been watching him for at least a minute before she spoke.

"Sorry?" Harry looked up from the paper he was reading. His legs were stretched across the couch, his bare feet propped up while he sorted through a stack of folders and papers he had pulled from his briefcase that sat on the coffee table next to him.

"I'm ready," she repeated with a wide smile.

"Oh-kay," he shifted on the couch, adjusting the stack of folders. "I'm not exactly sure what you're talking about but if you give me two minutes to finish this one briefing...I could be ready too."

"No," she shook her head with a laugh, pushing away from the frame and stepping into the room. "Not for that."

"For what?" Harry moved his feet from the end of the couch and waved his hand, inviting her over.
"I'm ready to come out of hiding," she took a seat, pulling his feet into her lap. "I need my day to be about more than harassing Bernard..."

"But you were having so much fun," he cut in with a smirk.

"Yes, but he's never going to cave," she sighed dramatically, her hands rubbing his feet; moving of their own volition. "He's never going to call me Maddie and he's never going to teach me how to make that pizza."

"No, he's not," Harry shook his head, moving his files to the table so that he could settle into the couch, so that he could enjoy what Maddie was doing to his feet.

"My housewife days are over. It was fun while it lasted," Maddie grinned as Harry chuckled. "I think I'm ready for that meeting."

"With Thomas?" Harry's eyebrows lifted.

"Yes," she nodded. "I know I can't come out with you and really get to it. But I can start with the wedding, right? And you said Thomas could keep me busy with some behind the scenes stuff?"

"I did say that," Harry smiled softly, loving the idea of bringing her on board. "You sure you're ready love? You don't want another week to..."

"To what?" She laughed. "To sleep until noon and wake only to greet you in a scintillating outfit with a glass of scotch?"

"Now, now," Harry shook his head, his eyes narrowing wickedly. "Don't knock the outfits. Or the scotch. I enjoyed them both—though not nearly equally."

"I'm sure," she rolled her eyes at him, her hands working up his ankle towards his calve. Harry watched her for a minute and then reached for his cell phone. Taking a breath he dialed and pressed the phone to his ear.

"Thomas, it's Harry." Maddie rolled her eyes again; as if Thomas expected it to be anyone else. "Listen, I would like to bring Maddie in. Yes. Yes. I think...tomorrow?" He arched his eyebrows at Maddie who nodded enthusiastically. "Tomorrow is perfect. Yes. We'll see you in the morning then. Fantastic. Thank you."

And just like that, Maddie was done being a housewife.

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Maddie learned something incredibly valuable the next day. Thomas Smith did not mess around. After changing her clothes three times, and successfully shutting down Harry's snickers as she did so, the two of them left for a full day at St. James Palace. From the moment they walked in the door, they were busy. Thomas had greeted them at the car, escorting them inside where Maddie was introduced to staffer after staffer, all standing in a line as they entered. Though a pink blush rose to her cheeks at the attention, she smiled wide, shook their hands, and repeated their names. She was new to the moment, but she adapted quickly. After checking to see if either of them needed anything, Thomas escorted them to a large board room where meetings would circulate through for the rest of the day. He had cancelled Harry's regular meetings so that he could sit in on all of Maddie's. With a relaxed stature and a tiny bit of amusement, Harry sat at her side and watched as Thomas brought his fiancé into the depth of it all.
First, they discussed her potential patronages. Though she could not work in any official capacity until she was "official," Thomas had put together a list of charities that had inquired about her since the engagement announcement. There was no harm in her sorting through the list and doing some research, just as long as she wasn't placing phone calls or taking meetings. Maddie thumbed through the four page list with wide eyes before taking a breath and sliding the folder into her bag.

Then they moved on to discuss her citizenship. Once given the okay from Maddie, Thomas would be happy to schedule times for her to take the two required tests for citizenship; The English Test and The British Life Test. They wanted to have the tests out of the way before the first of the year and then, after the new year, when her residency requirement was met, they would be able to file for citizenship right away. Maddie gave her consent and Thomas made a note in his planner before sliding a slim, soft-cover book across the table to her.

"What's this?" Harry glanced down at it.

"A study guide," Thomas explained quickly. "For the British Life Test. It was rated fairly high and it contains past questions that are no longer in use. You can look it over if you think it will be helpful."

"Thank you," Maddie smiled sweetly and stowed the book in her bag.

Finally, after a brief break for lunch, Thomas brought in Joan Schuler; a stunningly dressed middle aged woman who reeked of organization and preparation. She was their Wedding Planner—thought not just. She would be orchestrating the monstrosity that would be their nuptials. She had a lengthy history with the Royal Family, having been in event planning at the Palace for years. She had worked as second in command at Will and Kate's wedding and was happy and excited to take on the task of Harry and Maddie's.

They spent nearly two hours with Joan going over details of the big day; when and where and how. She inquired about their expectations, any hopes they had for the day. She asked about any specific traditions or pieces they wanted to be certain to include. And, though they would be meeting many times over the next eight months, she asked them to start thinking about the feel they were going for, particularly for the more intimate, private parts of the evening. Like Will and Kate, they would have a gigantic wedding; playing host to thousands. Following that, The Queen would host a champagne brunch at Buckingham Palace for a slightly smaller crowd and then Charles had already contacted her to let her know of his intentions to host a much smaller, personal reception that night.

Finally, after Joan had taken copious amounts of notes and sent them away with a few homework items, Maddie and Harry were back in their car heading home after what felt like an incredibly long day.

"Wow..." Maddie breathed; a soft chuckle pulling through her lips as their car pulled away from Saint James to take them back to Kensington. "You weren't kidding about Thomas."

"No," Harry laughed. "No I was not. I warned you."

"You were right," she sighed, leaning back against the leather seats, letting her head roll back as she thought about the day of meetings they had just finished. "This wedding is going to be..."

"Ridiculous. Yes." Harry cut her off with a nod.
"I wasn't going to say ridiculous," she laughed at him, pulling his hand up off the seat and into hers. She toyed with his fingers for a moment before looking over to him. "You never told me you wanted to marry at St. Paul's."

"Hmm..." He smiled, his eyes drifting in thought. "I'm not sure I knew that until Joan asked us. You're sure you're okay with it?"

"Of course," Maddie squeezed his hand. "If it can't be just the two of us and a minister off the coast of Greece, then it's all the same to me."

"There will be comparisons," he lifted an eyebrow. "My mother and father..."

"Will and Kate, your grandparents," she countered with a shrug. "There will be comparisons no matter what we do."

"Yes, I suppose you're right."

"I suppose I am," she turned to watch him as he nodded slowly. "What's on your mind?"

"I was just thinking that..." He took a deep breath and turned his head to meet her eyes. "I was just thinking that you had surprisingly little opinions on the wedding."

"Oh?" Maddie grinned at his shock.

"Yes. You seem quite at ease with whatever Joan suggested," his body turned towards hers. "Is that because you're really at ease with this or is that because you were afraid to speak up or..."

"Afraid to speak up?" She chuckled. "Have you ever known me to be afraid to speak up?"

"No, I suppose not," he grinned. "But I thought for sure you would have some sort of idea as to what you wanted, how this would look. Don't all girls dream of their wedding day? Planning it out in meticulous detail? Running around pretending to be brides?"

"What?" She shook her head at his grin, at his assumptions. "No. Not all girls run around pretending to be brides..."

"You honestly haven't thought about it until just today?" He narrowed his eyes at her questioningly.

"No, of course I've thought about it," her voice grew soft; low. "Over the years I've thought about it—fleetingly. But, it's different now. Things are different now."

"Oh?"

"Well for starters, I'm marrying a Prince—and not of the fictional Disney variety—an actual honest to God Prince..." She chuckled at the thought, at saying it out loud. "I expected there to be very little that I had control over and honestly, I have no problems with what she was suggesting. The location is...look, I really loved Eugenie's wedding at Windsor. That might actually be my first choice. But we can't do it there." She sighed and sent a crooked smile his way. "You're just too popular."

"Ha!" He laughed, tugging at her hand. "I seem to remember her commenting on the exponentially increasing interest from the Americans. I wonder why that is?" He cocked an
"Maybe those pictures of you in Vegas garnered you more fans than you originally thought?" Maddie smirked.

"Maybe," he laughed with a nod of his head. "People want to see you too Madeline. It's not just about me. You heard Joan, they are expecting tourism from the States to skyrocket. They are considering a later time so as to accommodate the viewership. That's about you. Not me."

"Anyway," Maddie rolled her eyes, dismissing the issue. "St. Paul's, The Abbey; it makes no difference to me."

"Fair enough. How about everything else? The date? Are you fine with June seventh?"

"Well, I haven't yet consulted my day planner but I suppose I could move a few things around."

"Okay," he rolled his eyes. "I get it."

"Come on Harry. It's fine. All of it is fine. Great in fact. We have a date, we have a location, we have an Officiant. I can let my family in on it so they can plan. It's actually kind of nice to have somebody else in charge of making sure we keep with protocol and tradition. That way we don't have to worry about messing it all up."

"Sure." She did have a point.

"And everything I asked for, she gave me. I want to use a local, relatively unknown designer for the dress and she said she would pull together some work from a few names so that I can start narrowing it down. I want to have Ella as my...maid of honor, if you will, and she said that was fine. Sure, there are some expected non-negotiables; the cameras, the landau..."

"The Blues and Royals uniform..." He offered.

"Exactly," she nodded. "And I have to wear white—naturally. We'll say traditional vows, we'll sing God Save the Queen, we can't kiss inside the cathedral—though I'm certain you're going to have more of a problem with that one..."

"You know me so well," he pulled her hand to his lips for a kiss.

"Hmmm..." Maddie smiled, squeezing his hand tight. "It's fine Harry. All of it."

"Yeah?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah. The dress, the songs, the thousands of people watching..."

"Millions," he cut in. Maddie's eyes met his and she took a deep breath in, letting it go slowly before she continued.

"At the end of it all...I get to call you my husband."

"I love it when you say that."

"Me too."
"So. June seventh. St. Paul's." Knowing a time, knowing a place made it so much more real to him. And it thrilled him to no end.

"June seventh. St. Paul's." She repeated with a grin.

"Okay," he let out a breath.

"Okay." Maddie's grip on his hand tightened.

"So, when are you going to tell Ella about her role in all of this?"

"I don't know," Maddie laughed. "It depends on how long I want to keep her around. Because once I tell her...she may very well implode."

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"I'm coming!" Maddie yelled towards the knock on the front door as she hurried from the kitchen; laughing because there was no way Ella would be able to hear her through that solid door and the music that was filling the house. She slid in Harry's long polo socks on the hardwood floor of the entry way, finally reaching the door. With a dramatic flourish, she yanked the door open; smiling wide. "Ella!"

"Maddie!" Her best friend's grin matched her own as she stepped right into her place and wrapped her arms around her.

"I am so glad you could come," Maddie spoke into the soft wisps of Ella's hair as she held her tight.

"Are you kidding? A slumber party at Kensington Palace? Wouldn't miss it," Ella laughed as they stepped into the house and Maddie shut the door behind them. "Where is Harry again?"

"On base," Maddie groaned slightly. "He had a two week training. He'll be back in four days." With Harry away, Maddie had decided this would be the perfect time to have a girl night with her best friend—a perfect time to ask her to be a part of the wedding.

"You miss him?" Ella dropped her overnight bag in the entryway and followed as Maddie led her into the kitchen.

"Ugh..." Maddie sighed with a roll of her eyes. "It's embarrassing how much I miss him. Would you like some wine?" She held up the bottle she had been opening when the knock at the door came.

"Yes please," Ella nodded enthusiastically. "Bishop sends his love...in a jealous, territorial sort of way."

"He's mad because I get you for the whole night?" Maddie handed her a glass and poured one for herself.

"More like he's mad because he thinks we're going to have pillow fights and sleep cuddled up together in lingerie and we didn't invite him..." Ella laughed into her wine glass as she took a sip. "But basically, yes."

"Nice," Maddie grinned. "So. Do you want to change right into the lingerie or..."
"Ha!" Ella laughed. "Let's wait for a bit."

"You got it," Maddie's laughter echoed hers. The two women moved to the living room, stretching luxuriously across the two large leather couches, bottle of wine in tow. "So tell me," Maddie's eyes danced in the soft light. "How is life on the outside?"

"The outside?" Ella raised her eyebrows.

"You know...where you get to have a job and a career and go to work..."

"You have a severely twisted way of looking at life, you know," Ella rolled her eyes. "You're a Princess in a castle and you're coveting my peasant job."

"You are not a peasant," Maddie's voice grew stern. "And I am not a Princess. Now stop it."

"Not yet..." Ella chuckled; loving how it irritated Maddie.

"Knock it off," Maddie tried to school her features, tried for angry, but she couldn't force a glare towards Ella.

"Or what?" Ella continued on, taking a long drink from her glass. "You'll have me drawn and quartered."

"Ella!" Maddie tossed a throw pillow across the room in laughter, her voice moving to sarcasm. "I can't order something like that. Harry will have to do it."

"Ha!" Ella couldn't help the giggles that came. "We've sure come a long way from that tiny apartment in Bendal, no?"

"Eh," Maddie shrugged; glancing around the room playfully.

"Nice." Ella sighed, reaching for the bottle to fill her glass.

"Seriously though, how are things at the hospital?"

"They're...they're great. Matt's finally dating somebody new so I don't get the death glare from him every time we go up anymore."

"It's about time."

"Right?" Ella's eyes flashed wide as she remembered their abrupt ending and her and Bishop's abrupt beginning. "But it's fine. It's work. How about you? How is life as a royal bride-to-be?"

"Well," Maddie sighed, moving to sit up straight. "I'm glad you asked. There's something I need to talk to you about."

"Oh?" Ella was interested; intrigued. Moving to sit up, she waved her hand. "What's up?"

"Okay..." Maddie clapped her hands together as she moved to sit next to her friend, focusing her attention. "Actually, I'm going to just..." Without explanation, she reached out and took the glass of wine from Ella, settling it safely on the table away from them—knowing there was great potential for a mess if Ella kept hold of it. Ella's eyes tracked her as she moved, growing more and
more curious.

"Everything okay?" She asked, turning her body to face Maddie's.

"Oh yes," Maddie grinned; matching Ella's posture. "Everything is great. Listen. I want to ask you something and I want you to hear everything I have to say before you answer. Can you do that?"

"Sure..." Ella's eyes grew suspicious.

"Okay," Maddie took a breath and met her eyes. "You have been my best friend for quite a few years now, right?"

"Yes..." The suspicion only increased.

"You have been there for me; over and over and over again—through everything in Bendal. You were there when I met Harry. You pushed me to him, you have been incredibly supportive through all of it. All of the chaos and the press and...you've been an amazing friend to me, Ella. A sister really. And I can't tell you how much I love you and appreciate all that you've brought to my life since you saved me from fire so many years ago."

"Ha!" Ella laughed through the tears in her eyes. "Do you want to make be bawl Madeline?"

"No," Maddie grinned wide. "I want you to be my maid of honor."

"Oh my God."

"I mean, there's not really a maid of honor but I would love for you to be...."

"Oh my God!" Ella's face exploded with shock; her eyes wide, her hands moving to catch the gasp that came from her throat.

"You really need to think about it," Maddie hurried to get out her entire thought before Ella lost her ability to hear. "People will talk about you, they will write about you. They will dissect your dress and your body and..."

"Yes!" Ella exclaimed; her hands reaching out to grab Maddie's in a rushed excitement. "Yesyesyesyesyesyes. Yes. Yes. I am in. I am...holy shit." She giggled. "I am totally in."

"Are you sure?" Maddie laughed at the response. "You can have some time to think about it and..."

"Think about it?" Ella's face screwed up in disgust. "What is there to think about? You're my best friend and I love you. You know I love you. Of course I would do this for you."

"But...the press and the criticism and..."

"So what!" Ella waved her hand and rolled her eyes. "People always have something to say about me. Will I get to wear a dress designed exclusively for me?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded, loving that Ella was so completely on board.

"Will I get to ride in a carriage?" Her eyes sparkled.
"Ha!" Maddie laughed; this was a dream come true for her best friend. Of course she was completely on board. "Yes. On the way out you will."

"And I'll carry your train as you walk into the Abbey?" Ella's voice grew soft and wistful as she pulled a throw pillow into her lap; hugging it to her stomach.

"No," Maddie shook her head.

"No? What the hell kind of..."

"Not the Abbey," Maddie cut her off.

"Not the Abbey?" She was confused. "Then where? Oh please tell me that Harry didn't convince the Queen to let you two run off. You know the public will..."

"Saint Paul's." Maddie interrupted her friend's spiral. "We're getting married at Saint Paul's Cathedral."

"..." Ella's entire thought process halted as she took that in. Her eyes blinked and her smile grew soft and nostalgic. "Saint Paul's?" She whispered; images flooding her mind of Harry's parents, of the history there, of her best friend in a beautiful, long white gown and Harry dressed as a soldier Prince. It was almost more than her fangirl heart could take. Tightening her hold on the pillow, she pulled it up to her face and, surprising Maddie, she let out a scream. Maddie flinched, but stayed put. Her grin stretched across her face.

"Okay. I can see you're going to need a minute to process this," her voice was low and soft as she chuckled. "Just. While you're in there, I should probably go ahead and tell you that you'll also be coming out on the balcony at Buckingham Palace to wave to the crowd and watch the flyover."

This time, when Ella screamed, it didn't surprise Maddie one bit.
"I would like to propose a toast," Bishop raised his glass, the humor evident in his eyes as they glanced around at the three other people at the table. Dinner had been cleared and they were all nice and tipsy.

"Oh-kay," Harry was smirking as he lifted his glass from the table.

"To Madeline..." He sent a wink across the table.

"Oh here we go," Maddie rolled her eyes.

"Bishop," Ella warned but he ignored her and lifted his glass higher.

"To Madeline," he smiled sweetly in her direction. "My most heartfelt congratulations on the passing of your English Test."

"Nice," Harry chuckled with a shake of his head. Maddie sighed dramatically and waved her hand for him to continue.

"I would like to say that I am particularly impressed at your ability, as an American, to adequately read, write and speak The Queen's English." His eyes sparkled in the dim light of the restaurant where they had met up for dinner.

"You're such an ass," Ella shook her head, taking a sip of her drink.

"What? They often butcher it and...are you drinking?!!" A flash of mock shock settled on his face. "I'm not finished with my toast and..."

"Finish." Ella glared, causing the other two to laugh lightly.

"To Madeline..." He turned back to her. "One step down in your return to the Motherland. Congratulations love."

"Thank you," she smiled, despite his mockery.

"Can we drink now?" Ella raised her eyebrows.

"Yes my darling," Bishop smiled at her. "To Maddie."

"To Maddie..." They echoed. They drank.

"So," Ella's smile widened, her hands coming together in front of her. "What's next on the list?"

"Which list?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, setting her glass back on the table. "The citizen list or the wedding list or..."

At the very same time that Bishop answered, "The citizen list." Ella grinned, "The wedding list."

"Nice," Harry laughed into his drink.
"Okay, well," Maddie sighed happily; either way it brought a smile to her face. "I have three weeks before I take the British Life test and then I have to wait until February when my residency requirement is up...then I'll submit my paperwork and wait to hear about the swearing in ceremony."

"Right." Bishop nodded.

"And on the wedding list..." She sighed again. "We have been meeting with Ms. Schuler..." "Jooooaaaannnn," Harry strung out her name with his warm buttery accent, making Maddie giggle.

"Yes. Joan. Tomorrow we're meeting her at St. Paul's for our first look around the place."

"First?" Harry's eyebrows arched.

"Okay, my first look around the place. We're meeting with the Archbishop."

"Saucy," Ella's eyebrows wagged.

"No," Harry pointed his finger at her, eyes narrowed. "The Archbishop is not saucy."

"She thought you were talking about me," Bishop pointed to himself, leaning to kiss Ella's exposed neck. "Bishop. And I am saucy." Maddie rolled her eyes as Harry groaned.

"Stop it," she swatted at him. "Is there anything I can help with?"

"Actually," Maddie finished off her glass as Harry paid the bill. "I need to sort through the designer portfolios and narrow it down. Maybe you could come over tonight and help me?" Her voice turned sing-songy as she looked hopefully to Ella, then Bishop, then back to Ella.

"Bishop?" Ella leaned closer to him, her eyes batting in a way that made Maddie blush.

"Harry?" He looked across the table.

"I have plenty of scotch."

"Fine. We're in."

"Yea!" Ella clapped her hands together.

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"Okay..." Maddie dropped a stack of seven thick, black portfolio binders on the couch next to Ella before settling in on the other side of them.

"These are them?" Ella's scanned them as her fingers reached out to trace the thick, black leather.

"These are them." Maddie nodded, reaching for her glass of champagne she had sat on the table. "I need to narrow seven down to three and then Joan will contact them with a super secret mission."

"Your life is so much cooler than mine," Ella groaned, pulling the top portfolio into her lap while
she sipped from her glass.

"Hardly." Maddie sighed. "I'm going to be a bride and I can't do any of the bride-y things...like try on dresses..."

"Of course you can't try on dresses," Ella rolled her eyes. "A Princess simply cannot wear a dress that a hundred other brides wear. She sets the standard."

"Are you ever going to stop with the princess stuff?" Maddie leaned in to look at the portfolio as Ella opened it up and turned a page.

"Doubtful."

"I may have you banished," Maddie warned reaching out to turn another page.

"Do what you must," Ella winked.

"Harry!" Maddie called out to him just as he and Bishop stepped back into the room.

"Yes darling?" He eyed her over his drink.

"How do I go about having somebody banished?"

"It's a little tricky. There's paperwork and a petition and..." He sighed deeply; sinking to the couch across from them. "And you only get so many banishments. It's important to use them wisely."

"Fine, fine. Forget it..." Maddie rolled her eyes; a laughter settling over the group.

"OH!" Ella exclaimed, her finger pointing to a sketch in the first book. "I like this one."

"What are you looking at?" Bishop stepped closer.

"Sketches for my wedding dress," Maddie answered without looking up at him. Her eyes were focused on the book in Ella's hand. Bishop looked to Harry who shrugged and smiled.

"Can I look?" Bishop's voice echoed in his glass.

"Sure," Maddie nodded.

"What?!" Ella looked up with disdain etched on her face. "No!"

"No? Why not?" Maddie tore her eyes from the books and looked at her best friend, laughter on her lips.

"He's..." Ella stalled for a moment. "He's a boy!"

"It's true," Bishop smirked. "I have proof."

"Easy," Harry warned.

"No thanks, Bishop." Maddie shook her head at him before turning back to Ella. "I know he's a boy, but he's not the boy I'm going to marry."
"But..." Ella stammered.

"And it might be nice to have a boy's opinion," Maddie's head nodded in thought. "I think that as long as Harry stays on that couch..."

"No problem," Harry held up a hand in an oath.

"And as long as you swear not to share anything with him..." She looked up at Bishop with a serious warning in her eyes.

"I swear on my life," he held his hand up.

"Then I say yes, you can look." Maddie's statement was met with a groan from Ella.

"Why are you always trying so hard to be rid of me love?" Bishop spoke to Ella as he took a seat next to Maddie; sandwiching her between himself and Ella. Ignoring him, Ella grumbled.

"I cannot believe you're going to ask for his opinion. He has zero taste."

"He has excellent taste," Harry offered with that smarmy grin that always won him favor. "He has you."

"Oh please." Ella rolled her eyes, entirely un-amused, as the other three laughed.

"Okay, okay," Maddie smiled and turned her attention back to the portfolios. "Are we ready?"

"Ready!" Bishop exclaimed just a bit too excitedly.

"Yes," Ella sighed; a genuine smile rising to her face as she focused on her best friend.

"Let's do this," Maddie nodded.

"Okay. Well..." Ella held up one of the books with a cringe. "I think you could probably get rid of this one right away."

"Ah yes," Maddie giggled, passing it along to Bishop.

"Wait a second." Instead of passing it on to the table and starting a 'no' pile, he held onto it. "Why not this one?"

"You're joking." Maddie laughed.

"No," he shook his head, swallowing more scotch. "What's wrong with it?"

"It's..." Maddie struggled for the right word; descriptive and non-offensive.

"Slutty," Ella offered; causing Harry to choke on his drink.

"Slutty?" Bishop laughed.

"Slutty," Ella nodded.

"Let me see this," Harry leaned forward, his hand stretching towards Bishop.
"NO!!!" Maddie and Ella yelled in unison, freezing the men in their spots.

"Why not?" Harry laughed.

"Because you can't see any hint of the dress until the wedding day!" Ella reached across Maddie and jerked the portfolio from Bishop's hand.

"But you said it was slutty," Harry argued. "Surely you're not going to wear something slutty to our wedding." He raised his eyebrows at Maddie.

"Not to the wedding," she winked with a grin. "But maybe to the after party."

"Now we're talking," Bishop took the portfolio back from Ella. "Maybe we should have a separate pile for after party wear."

"Fine," Ella huffed. "We'll have a yes pile, a no pile, and a slutty after party pile." With a deep, heavy sigh, Ella waved her hand at a place on the table where Bishop made a show of setting the book.

"I have to say," Harry leaned back on the couch. "I didn't realize just how much I needed a voice like Bishop's at this meeting until just now."

By the time Bishop and Ella left, they had helped Maddie narrow it down to three potential wedding dress designers and one potential after-party ensemble. Ella had stacked the portfolios into one, tall, stack before she had kissed Maddie's cheeks, ruffled Harry's hair, and pulled Bishop towards the door while he warned her of a long night ahead. With the music still playing throughout their place, Harry and Maddie sat on opposite couches; empty glasses and bottles strewn across the table that sat between them. It was late, they were tired, and their minds were slowly drifting towards the long day of meetings and planning they had ahead of them. As Maddie's eyes flittered past the stack of portfolios a question came to mind—one that had been there before, one that had yet to be answered.

"Harry..." Maddie blinked; a slow, drawn out process that told of her sleepiness and hinted at too much champagne.

"Yes?" His grin was warm, slightly mocking; that cocky way his mouth twisted laid truth to how well he could read her—she was tipsy and feeling friendly.

"I want to ask you about something..."

"Anything," he held his hand out; palm up and fingers spread.

"Open book?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"Yes I am." His head tipped back, propped up by his own hand.

"I don't know," her bottom lip pulled into her teeth; her tell.

"Come on, love. What do you want to talk about?" He couldn't help the small chuckle that came out of his mouth—amused that even still there might be something that made her nervous. And
then she said truly the only thing that would make him pause.

"Money." Maddie let the word settle, watching as he controlled his features. He took a few seconds before he moved, sitting up and leaning forward; blowing a burst of air through his lips as he moved.

"I'm guessing you're not talking about how to count back change," his lips cracked the smile that had been there before.

"No. No, I'm not." She smiled softly. "Listen. I know it's uncomfortable..."

"It's not...uncomfortable," his neck stretched as he adjusted. "It's just not something I talk about. It's not something we talk about."

"I know," she nodded, sitting up straighter.

"I was raised not to talk about it, not to give voice to..."

"I know," she sighed, pulling her thoughts together. "And I get that. I do. I just..." She swallowed and looked off into the distance for a moment. Her hands came together in front of her as her gaze shifted back to him. "I don't know that I need to know...everything. I just...Harry I've had a job since I was fourteen. I have been managing a budget and an account since I was very young. I worked through college, I...I had to budget things and be very aware of what I was spending. Granted, in more recent years it hasn't been as tight..." She shrugged. "But I always know what I have coming in and what I have coming out." She took a breath and thought for a moment. "I guess it's just strange to sit in this space where I have no job, no income, no budget. It's...strange."

Harry watched her for a moment, his mind processing her words at a rapid rate, trying to sort out any undercurrents to what she was saying. His voice was softer as he spoke. "You do know that you need not...worry...about any of that now, right?"

"No," she laughed, shaking her head. "I don't know that. I mean...of course I know that you are..." She trialed off, waving her hand around the opulent room; the wealth and décor that surrounded them. "I get that. I'm not naïve. I just...we're planning this wedding and I'm making choices about dresses and shoes and I have no idea what any of it costs nor do I know if it's ridiculously expensive or..."

"But..." He tried to step in but Maddie continued.

"I know. I know. I don't have to worry about the cost of the wedding. I know. You said that. Joan knows what to do. I just have to tell her what I want..." Maddie recited the words he had spoken to her during that initial meeting. The cost of the wedding had not been discussed except to say that it was taken care of. Harry and his father would handle everything. At the time Maddie had accepted that; a royal wedding surely cost an astronomical amount of money and she had never intended on asking her mother for anything—even if she weren't marrying a Prince. "And we haven't even talked about a pre-nup."

"Hold on..."

"Why haven't we talked about a pre-nup yet? I've been expecting it but..." Maddie laughed tiredly. "We're planning a wedding. You're third in line to the throne. Surely nobody allows you to marry somebody without a pre-nup." She stared at him; met his eyes. Neither of them moved. It was twenty seconds before Harry was the first to blink.
"No." He let out a long, exhaustive sigh. "Nobody allows me to marry without a prenuptial agreement."

"See," she smiled weakly.

"Maddie," he groaned; his hand scrubbing over his face. It was abundantly clear that this was a topic he would give anything to avoid. "I don't want to get into this right now." Maddie's eyes stayed fixed on him only for a moment.

"Fine." She shrugged; a light-hearted move that held onto tense undertones.

"Fine?" Harry questioned.

"Fine." She nodded. His eyes squinted as he studied her; wondering if this fine was a girl's fine or a guy's fine. Going for the easiest path, Harry went with a guy's fine.

"Great." He clapped his hands together and moved from the couch.

"Great," Maddie repeated. She leaned to collect the wine glasses from the table in front of her and rose to her feet. As she took a small, swoosh of a step past him, she very casually offered, "I suppose that sooner or later I'll just adapt to being a kept woman."

It was a girl's fine.

Harry's head fell back as he groaned into the large, open room.

It was definitely a girl's fine.

With a deep, heavy breath, Harry summoned his will and followed her into the kitchen.

"Madeline," he pleaded.

"Look. I don't want to know all of it. I don't need to know all of it. Just..." She stood at the sink, her back to him as she unnecessarily rinsed out the wine glasses. "Just a budget would be nice. Give me a monthly limit." She glanced at him over her shoulder. "A thousand?"

"Maddie." His eyes squinted as he stifled the laughter in his throat.

"Give me a wedding budget Harry. Those dresses are..." She turned back to the dishes. "How much is too much? What if I spend all of your money? What do I do with the money I have now? I don't need to know everything Harry. I just...not knowing anything makes me feel..." She paused to take a breath. "It makes me feel like you're taking care of me. And, you know...fine. You're taking care of me. But I don't think a monthly budget or...I don't know." She sighed, setting the glasses in the sink. "I don't think it's entirely out of line."

The room was silent for a minute. Maddie stayed at the sink, turned away from him while he processed her words. It wasn't an easy thing to do, nowhere near an easy thing to do. He wasn't lying. He never talked about this. Ever. It wasn't as though he just didn't like to, he simply never did it. It was frowned upon; for somebody of such great wealth and privilege to get into such discussions. He stared at the back of her head for a moment, his mind working much harder than he had planned on it working after taking down all that scotch with Bishop.
With great resolve he took a step in her direction. Maddie could hear him move closer and closer before he popped into the reflection from the window over the sink. She stayed put, waiting for him to say something, waiting for his next move. She watched as he pulled his phone from his pocket, dialed and pressed it to his ear. As he waited for an answer, his free hand moved around her hip to rest on the counter—as though he were blocking her in.

"Thomas," Harry's voice was distinctively more chipper than it had been only moments ago. "Tomorrow afternoon I would like to set up a meeting with the attorney and the banker..." He took a deep breath and half a step forward, closing the miniscule space between the two of them. "Yes. Yes. And if you can have him bring in a draft of a prenuptial agreement for Maddie to review..." Maddie felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up as his breath tickled her skin. "Yes. I want to take care of it tomorrow. All of it. Yes. Okay. Thank you. I'll see you then." Harry ended the call and, reaching around her other hip, he sat the phone on the counter next to the sink and let his hand rest on the edge; trapping her in. "Thomas is scheduling a meeting for us after the morning meeting with the Archbishop and before our afternoon meeting with Joan." His head dipped to kiss her shoulder. "They'll have some things for you to look at and a prenuptial agreement for you to review and..." Maddie's head tilted reflexively to the side as he kissed at the crook of her neck.

"You didn't have to do that..." She breathed.

"You're not a kept woman, Maddie." His fingers lifted from the counter, running down her arm to press on top of her hand. "You're not a mistress either."

"Harry..." She tried again; the mood in the room shifting.

"You're going to be my wife." The way his lips formed the last word spoke of solemnity and seriousness.

"Hmmm." Maddie's lips pressed together as he kissed up her neck. Her hand, still wet, moved up into his hair; pushing him closer. The tension from the moment before slipping from him, fluttering away from her.

"My partner..." He breathed into her ear; his other hand moving to her hip, flattening out and sliding around to the small of her stomach. Holding her body flush to his, he smiled against her skin.

"You know..." She breathed wanting to let out her last bit of thought on the issue before she jumped head first into where he was trying to move her. "You don't have to show me everything. You could..." She swallowed as the hand at her stomach began an achingly slow journey south; unzipping and unbuttoning before slipping into the waist of her pants.

"Shhhh..." His fingers slipped further down, prying the thin lace from her skin to make room for him. "I will show you everything. But I'll show you tomorrow." His fingers slipped further, pulling a groan from Maddie's lips. "But I am done talking about this tonight."

"Harry. I. Ohhhhhhhhh." Her head tipped back into him and he grinned—proud.

He had found her sweet spot. Her mind was effectively cleared.

"Mmmm..." His smile morphed into a hum as Maddie's knees went slightly weak; her one hand pulling at his hair, the other under his clutching the counter for support. "Can we do that?" His voice was low, knowing the answer. "Can we stop talking about this tonight?"
"Yes," she whispered, her head nodding in agreement.

"Good." Firm. Final. Swiftly, his hands moved from their spots to her hips.

"Oh!" She gasped as he turned her to face him. "Ohhhhh..." She grinned, her cheeks flushing at the look in his eye. "So..." Her fingers walked up his flat stomach, his chest; dancing up the column of his neck and over his chin. She ran a finger across his lips. "If we're done talking..."

"Oh we're done talking." He assured her.

"Whatever shall we do?" Her eyebrows lifted ever so slightly, a puff of air pushing through her lips as her lips curved upwards. Her entire body was pulsating this hot, urgent desire for his hands to return to her body. With a rough burst of laughter, Harry shook his head; shaking out the last bit of humor before his face grew serious.

And his hands returned.

They were strong.

They were insistent.

They were holding her tight and rough and close to him so that his lips could find hers with purpose. They were hot and warm and demanding. And the way his tongue pushed past her lips and into her mouth was a precursor to the way in which he was about to pursue her, the way in which he was about to draw her in and take her over. If there had been room for a moan, one would have moved through her mouth. But there was no vacancy. She was completely occupied —by him.

His hands left her hips, running up along her side, teasing past her chest as they moved to her shoulders. Settling her in her spot, they moved down her arms, pulling them from where they were wrapped around him, taking her hands and planting them firmly on the counter behind her. Her eyes opened in time to watch him leave her lips, red and swollen, to moved down her body. His hands met his mouth at her chest, offering a nip and a kiss, a squeeze and a promise to return.

And then he dipped lower. Having just moments ago initiated the steps to divest her of her pants, all his hands had left to do was tug. Gripping the waist of her pants in his fingers, he pulled them to the floor with him in one synchronized, fluid, motion. He pulled them from her body and in the morning Maddie would expect to find them across the room, under the table where he had carelessly tossed them.

His fingers pressed into the flesh of her thighs as his face pressed to the lace of her panties; the intensity of both causing her head to rock back, her elbows giving just slightly. And the animalistic groan that came from deep inside her drew Harry to the edge quicker than any dirty word, quicker than any piece of provocative lingerie. He moaned against her as the tease continued across that thin layer of black lace.

"Harry..." She breathed; a long, drawn out whisper of a word. She was warm and wet and wound up. He was hot and thorough and happy to stay exactly where he was. But when her hands found the will to move from the counter and tug, not quite so gently, at the red mess of hair on his head, he did as she demanded and moved from his knees.

Maddie wasted no time pulling his shirt up and over his head, letting it fall behind her into the
sink; crystal clinking against crystal. Harry laughed against her lips as her hands moved to his belt. Struggling with the buckle made her frustrated; drawing her lip forward in something of a pout.

"Here..." He grinned, his hands leaving her body to assist. "Let me..." Harry's hands were quick at their work as Maddie pulled her own shirt up and over her head, leaving behind a mussed up mane of hair that Harry embedded his hands in. Maddie pushed against him, moving them both away from the sink till his back met the island in the middle of the room. She shoved at his pants and he stepped from them, kicking them off to the side. Harry turned them both around, lifting Maddie up onto the island. She pulled at him, wanting him with her.

As Maddie moved further back and Harry moved above her, items were sent crashing to the ground; both functional and decorative. As the last bit of their clothing was torn from their bodies and tossed unceremoniously aside, neither of them seemed to care.

Neither of them would give another thought of the mess until it was all over. Until Maddie had called out his name before biting her teeth into his shoulder. Until Harry unrelentingly held her to him, pushing her to the edge again, with him. Until they were exhausted and sweaty and marked —him from her teeth, her from his fingers at her hip.

It wasn't until it was over and Harry lifted his head from where it lay on her stomach to look out over the kitchen floor, now littered with utensils and a small amount of shattered glass, that either of them gave a moment's pause to think of where they were. Harry pressed kisses to her stomach, her hip, her thigh, her knee, her feet, as he moved to sit at the edge of the counter, looking out at the room for the clearest path out.

"Are we going to have to sleep here tonight?" Maddie giggled sleepily as she wrapped her arms around him from behind, her chest pressing up against his back.

"No, love," he pulled her hand to his lips. "Come on. Hop on my back. I'll take you." He moved from the island, securing his feet before helping her onto him. With her arms wrapped securely around him and her laughter in his ear, Harry carried Maddie from the kitchen to the soft, safety of the living room rug.

"Will you take me to bed?" Her voice bordered between a whine and a plea. "Please?" Feeling particularly chivalrous and eager to please, Harry tightened his hold on her and moved up the stairs to their room.

It wasn't until the next morning when Maddie was showered and dressed and made her way downstairs for breakfast when it really hit her. Harry stood in the kitchen, dressed in a suit, a cup of coffee in his hand as he read through a folder laying on the very same island they had depraved the night before. Her eyes traveled around the spotless kitchen, without a trace of what had occurred the night before, and she knew that Harry hadn't cleaned up the mess. She suddenly felt very guilty. She should have come down with shoes on to clean the mess. She should not have left it here for...

"Good Morning ma'am," Bernard's voice called as he joined them in the kitchen, a fresh vase of flowers in his hand. Maddie's face flushed warm as she cleared her throat.

"Good Morning Bernard," she managed to recover, despite the smug smirk that tugged at Harry's lips.

"Would you like me to make you something for breakfast ma'am?" His smile was genuine as he turned his attention to her.
And it hit her. This was how it worked. Every single person in that room knew what had occurred in that very space just the night before and Maddie was just now learning that there was no way in hell Bernard would ever speak of it. He was most definitely the one who had cleaned the mess, most definitely the one who had retrieved their clothing that they would later find washed and pressed and returned to its rightful home. He was most definitely privy to this private, intimate moment that she had shared with Harry the night before. But here he was, smiling and meeting her eyes while he offered her eggs and toast. Guilty or not, this was how it worked.

"No," she shook her head and returned his smile. "No. I'll just have coffee this morning. Thank you."

"Yes ma'am," he nodded and stepped back out of the kitchen and off to his work.

"Wow..." Maddie breathed as Harry broke from his spot, moving towards her. "He just..."

"Mmm Hmm," Harry nodded, bending to kiss the spot on her hip he knew he had bruised before moving to her lips. "I told you he was discreet."

Unable to find the words for the feeling that passed over her, Maddie smiled and kissed him back. Life as she knew it was over. Though she would absolutely find a way to set aside her embarrassment and thank Bernard, the way she went about her life had absolutely changed.

And this was only the beginning. As she pressed a kiss to Harry's shoulder, where she was certain her teeth marks were still a light presence, and moved to pour herself some coffee, she passed over her agenda for the day.

First. A meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury at St. Paul's Cathedral.

Second. A meeting with an attorney and a banker to go over Harry's monetary worth and sign a prenuptial agreement.

And Third. A meeting with Joan where they would discuss three designers—one of whom would end up designing a gown that would ultimately hang in a museum.

Life as she knew it was over.
Chapter 84

As the year drew closer to the end, the wedding plans continued. Those three important meetings had set the ball rolling for all that was to come.

They had met with the Archbishop of Canterbury twice since that initial meeting and they continued to meet at St. Paul's Cathedral. Every time Maddie stepped foot into St. Paul's, she had to pause and take a moment to let it sink in, let her mind adjust. The vast opulence, the regality that it held was intimidating. Every time she stepped inside, she became more and more at ease with the grandness, more and more at home in the space. Harry, biting back his smirk, would hold her hand and walk the length of the aisle, realizing she needed the time and the moment to process.

Maddie would take notes as they walked. She would take note of the time it took to walk from one end to the other, the time it would take her to walk from the door to Harry. Three and a half minutes. She would take note of just how many people would fit inside. She would take note of where Harry would be standing, where she would meet him, where they would move to. Though the Archbishop assured her there would be plenty of time for rehearsals, seeing how it would be laid out in her mind was a sort of comfort for her.

They had met with the attorney and the banker only once. Maddie had controlled her facial features when the folder was placed in front of her, she kept her eyes focused in front of her as paper after paper was flipped over for her—drawing her deeper and deeper into the details of Harry's wealth. She was aware that next to her, Harry sat in a continual state of instability; his foot tapping on the floor, his fingers drumming on the table, his teeth biting at his nails. There was nothing about this experience that didn't make him uncomfortable. She recognized that. And she recognized how big of a moment this must be for him, to share this information with her. And, though her jaw wanted to slack, though her eyes wanted to bug wide, she held it together. She kept a small, easy smile on her face and nodded curtly at each new bit of information. And, when the attorney slid the pen across the table to her, she signed all of the documents; the one allowing her access to the newly established joint account, the one allowing her to order and charge things to the household account, and finally the small stack that outlined the details of her life in a divorced-from-Harry world; she signed them all with the same calm, the same ease. And when she was done, she clicked the pen and let it rest on the table right next to all of her questions about his money.

There were no more questions, no more inquiries. He had shown her. She had seen. And they were moving on.

And finally, they had met with Joan about the dress designer and a few small details. Maddie turned over the narrowed down pile of three designers. Joan would take them from the meeting and call them all in for a secret meeting. She would ask that they each put together drawings, fabrics, and ideas for what they would see Maddie wearing on the big day. She would ask that the send over something they had designed so that Maddie could wear it and get a feel for their style, for their cuts. Not more than three weeks later, Maddie had made a final selection. Winifred Ellis, relatively unknown until now, was brought into St. James Palace where she would enthusiastically agree to take on the biggest assignment of her life. She would sign confidentiality agreements and take meetings with Thomas, a family attorney and Joan all before she was able to sit down with Maddie. Both Maddie and Winnie, as she preferred to be called, were excited and anxious to finally meet and begin this journey that would prove life altering for the both of them. It was November, the wedding was in June and there wasn't much time to bring it all together. But it was time to begin.
"Next question please," Maddie smiled to Harry as she returned to the breakfast table.

"Yes," Harry nodded and looked to the book of sample questions for The British Life test she would be taking in a matter of days. Clearing his throat, he read the next on the list. "How many Parliamentary constituencies are there? 464, 564, 646, or 664?"

"Hmm," Maddie's mouth twisted to the side as she thought for a split second. "646?"

"Brilliant," Harry grinned. "In which year did married women get the right to divorce their husband?" His face twisted up. "What kind of question is that?"

"Harry," Maddie warned.

"Seriously now. This is how we're deciding who can be a citizen?"

"Now is not the time for a reformation movement," Maddie couldn't help but chuckle at the seriousness on his face.

"I think now is the perfect time," he held strong for a moment before bending to her narrowed eyes and repeating the question. "In which year did married women get the right to divorce their husband? 1837, 1857, 1875, 1882?"


"Oh-kay," he adjusted slightly in his chair, sipping from his drink. "Who is the sexiest member of the royal family?" Sarcasm flickered across his face. "Prince Harry," he pointed at himself. "Prince Charles..." He shook his head at her. "Or..."

"Eugenie," Maddie interrupted his silliness, snatching the questions from his hand and hitting him with it. "She is by far the sexiest member of the royal family. Now. Will you stop it?!"

"Come on...I'm just playing."

"You know I have to take this test."

"I do."

"And they are going to publish my scores in every paper in England."

"Are you kidding? They are going to publish those scores internationally."

"Exactly!" She swatted him again. "Now, can you please take this seriously? I do not want to embarrass the Queen by having to take the test again."

"Fine..." He sighed and continued. "Next question..." He cleared his throat dramatically; shaking the book in his hand for effect. But before the next question could be read, Thomas—who had been working in the residence, stepped into the room.

"Pardon me, Sir," he nodded to Harry. "Ma'am."
"Good morning, Thomas," Maddie smiled sweetly.

"Good morning, Ma'am," he smiled in return.

"How can I thank you for the interruption, Thomas?" Harry joked, tossing a wink to Maddie.

"I'm sorry, Sir. I have a request for Dr. Forrester."

"Oh?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted. It was a rare occasion for her to be singled out for a last minute request.

"Her Majesty's Secretary has called to invite you and Ms. Schuler and Ms. Ellis to view The Directory."

"The Directory?" Maddie was confused as she looked from Thomas to Harry and back.

"The Directory of jewelry Ma'am," Thomas and Harry met eyes as Thomas tried to explain.

"Jewelry?" Maddie felt her heart pause, embarrassed at her lack of understanding.

"To choose a tiara," Harry offered, his fingers pushing his plate aside.

"I'm sorry," Maddie let out a breathy laugh. "To choose a tiara? I thought that was something that was decided by...I don't know...somebody who is not me. I get to choose?" Her forehead scrunched up as she looked to the two men—the two men who were delving into this for the first time as well. Though they did have a bit more knowledge on the subject than Maddie did.

"Maybe you should explain," Harry nodded to Thomas.

"Yes," Thomas nodded. "You, Ms. Schuler, and Ms. Ellis will meet with Her Majesty's secretary at Buckingham Palace to view The Directory. The Secretary will know which options are available to you. Once a choice is made, the Secretary will send the request onto The Queen for her final approval."

"Wow..." Maddie breathed, reaching for her drink. "When does she want to see us?"

"This afternoon if possible, Ma'am."

"Okay," she nodded. "Would you please call Ms. Schuler and Ms. Ellis to see if they're free?"

"Of course, Ma'am," Thomas nodded before slipping from the room. The irony that Maddie didn't see at the moment was that there was no need to check on their availability. Both women would, upon a moment's notice, clear their entire day to make room for this appointment—to make way for this once in a lifetime opportunity. That afternoon, the three women would be sitting in an office at Buckingham Palace looking through The Directory full of timeless, magnificent pieces. And, with lumps in their throats, they would be sending up a selection for The Queen's approval.

"Well..." Maddie took a breath and smiled a slightly nervous smile at Harry. "So much for a normal day, no?"

"You ready for your next question?" He held up the book of sample questions with a smirk.

"Henry," her eyes moved into a glare that she could only hold for a beat before a bubble of
laughter escaped. Her day had just become infinitely more important.

Maddie thought her heart rate had likely doubled as she slipped into her waiting car after her meeting at BP. She had sat with Joan and Winnie and had looked through The Directory, discussing historical facts, going over the feel for the wedding, the look of the dress. They had looked through pages of jewels, sitting in a respectful awe at each piece. And, after sending up their request, one that was quickly granted, they were escorted to the cars that were waiting to take them back to their respective days. Maddie kissed and hugged both women and smiled at Sampson as he shut her car door before sliding into the front seat of the car.

As they flew through the streets of London, Maddie took long, deep breaths. She focused on the passing scenery, letting her body relax. She couldn't help but giggle at surreal state of her life. She wondered if there was ever going to be a time when it all became commonplace, when she wasn't knocked sidewise by the royalty that was seeping into her once ordinary life. When she looked over the few months since Harry had proposed, when she cataloged the moments since she had said yes, she could feel her ordinary life slipping further and further away.

She really had just come from Buckingham Palace where she had chosen a tiara to wear on her wedding day.

"Wow..." Maddie breathed the word that had almost become her mantra. "Sorry. Sampson?" She leaned forward.

"Ma'am?" He turned towards her.

"I'm not ready to go back to Kensington quite yet. Can we make a stop first?"

"Of course Ma'am," he nodded. "Where would you like to go?"

"Madeline," Ella was waiting for her when she arrived. "I'm so happy you called."

"I'm so happy you're home," Maddie smiled sincerely as Sampson entered Ella's place, quickly sweeping and standing aside.

"Come on in," Ella pulled at Maddie's hand, happy to see her friend, even though they had lunch plans in two days. "What's going on?"

"Do you have tequila?" Maddie asked, shrugging out of her coat and kicking off her shoes.

"Yes," Ella laughed, moving swiftly towards the liquor cabinet. "You okay?"

"Mmm Hmm," Maddie nodded.

"You don't seem okay," Ella looked her over. "Where's Harry?"

"A meeting? Or he could be home by now. I don't know." Maddie shrugged. "He wouldn't...he wouldn't understand this. I needed somebody who would understand this."

"Understand what?" Ella laughed, pulling the bottle from the cabinet and looking for glasses.
"Tequila, please." Maddie held out her hand impatiently. "Is Bishop here?"

"No," she laughed, holding out the bottle. "Here. Tequila."

"Thank you," Maddie breathed, taking the bottle from her friend. Maddie wasted no time as she twisted the lid open, tipping the bottle to her lips for a drink.

"Whoa..." Ella watched with a smirk. "What's going on?"

"Ahem," Maddie cleared her throat, wiping her lips with the back of her hand. She took a breath and settled herself for a moment, her eyes meeting Ella's with a seriousness in them that spoke of the significance and confidentiality with which she spoke the next words. "I chose a tiara today, for the wedding. Whoo..." She let out a long breath. "I am wearing The Strathmore Rose Tiara."

"Oh my..." Ella gasped, her hand flying to her mouth; her eyes filled with tears. The romance, the warmth, the image of Maddie in that piece of artwork, overwhelmed her for a moment. Without another word, Ella held her hand out for the bottle of Tequila. Maddie nodded and handed it over, watching as Ella tipped it back. There, Maddie thought, that was the reaction, the reality she needed. She hadn't lost it quite yet. She knew she could count on Ella to feel the impact; to hold that space for her. She also knew she could count on her to get drunk and giggly and accept it all with ease and aplomb.

"Harry!" Maddie called out into the house as she pushed inside the warm, music-filled house. "Harry darling!" She giggled at herself, kicking her shoes to the side and shutting the door.

"Darling?" He chuckled, sticking his head out of the office to watch as she clunked into the entryway. "Are you drunk?"

"No," she giggled again with a shake of her head, dropping her bag to the table and turning her attention to him, not at all convincing. "I like the music," she pointed to the living room from where the tunes blared.

"I was just finishing up some stuff in the office. I can turn it down," he offered, his eyebrows raising as he leaned against the wall; his arms crossed over his chest as he watched her.

"No, no," she shook her head again; her grin wide, her eyes bright.

"How was the meeting?" He asked, amused at the way her hips began to sway involuntarily.

"Dance with me?" She held out her hand, her head tipping to the side slightly. Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing at her and, with an easy sort of nod, he pushed away from the wall and took her hand.

"Absolutely," he smiled, tugging her hand up to his shoulder and wrapping his arms around her waist. She loved that about him; loved it. The way he didn't put up a fight, the way he didn't even ask, the way he took her hand and pulled her close, the way he dropped everything he was doing in the office to dance with her. She loved that about him so much.

"The meeting went well," she smiled up at him.
"Happy to hear it," his eyes flickered as he looked her over; moving them around the entry way.

"I had a bit of Tequila..."

"No!" He chuckled. "With Gran's Secretary or..."

"Ella," Maddie offered. "I stopped by on my way home."

"Makes more sense," Harry nodded. Maddie sighed in his arms, nuzzling into his warmth.

"I chose a tiara," she confessed; the words flowing more easily from her mouth than they had when she first spoke them.

"Are you going to let me in on the secret?"

"The Strathmore Rose tiara," the words rolled off her tongue.

"Ah," he nodded.

"It's beautiful," Maddie sighed.

"You're beautiful," Harry countered.

"Hmmm..." Her lips pulled into a grin. "It was given to the Queen Mother by her parents when she married Prince Albert...King George the Sixth." Maddie sighed closer to him. "Your Great-Grandfather."

"Yes," he smiled. "I know."

"It's quite romantic, isn't it?" Maddie thought it over. "She remained devoted to him her entire life, for years and years after he died. Fifty years, Harry. She never wavered."

"It's true," he nodded.

"And he was a second son..." She ran her hand over his shoulder then, searching his face. "There's so much history there."

"Yes," his fingers reached out to move a strand of hair from her face with an adoring smile. "Enough history to drive you to Tequila?"

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, her hand smacking against her chest. "No, no. I just...I needed a normal moment is all."

"Mmm..." Harry nodded. "I see."

"I love you Harry," she stopped moving, drawing them to a halt. "I love you so much."

"I know."

"And now I have a tiara to wear on the day I stand before God and, apparently, millions of people, to declare my undying love for you."

"You do," he watched her closely, watching her day pass over her face; her eyes adjusting to the
feelings that flowed with it all. "You okay, love?"

"I am," she sighed. "Normal moment has been had and now I'm back...dancing with a Prince at the Palace." She laughed at herself and tugged at his shirt, bringing his lips to hers.

"Mmm..." He grinned against her lips, tasting the Tequila. "I have an idea."

"Ohhh..." She kissed him again. "I think I have the same idea." Her eyebrow arched suggestively.

"No, no," he laughed. "Not that."

"Boo."

"Not that yet," he clarified; his arms moving to hug her around the shoulders. "I have an idea for the weekend; something normal."

"Oh!" Maddie's eyes grew wide with excitement. "Like?"

"I thought we might invite Khenda, Collins, and Isaiah up for the weekend..."

"I love it!" Maddie bust in, bouncing in his arms.

"You take your test on Friday, they can be here in time for a celebratory dinner with Bishop and Ella and then we can spend the weekend being all kinds of normal."

"I looooooooooooooooooooooove it," she danced around in his arms. "We should call them and invite them."

"Yes."

"We should call them and invite them now."

"Yes ma'am," he offered a small salute and, letting his arms fall from around her, he pulled his phone from his pocket and held it out to her. "Why don't you call them while I get you some water."

"Water?" She questioned as she dialed and watched as he walked away from her.

"To avoid that very normal headache you're bound to have," he winked.

"Ah yes," she grinned. "You do love me."

"You know it!"
Chapter 85

Maddie thought it was funny really, how things had changed in her life. Most people; her family, the public, noticed only the big things. They noticed the constant armed shadow she had with her wherever she went. They noticed the palace, they noticed the car and driver, they noticed the ring, they noticed the famous, royal, soon-to-be husband. What they didn't see were the little things; the minute everyday things that most people took for granted. Maddie laughed to herself as she remembered one of her first conversations with Harry—where she mocked him for coveting her anonymity.

It was the little things that made the biggest impact. It was the way the staff cleaned up after her, after them—the way it seemed to be an honor to do so. It was the way she had to go through three checkpoints to take a walk through the park. It was the way Bernard knew what she liked for breakfast, what kind of soda she liked the best. It was the way that information traveled around the staff at the other houses. It was the sheer amount of prep work that went into the simple gesture of picking up friends at the airport. Collins, Khenda, and Isaiah's arrival brought out those little things. The royal watchers who went wild with excitement at the photos of Harry carrying baby Isaiah through the airport in his newly gifted stocking cap that made him look like a dinosaur. Maddie's picture would be nowhere near; it was all Isaiah the dinosaur smiling blissfully up at his proud Uncle Harry.

Maddie laughed to herself as she remembered the giddy way Harry had prepared for their visit. The very second he had confirmation they would be coming, he had hurried about making lists—or more accurately calling out items for Bernard to order for the household; play pens, beds, toys, food, the now famous hat.

"You know, if this list gets out, people are going to think we're expecting," Maddie had giggled at him one afternoon. She hadn't quite been prepared for the way he looked at her then; that far off, blissful look in his eyes that made her chest constrict. "Easy tiger," she breathed. "We have a wedding to get through first. Remember? Duke. Duchess. Then baby." Harry had offered her a wink, a ridiculous grin, and went about his preparations.

Harry's interest in his surrogate nephew did not end with preparations. They continued straight on into the weekend.

"You know," Khenda had smirked as she sank onto the couch next to Ella, her eyes watching Harry as he carried Isaiah so casually, so instinctually, around the place with him. "Had I known that Uncle Harry would take over like this, I would have just sent Isaiah. Collins and I would have caught up on our sleep."

"There's a thought," Collins winked while Ella laughed and Maddie joined them with more wine.

"I would be happy to book you a room somewhere," Harry called to her, his eyes never leaving the baby. "I could send you off for the weekend..."

"It's appealing," Khenda winked at her husband.

"I don't think he's joking," Bishop shook his head, amused by Harry's attachment to the child, by the way he was entranced.

"He's not joking," Maddie smiled across the room at him.
"He's not." Harry confirmed, his eyes meeting Maddie's.

"You know you're going to have to share him eventually," Maddie called out, the beginnings of a playful pout on her lips.

"No way." He shook his head. "I've never had to share a thing my entire life. Except for with Will, but I don't see him around here, do you?"

"Come here little buddy," Maddie turned her focus to the more flexible of the twosome. Holding out her hands, she smiled at the bubbly bundle. "Come see Aunt Maddie. You know you wanna..." And, because he really was quite the agreeable baby, he smiled wide and held his arms up to her. She lifted him from Harry with a gleam of victory in her eyes.

"I see how it is little man," Harry joked, relinquishing his hold to her. "No hard feelings. I prefer her to me too."

"There we go..." Maddie sighed; snuggling him close. "Why don't you come tell Aunt Maddie about your day..." With only a quick glance up to Harry, she caught it; that look on his face—half adoration, half predatory—that made her cheeks blush and her skin tingle. She knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Stop it," she warned in hushed tones that spoke of a private, intimate moment.

"Make me," he countered with a cocky grin. She walked up to him then, stretching her neck so that she could kiss him.

"Duke, Duchess, then baby." Her narrowed eyes met his.

"Yeah..." He sighed. "I'm going to have to see what I can do to move up this wedding."

"I'm going to have to see what I can do to avoid vomiting all over what is most certainly a ridiculously expensive rug," Ella offered with a laugh; half annoyed, half jealous.

And so the weekend began; the three couples and the six-month-old center of attention. It was wonderful; so exactly what they all needed before heading into the holiday season. That first night was spent catching up; warm drinks, wonderful food, and stories until way past everyone's bed time. The second day, Uncle Harry and Collins took over Isaiah duties and Maddie, Ella and Khenda took the day for some much need relaxation and girl time. And on the third day, they all relaxed; comfy clothes, yummy brunch, and talk of the future—a wedding, a growing Isaiah, joint summer vacations. And when they finally said good-bye the France-bound threesome, the remaining Londoners felt refreshed and revived and ready to face the holidays.

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"All packed?" Harry's hands rested on his hips as he looked around the room at her loaded bags. It was December twenty-second. The tree was up, the halls were decked and Maddie had already decided that one of the best perks about her impending marriage and life role was that the Royal Family, the palaces, they DID the holidays right. It was absolutely beautiful and she soaked it up every chance she had. But now wasn't the time for strolling lazily through the winter wonderland around her. Now was the time for packing. She was leaving that night, taking an overnight flight to the states for what would be her last Christmas as a Forrester. Though Harry had groaned at the thought of her being so far away for so long, with his obligations to his family, he understood.
Harry smiled at her, trying to avoid the sadness that came with her imminent departure; reminding himself that it was better than her staying behind alone.

"Yes." Maddie nodded; relief washing over her. It had been a long process; preparing for this trip; preparing for the holidays. She felt emotionally and physically exhausted.

"And...are you leaving me and taking everything or..." He tried for humor, seeing the tension.

"Ha. Ha." Maddie rolled her eyes. "I'm going to be stateside for two weeks. Who knows what I'll need."

"Who indeed." He watched her for a moment as she moved around their room. "Are you okay?"

"What?" She looked up in surprise. "Why?"

"You seem..." He shrugged, unable to pin point it, unable to find the word for his hunch. "I don't know. You seem a little off."

"Hmmm..." She pressed her lips together; taking a moment to think, a moment to blink away the unexpected surge of emotion she felt when he pointed it out.

"Maddie?" His forehead knotted; his hunch moved to strong suspicion. She turned her face from him then; a quick, whip of her head. "Madeline?" His voice was soft as he took a step towards her and stopped. He blinked once, twice, three times before Maddie moved again. He heard her sniff, watched her take a deep breath and then she turned to face him; eyes bright and shiny from unshed tears.

"I just..." She took a deep breath and blew it out of her mouth, looking down at her bags stacked by the door, at her piles of notebooks and folders sitting on the dresser and she wiped at her eyes.

"Baby, are you okay?"

"Yes," she cried; half weepy, half laughing. "God..." She exhaled again, trying to gain control of her emotions. She looked to him again, shaking her head. "Would you look at me? I'm a mess."

"Yeah..." His smile was small, cautious. "You want to let me in on the mess?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded; pressing her lips tight to keep from crying. She took a moment to breathe, a moment to calm, before she could speak again. "I was just packing—you know, figuring out what I would need to take home for Christmas and I realized..." Her fight to keep the tears at bay was lost as they tumbled from her eyes. "...this is my first Christmas at home without him..."

"Ah..." It came out of his mouth as though it had been forced by a blow to the gut. His heart ached in his chest. He had experienced so many Christmases without his mother but the feelings still came steaming to the surface.

"I went to Bendal right after he died. I missed the first two and then last year..." She trailed off blowing air from her mouth, waving her hands in front of her face, trying to calm down. Last year she had been there, in London. "Sorry," she laughed.

"Don't be," he shook his head. "Baby, it's okay to be sad."

"I know..." She started to cry again. "I just...it just surprised me is all."
"Yeah," he nodded; voice soft and low—comforting.

"I was looking through some of my boxes and I found this," she lifted a framed photo from the dresser and held it out to him. "This is the day I received my Doctorate." He moved closer, taking the photo from her hand.

"You look so much like him," Harry smiled. "You have the same smile."

"Yes," Maddie nodded; reaching for a tissue to wipe at her eyes. Harry watched as she sat down on the bed in front of him; closing her eyes. She sat there for a minute; breathing, taking it in before she opened her eyes and smiled up at him. "I found the photo and it reminded me that he wouldn't be there; that I would be and he wouldn't." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I know it's silly."

"It's not silly," he was quick to interrupt.

"I wish he could have known you." God how she wished that these two men could have known each other.

"I wish that too." Maddie nodded, her emotions getting the better part of her.

"How did you do this?" She looked up at him then; face red, eyes puffy. "How did you miss your mother in front of the whole world? I can barely handle it in front of you and you had to..." She trailed off, her heart aching for the little boy she never knew; for the man in front of her.

"I..." Harry's voice cracked as his memories came flooding back. Clearing his throat, he shook his head. "I have had years of training on how to control how much of this..." He pointed to his heart. "Makes it to the surface."

"Yeah?" She wasn't sure that made it any better.

"Yeah," he nodded; moving to place the photo back on the dresser. "I cried in private; to my father, my brother. I slept in bed with my dad for weeks...and when I went out I went with the strength she walked with." He reached down to smooth her hair from her forehead, from her cheek. "I made a lot of mistakes along the way but it got easier."

"Yeah..." She nodded, her face leaning into the warmth of his hand. And just when she thought she might be able to move on from this, just when she thought she had gained control of her tears, they flooded over and her entire chest ached.

"Hey, hey..." He crouched down, moving to her level; his hands moving to hold hers.

"And now we're getting married..." She spoke as silent tears moved down her cheeks. "We're getting married and he won't be there. He was supposed to hold my hand and walk me down that ridiculously long aisle. He was supposed to keep me steady and give me away and..." She looked so young, so innocent as she looked to him; asking for an answer he had no way to give. "Who does that now? Do I walk alone? Does my mother do it? My uncle? Who...who steps into my dad's spot that day?" And because, in that moment, he couldn't speak without breaking down, he adjusted, looking down at their joined hands and taking a breath before looking back to her.

"Listen..." his voice cracked when he spoke. "You tell me what you want. If you want to walk alone or with your mother or your uncle or Bishop..." She cracked a smile and he sighed relief.
"Whatever you want, you tell me. I'll take it to Gran and that will be it. I promise. I promise."

"Yeah?" She arched her eyebrows, fresh tears moving to the forefront.

"Yes." He nodded; heavy and so incredibly protective of this promise he was making. "You talk to your mother while you're there. You figure out what you want to do and we will do that—whatever that is. Okay?" His hand moved so he could stroke her cheek.

"Okay," she nodded. Taking a few deep breaths, she seemed to calm down, seemed to be letting it sit. Her eyes grew soft as she looked up at him. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me and..." She felt slightly foolish and incredibly tired.

"Don't be sorry," he shook his head. "Don't apologize for this. Please."

"Kay," she nodded, her face turning in his hand to kiss his palm.

"Okay," he nodded, offering a smile. He moved then, rising and bending to her; kissing her forehead, her lips. He moved slightly, his forehead staying to hers, to look in her eyes. His hand rested at the base of her neck, his thumb rubbing behind her ear as he smiled down at her. It seemed as though the moment was holding onto the multitude of words that had been spoken and even more that had not. Maddie's head tipped up ever so slightly so that her lips could find his again. The kiss was soft and sweet; a kiss that was generally meant to seal things, a kiss you might leave somebody with. But when Harry moved, pulling only an inch away from her, Maddie's hands reached out and her fingers clutched to his shirt; holding him there. Her eyes lifted to his and her lip pulled into her teeth. With a gentle tug, she brought his lips back to hers. She wasn't ready to seal things. She wasn't ready to leave.

"Mmm..." She sighed into his mouth, her hands pulling him closer. There was a moment, a pause, where a wordless exchange of conversation occurred.

Her mouth opened under his, her tongue drawing him in; a silent 'Please. This. Now.'

His hands closed over hers still holding to his shirt, his eyes opening to look into hers; 'Really?'

With the tiniest of nods, Maddie tugged at his shirt, sliding it effortlessly from his body and tossing it to the floor. 'Yes. Really.'

She needed this. She needed him. Since she found that photo of her and her father, her emotions had been a wreck. Thinking of the holiday and of the wedding had drained her. She needed to be replenished. She needed something to fill that empty space that had caved in when she thought of it.

Harry could do that. Harry could kiss her and bring her back to life. Harry could pull his hands into her hair, step into her space—he could fill her lungs with the smell of him, fill her mind with thoughts of him, fill her entire being with him. He could rejuvenate all of her senses, all of her nerves and leave her in a blissful mess instead of this emotional one she had just been.

She knew Harry could do that, would do that. He would do that for her.

There were no words. There was only a heightened, heated, heavy moment where the look on Maddie's face, the sentiment of her kisses passed from sad to please, please fill me up with all of the good you have in you. She needed it. She needed him.
'Heal me. Make me whole.' She pulled him to her then, needing his body over hers, his weight pressing into her.

'Anything. Anything. Anything.' He followed where she lead; willing and ready to do whatever she asked—even if she didn't ask it outright.

He would do that for her.

The mood was serious as Harry moved over her, his body pressing her back into the pillows. He had a fleeting thought that maybe he should remind her of her flight, of the time she had left to finish packing. But the thought drifted just as quickly as it came.

Her hands were possessive as she clutched at him, needing him closer, closer. Her lungs took the air from his, her lips and tongue pulling him in, taking him over. Her legs wrapped around him instantly, her feet pressing into his back as her body arched up to meet his. Her want for him was palpable. Her need for him bordering on desperation.

His attempts at foreplay were brushed aside. She didn't need that in this moment; the touches and the soft, subtle seduction. She didn't need that. She needed him, all of him, every inch of him and she needed him right then.

Hastily, their clothing was removed, tossed to the side and without warning or preamble, he was pushing into her. He was slow and steady and as he moved into her, the tiniest of cries moved from her lips. She blinked at the tears in her eyes and wrapped herself around him, holding him there. She wasn't ready for him to move yet. She wasn't ready for the friction. She just wanted him there, right there, filling every inch of her. She needed the entire length of his body resting against hers. For just a moment.

Harry stayed steady, his body over hers as his hand moved to her face. He pushed her hair from her forehead, his lips finding hers. He kissed her again and again and again, making love to her mouth before he could make love to her body. He held her, cradled her close, waiting for her to give him direction, permission.

And when she did, when she finally released her tight hold on his shoulders and arched her hips away from his, Harry took his cue and began to move. The breathy moan that came from her was primal. The heat in the room was intense. It was so intimate, so personal—the way their eyes never lost contact; the heavy, hot kisses and the deep, slow thrusts. It made Maddie's heart soar and it made Harry struggle to maintain control.

"Please..." Maddie cried out as her head tipped back into her pillow. "Please..." She breathed as Harry's lips moved to her neck, to her chest. "Don't stop. Don't..." Her words fell off her lips as she let out a small gasp.

He could tell that she was struggling. He knew her well enough, was familiar enough with her body that he knew she was struggling—unsure if she wanted fast and hot or slow and burning. He could tell by the way her hips moved to him, by the way her fingers pressed into his back, by the way she nipped at his lips when he kissed her.

Making the decision for her, his hand wrapped around the back of her knee and pulled her leg higher, allowing him deeper access. And he stayed steady; in and out, in and out.

"Please..." She begged, wanting to run from the lump that was forming in her throat, from the burst of emotion she knew would come with following him to the place he was pushing her. He
watched as her eyes rolled back, her lids fluttering closed. He watched as her cheeks flushed pink and her lips pulled into her teeth. He watched and he knew.

"Look at me," his voice was heavy, gruff, as hand moved to her neck. He wrapped his fingers around the back of her neck, tilting her back to him, back to the moment. "Open your eyes..." He was not asking. He was demanding. And, because he could make her do anything in that moment, she complied. Her eyes opened and locked with his. His thumb dipped into her mouth as he held her to him. "My God...I love you," he groaned; his free arm wrapping underneath her, pushing her to him.

She couldn't look away from him if she had wanted to. With his forehead pressed to hers, his hand moved down between them, finding home where they were joined together. With the added stroke of his fingers, with his eyes holding hers, he pushed into her; deep, steady; deep and steady.

"Oh..." Maddie sucked in the air between them.

"Yes." Harry nodded encouragingly.

"Harry..." She gasped, her body constricting around him.

"Yes." He commanded.

"Yes." She echoed.

"Yes." He bent to kiss her. "Come on baby..." He whispered into her mouth. "I know you want to let go. Just..."

And she did. She let go.

Of the tension from before.

Of the sadness.

Of the hurt and the upset and the uncertainty.

Of her entire mind, body and soul.

Of any inhibition she had.

She let go.

Despite his very best efforts, Harry found it impossible to keep the smug grin from his face as he held onto her; steady and strong through the waves of her passion. And only when she met his eyes with a silent, commanding, *Come with me*, did he let go and join her; his hands fisting the pillow under her head as he groaned into the soft concave of her neck.

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pressing to the top of her head in the sweetest way.

"Are you okay?" He whispered to her, wanting to protect the silence as much as she.

"I am now," she sighed into him, her head tilting up so she could meet his eyes. And they smiled, together; a bright, beautiful smile that spoke of the joy that now washed over them.

"Good," he tightened his hold on her, still in place over her, still pressing her into their bed.

"I have a flight to catch." She surrendered to reality.

"Ugh..." Harry groaned as his fingers moved along the curves of her body; down her side over her hip. "I knew you were going to say that."

"You're a genius," she smiled up at him, her hand moving up and into his hair; everything about her less tense, more relaxed. "I'm going to miss you."

"And I you," he kissed her, his eyes smiling as a thought came to him. "Listen. Do you think maybe you could come somewhere with me for a moment?"

"Come with you somewhere?" She grinned. "You mean right now?"

"Yes," he nodded.

"But I have..." She laughed at the eager look on his face. "I have a flight to catch."

"You have plenty of time before they summon you to the car."

"Less than an hour," she twisted to glance at the clock. "And if you haven't noticed, I'm completely naked."

"Oh I've noticed," he groaned, his head dipping to kiss her chest as she laughed and swatted at him playfully. As he pulled away from her then, allowing a kiss for her stomach before he sat up, she frowned at his absence. "Come on, love. Put your clothes on, get settled and come with me. There's something I want to show you."

Maddie leaned up on her elbows, glancing around the room. She was basically done packing. All she needed to do was locate what she had been wearing and make sure her on flight bag was ready.

"Okay," she shrugged. "Just let me dress and check one thing and then...I will go with you."

"Fantastic." Harry clapped his hands together. Leaning to kiss her first, he stepped from the bed—pulling her along with him. "Clothes."

"Clothes." Maddie repeated with a matching smile. Never in her life would she be able to find words for just how cleansed she felt after Harry loved her, how whole she felt.

They both hurried about, dressing and packing and moving items to the entryway of their place where the staff would pick them up and load them into the car. The new ease and state of relaxation was evident in the way she walked, the way she spoke; the way she breathed easier.

"Okay Wales," she looked at her watch. "You have thirty minutes. Where are we going?"

"Hmm..." His grin was wicked. "Not quite yet. Coat, scarf, gloves, boots."
"Excuse me?" Maddie laughed as he reached for the landline and dialed.

"Coat. Scarf. Gloves. Boots." He ordered, ignoring her glare and focusing on her grin. "Come on Forrester, we haven't much....Hello." His voice, demeanor and posture changed as somebody answered the line. "It's Harry. We're going to eight and nine right now. Yes. Thank you."

"Eight and Nine?" Maddie was intrigued as she pulled on her second boot. "What is eight and nine?"

"I promise you if you stop stalling, you'll find out," he winked at her, reaching out to hold her coat while she slipped her arms into the sleeves. Very quickly, he dressed himself for the bitter winter nip that awaited them on the other side of the door.

"Fine," she huffed, pulling her stocking cap onto her head. "I'm ready."

"Perfect," he grinned and with a turn of the handle, they were outside. Taking her gloved hand into his, he led her past the waiting SUV, past the driver and Sampson, and across the lawn. He was moving quickly and with great purpose through the grounds.

"Well, we're not leaving the gates," Maddie observed. Harry chuckled at the way her mind instantly began to sort it out. "We left the car and the officers. We're walking alone so we can't be going out... Harry, are you taking me to the roof? I don't know if that's such a..."

"No," he grinned; his cheeks pink from the cold. "Not the roof."

"Okay..." Maddie's skin matched his. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

"No." Firm, definitive; he shook his head.

"Want to give me a hint?" Her hand tugged at his, her eyes growing soft. With a roll of his eyes, he laughed at her.

"Christmas."

"Christmas?" Her face screwed up at his one word response. "Christmas? But...oh no." She stopped short, her hand dropping from his. "Henry Charles. We had an agreement."

"An agreement?" He laughed again.

"If this is a Christmas gift..."

"What? If this is a Christmas gift than what?" He cocked his eyebrow as though she were being unreasonable. "How do you know I'm not living up to that agreement? What are the odds that what I'm about to show you does live up to that agreement?"

"Something we can share?" She turned her head slightly.

"Maybe," he shrugged; smug and smirky.

"Something we can..." Maddie studied his face, glanced around the dark, cold night before seeking his eyes. In them she recognized that flicker that told her—something was up. "What's going on?"
"Come on," he held his hand out to her, his breath coming out in visible puffs as he spoke. "I'll show you."

"Okay." She could do that, let him have this moment. He had, after all, just completely healed her. Her hand was back in his and they were moving.

They didn't walk much further before they took a quick turn and were walking up the short pathway to what appeared to be another apartment at Kensington. Who lived here? She thought. She had spent some of her endless amounts of time at home since their engagement to map out the grounds and get a grasp on who exactly was where. But she really couldn't place a name or a face with this particular residence. With a kiss to her cheek, Harry reached into his pocket for a key. As he walked up the two steps to unlock the door, Maddie chuckled at the thought that, in all the time she had known him, she was pretty sure this was the first time she had seen him with a set of keys.

"Right this way," he nodded to her, pushing the door open to an already lit room. Maddie took a breath and walked past him, her fingers reaching out to trail a path across his chest as she moved through the door; stepping into a large, spacious, empty room. Maddie's eyes scanned the place, taking in the wood flooring, the floor to ceiling windows, the crown molding, the enormous room, the grand stair case. "Harry?" She turned to watch him as he stepped inside, shutting the door behind him.

"Can I ask you something?" He turned the key over in his fingers.

"Sure." She smiled easily.

"How many babies do you really want to have?"

"What?" Maddie laughed but he was completely serious.

"The number eight gets tossed back and forth a lot," he was smiling as he spoke. "But I'm not entirely sure that's really what we want."

"No?" Maddie's eyebrows arched, unable to control the way her body lifted when they talked about children—especially after the way he had loved her less than thirty minutes ago. "The idea of trying to make eight..."

"Madeline..." His voice had warning to it. The definitely didn't have time for another go.

"I don't know Harry," she shrugged, moving freely around the room as she spoke. "I was an only child so the idea of a big family intrigues me..." She reached a bay window on the far wall and turned to look at him; lowering to the bench. "At least two. Maybe four." Her eyes met his and her smile stretched. "How many babies do you really want to have?"

"Hmm..." Harry's lips pressed together in thought, his finger tapping his chin. "I like the idea of two; one for each of us. Once they start to outnumber us..." He shook his head and chuckled. "But four would be great."

"Okay," she couldn't help the way her eyes sparkled at the thought. "Four it is."

"Four it is." His gaze held tight to hers for a moment, that dancing gleam in his eye brightening.

"Harry. I'm leaving for the States in fifteen minutes. What are we..."
"My place is too small," he cut her off.

"Too small?" Maddie laughed.

"Yes," he nodded. "The place we live in right now is too small for the two of us and four babies."

"Okay. But..."

"We can move here." He spread his hands out as if he were presenting the room to her. "I've spoken to my grandmother, to my brother and, if it meets your expectations, if it would suit you...we can move here."

"If it meets my...Harry..." Maddie's eyes were wide; she was speechless.

"There are plenty of rooms," he spoke softly. "The kitchen is incredible. We would need to do some renovations. We could put in a huge tub in the master suite, there's a room upstairs for a library..."

"Harry..."

"It was my mother's." That did it. Maddie's eyes welled with tears. She swallowed at the lump in her throat, wanting desperately not to dissolve into a mess for the umpteenth time that night.

"Your mother's?" She smiled up at him through teary eyes. "You...you lived here when you were little?"

"Yes," he nodded; sighing as he took a seat next to her. "Will and I lived here as children. She lived here until..." He cleared his throat and looked to his shoes for a moment.

"And you..." She was soft with him, gentle; giving back what he had given her when she thought of her dad. Her hand ran down his back. "Now you want to have our children here?"

"Hmm..." The smile pulled at his face, pulled him from his melancholy. Babies did that to him, babies with her did that to him. "If you say it's okay..." His eyes seemed tired when he turned to look at her, his forehead lifting in question. Maddie reached for his hand, conviction already setting in.

"You said there was a library?" She nudged his shoulder with hers.

"There could be."

"Well come on sunshine," she moved to her feet, taking his hand with her. "I don't have much time left in London and if we're going to figure out which room goes to the babies and which room goes to the books..." She had to stop, had to take a breath; Harry's eyes were so happy, she had to pause to mark that.

"Yeah?" His thumb rubbed at the back of her hand.

"Are you kidding?" Maddie whispered; tugging at his hand again. "Absolutely yes."

"Okay," he was beaming as he stood. His hands clapped together and his face shone. "Here's what I was thinking..."
For ten minutes they went from room to room; taking in the entire floor plan. Harry was animated as he spoke, explaining what the room had been, what it could be. Maddie was warmed from head to toe as he told of his plans for their home; for their future. She was touched when he shrugged and told her that, of course, she could disregard any of the suggestions he had made. Then, standing in the room that would be theirs, he stopped moving, stopped talking. He pulled her to him; his arms wrapping around her, holding her tight and close and safe in his arms for the second time that night. His face buried into her hair as he sighed; accepting that his time had run out. He needed to get her back. She needed to get to the airport.

"I'll miss you too," Maddie put voice to his thoughts; her fingers pushing into the hair at his neck.

"I'll be out in a week. We'll bring in the New Year in..." He pulled back slightly, having forgotten the name.

"Beaver Creek," she smiled. "They have a cabin there for the holiday."

"Big enough for Jim and Nathan and Sampson and Arthur?"

"Big enough for them too," she assured him; having gone over it and over it with her cousin Kyle who had done the booking.

"Okay," he sighed; his hands moving to rub her arms. "Come on, love. They're waiting for you."

"They'll wait for just one more minute," she smiled, tipping up on her toes to kiss him. It wasn't quite the request her earlier kisses had been, but it pulled him in nonetheless.

"Hmm..." He chuckled against her lips. "I think you're going to take marvelously to your role as a Duchess."

"Ha!" She laughed, pulling away from him and taking his hand. "It was bound to happen someday."

"It was," Harry nodded, leading her from the room. Maddie held tight to him as they descended the stairs, as they turned off the lights and stepped back into the cold; locking the door behind them.

She cuddled close to his arm as they walked back to the waiting SUV, now completely packed and ready to roll. The Security officers faded into the night as Harry reached to open her door for her.

"I love you," Maddie minced no words as she wrapped her arms around him. "Thank you for..." Her cheeks flushed. "Thank you for loving me like you do."

"Hmm..." He grinned, knowing exactly where her mind had gone. "Happy to." He hugged her tight and pushed his lips to hers. "Call me when you land in Colorado?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Give my love to the family."

"Of course," he agreed. "Oh!" He dropped his hold on her then. Reaching into his pocket, he produced a set of keys with a bright red ribbon. "Merry Christmas, love."

"Merry Christmas," she echoed, taking the keys lovingly from his hand; her voice dropping to a
whisper. "I can't wait to put babies in there with you."

"Come here," he pulled her in for another kiss.

"I'll see you soon," she nuzzled against him one last time before she stepped back.

"You will," he nodded, already missing her as she slipped into the warm vehicle. "I love you Madeline."

"And I love you," she grinned, leaning to kiss him once more before he shook his head slowly, committing her smile to memory as he shut her door—tapping twice on the cold metal.

As Harry stepped back from the large, black vehicle, the team stepped up. And with absolutely no haste, they were driving away from him. He stood and watched as they turned a corner and moved from his sight before he hurried to the warmth of his home; their home.

And he missed her instantly.

Maddie took a deep breath as they passed through the gates of Kensington Palace, allowing the events of the last two hours to settle over her. If it hadn't been for Harry, she would have been in a horrible mood; distraught and upset. But she wasn't. She was smiling and relaxed and thinking of their future family. Reaching into her bag for her phone, wanting to call her mother and let her know she was en route, her hand fell upon something unexpected.

"What is..." Her words ceased. There in her hand was a bag of her Christmas candy with a small note attached. 'Just as I promised. All my love-H.'

Duke. Duchess. Then babies. Maddie reminded herself; sinking into the soft leather seat and letting the warmth, the joy, flood right over her. Her smile stretched wide.

She was ready for the holidays.
After a ten hour flight and close to two hours of driving, Maddie and her crew finally made it to her childhood home in the middle of the night. And her mother was waiting. Clad in a bathrobe and sleepy eyes, she greeted them at the door. She hugged Maddie tight before meeting Arthur and Sampson and inviting them in to look around and get settled in their space. Maddie loved that her mother seemed to just roll with the idea that she now traveled with an armed officer at all hours of the day and night. Hannah hugged Maddie again, kissed her cheeks and promised they could catch up in the morning. And then she watched as her mother slipped back downstairs, already half asleep.

After a short phone call to a sleepy and half-awake Harry, Maddie cuddled under a blanket on the couch; the tree twinkling in the dark room next to the fireplace and she settled into her home. She wasn't tired, not in the least. After her own personal, red-haired, sleep-aid, Maddie had slept through the entire flight. She laid there on the couch, enjoying the peaceful stillness of it all until just before the sun came up and then she drifted off to sleep. She was still there, snug on the couch, when her mother finally re-emerged from her room; refreshed and dressed. Hannah sat down next to her, watching her for a moment before she began to gently nudge her awake.

"Madeline..." Hannah sang.

"Mmm..." Maddie moaned softly, turning a bit towards her mother.

"You probably shouldn't have slept on the couch..."

"No," Maddie groaned, her eyes pulling open. "It was really only a nap."

"Gary and Jenna are on their way over for breakfast," Hannah relaxed back. "They've been dying to see you. I hope you don't mind..."

"I don't mind," Maddie shook her head as she sat up, her eyes opening wide. She was happy they were coming. One of the best things about coming home was the abundance of family, the family she missed. "Okay. I'll wake up." She ran her hand back and through her hair.

"Well, well. Would you look at this..." Hannah took Maddie's left hand in hers, smiling down at the glistening ring on her finger. "And I thought it looked beautiful in the box..."

"You saw it in the box?" Maddie smiled up at her mother.

"Harry brought it with him when he flew out before..."

"Of course he did," Maddie sighed as she thought of him, as she thought of him traveling to Colorado with the ring to see her mother. "That must have been quite the meeting, no?"

"Hmm..." Hannah grinned as she thought of it.

"Was he terribly nervous?" Maddie raised her eyebrows.

"If he was, he didn't show it," Hannah shook her head.

"He is pretty smooth."
"I would say confident," Hannah laughed lightly.

"That he is."

"Yes."

"Okay." Maddie clapped her hands together. "I'm going to go shower and change before they get here." She tossed her blanket aside and rose to her feet, walking to the tree. "You only put on the lights."

"Of course," Hannah nodded, rising to join her daughter. "We'll string the popcorn and cranberries tonight and finish decorating tomorrow on..."

"Christmas Eve," Maddie finished. It was tradition—had been since she was young. Maddie allowed both the lump in her throat and the wide smile. Her eyes drifted from the tree up to the mantel. Passing over the photos, her eyes went directly to a new addition. "Look at this..." Her hand reached for the framed photo of her and Harry, from their engagement announcement at Buckingham Palace.

"Ah..." Hannah moved closer, her eyes dancing as she took in the photo. "Charles sent that after your announcement, with the nicest note..."

"He did?" This was news to Maddie.

"He did," Hannah nodded. "It was very sweet. And incredibly thoughtful."

"Yeah. They really know how to work that English charm, no?"

"I suppose so," Hannah laughed at the look on her daughter's face. "You look incredibly happy."

"Yeah, well. It was a crazy day," Maddie nodded to the picture as she sat it back on the mantel.

"No..." Hannah crossed her arms over her chest. "I meant right now."

"Ah..." Maddie sighed and turned a wide smile to her mother. "I am happy. I'm...I'm really happy."

"Good. Now. Go shower. Gary and Jenna are on their way and we have a big day ahead of us."

"Yes." Maddie clapped her hands together. "I'm on it."

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

"Seriously Maddie, that engagement interview was fantastic. You looked so amazing..." Jenna gushed over coffee and pancakes.

"Thank you Jenna. But I take very little credit for that. I had stylists and a hairdresser and..." Maddie chuckled as she remembered it. "And a shot of Tequila."

"Nice," Gary shook his head as they all laughed.

"Thank you."

"You know...There's a pool at work over what tiara you'll wear."

"What?!" Maddie had to laugh at that.

"There is!" Jenna nodded. "It's so ridiculous. People are incredibly invested in this wedding. It's like...I don't know. The Super Bowl..."

"It's nothing like the Super Bowl," Gary shook his head and Maddie laughed.

"Fine. It's like a Disney story coming to life..."

"Oh-kay," Maddie adjusted in her chair, looking her long-time friend and cousin-in-law in the eye. "You do know that it has nothing to do with Disney, right?"

"Oh God yes!" Jenna rolled her eyes and laughed. "Sorry. I totally get it. I'm just saying the world has gone..."

"Yeah," Maddie agreed, swallowing back some coffee. "Hey. You want me to tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"The tiara. You want me to tell you what tiara I'm wearing? You can clean house in the office pool."

"Ha!" Jenna clapped her hands a couple of times. "No, thanks though. I prefer to stay out of it all together, you know? It's easier that way. Once I start answering questions or participating, they're just going to come at me all the time. It's best if I steer clear of it all."

"Wow..." Maddie sat in awe for a moment.

"What?"

"It just...it took me so long to understand that. Nicely done," she squeezed Jenna's hand across the table. "Listen. Is everyone coming tomorrow?"

"To Christmas Eve?" Gary raised his eyebrows. "Yeah. Everyone's coming."

"Yeah, but I mean...a little earlier..." Maddie reached for her coffee.

"For the wedding informational session?" Gary's voice was sarcastic. "Yeah. Everyone's coming. You told us if we didn't come to the session, we couldn't come to the wedding."

"I did?" She smiled sweetly, defiance twinkling in her eyes.

"Yes." He glared. "And just a fair warning, if you don't have alcohol at this informational session, you're going to have a revolt on your hands."

"Got it."

"A whole different kind of tea party."
"Nice," Maddie rolled her eyes. "I'll have booze. Mom, can we add booze to the shopping list for this afternoon."

"Absolutely."

After a day of shopping, Maddie and her mother had finished their wrapping, finished a light dinner, and now—glasses of wine within reach—they were stringing up popcorn and cranberries to use the next day when they marked tradition and decorated the Christmas tree. The nervousness, the sadness she had felt before she left London had evaporated into this wonderful need to see to it that she and her mother carried through all of their old traditions; the cranberries, the stockings, A Christmas Story—they were making every effort to honor their history on what would be Maddie's last Christmas at home—even without her father being there to celebrate with them.

"Remember when you were little, how you always wanted to be the Baton girl that started the Christmas Parade?" Hannah smiled at Maddie across the bowls of popcorn and cranberries.

"I do!" Maddie laughed, covering her mouth to keep from spitting her wine. "I wanted that so bad! And it was always...what was her name..." Her eyes squinted in thought.

"Susie Bender!" Hannah exclaimed.

"Yes! Susie Bender!" Maddie sighed and then shrugged. "I bet they'd let me be the damn Baton girl now."

"I bet they would." Hannah nodded in agreement.

"Mom..." Maddie smiled as she laid the string of corn and berries onto the table. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Okay," Hannah answered casually.

"So." Maddie took a deep breath. "I'm getting married."

"Ah yes, I've heard," Hannah laughed over her wine glass. "To a Prince, is it?"

"Yes," she laughed, easing up slightly.

"Well, if you're asking for my approval, you know you have it. Harry is a great guy. Everyone likes him. They took a vote."

"They took a vote?" She laughed, temporarily side tracked.

"It's a thing your cousins are trying out," she shrugged and took another sip from her wine. "Don't worry. It's unanimous. Everyone approves."

"Good to know," Maddie shook her head. "But that's not what I wanted to ask."

"No?"

"No," she took a deep breath and met her eyes. "I want you to give me away." The impact of her
words was visible on Hannah's face as she took the emotional hit.

"Madeline..." Hannah breathed; the sadness wafting over her. This was one of those moments—a moment he would have given anything to have been there for, a moment that she would forever feel a void in.

"I'm getting married in six months and I need somebody to walk me down the aisle, somebody to hand me over to Harry, somebody to stand next to me," she tried to hurry, tried to get it all out before she started crying. "I need somebody to keep me grounded and strong and to keep me from losing it...I need somebody to stand where dad would have stood, to be his strength for the day..."

"And you want me?"

"I do."

"What..." Hannah cleared her throat. "What did Harry say? Have you talked to him about this?"

"Harry and I talked about it and he said that I should decide what I want to do and he would take whatever that decision was to The Queen...to his grandmother and that would be it."

"Wow."

"Yeah," Maddie smiled, her eyes growing soft as she thought of the man she was going to marry, the amazing man she was going to marry. She smiled at her mother, sincerity flooding her face. "You can tell me no, mom. You can tell me that you would rather watch from your seat and that you don't want that kind of pressure or that you don't want to read the stories they would print or...you can tell me no and I won't be mad or sad or upset or...you can tell me no, mom." Hannah shook her head; one hand holding onto her daughter's while the other wiped at her eyes. Maddie hurried with her speech. "You would have to come out early. You would have to go through some serious rehearsals. You would have to wear..."

"Yes." Hannah managed to find her voice. She blinked at the tears in her eyes, took big, deep breaths.

"They'll write about you and talk about you. They will talk about dad dying and..."

"I would be honored," she cut in again.

"Yeah?" Her eyebrows lifted as the tears welled up.

"Yeah." She nodded; pushing away from her chair so she could hug her. Pressing a kiss to her cheek, she pulled her into her arms. "I would be honored to represent your father, to stand strong for you...to turn you over to Harry."

"Thank you," Maddie laughed through the tears in her eyes. "Thank you mom."

"Of course," Hannah laughed along with her daughter, both of them wiping at tears. "Of course."

"I thought we would at least make it till tomorrow night before I broke down," Maddie blew air through her lips as she fanned her hands towards her face.

"Yeah..." Hannah nodded and sniffed. "Well. For what it's worth, I'm sure it won't be the last."
"Okay everyone," Maddie clapped her hands together and turned to the room full of her family. Her mother, uncle, cousins, spouses, and her grandmother had all assembled in her mother's family room at Maddie's request. She knew long before she left London that they were all going to have a million questions for her about the wedding and she thought it would be best to answer them all at once. "I really appreciate everyone coming early so that we could talk about the wedding."

"Of course, darling," her grandmother smiled warmly as the cousins chuckled at the way she made it sound like they had a choice.

"First, I really want to tell you..." She paused for a moment and then continued. "It means a lot to me that you are all coming out. I know that it's going to be a lot...the travel, the planning, the rules...it's a lot. But it means so much to me that you're willing to take it all on."

"Wouldn't miss it," Kyle met her eyes.

"And I just want to thank you...not only for coming to the wedding but for everything. You've been so incredibly supportive and I know it hasn't been easy. I know people ask you things and say things and...thank you. Thank you for having my back on this."

"Always," Derek smiled up at her.

"Thank you," she sighed. "Okay. Here's what's happening. I wanted to give you some information, a rundown of events and protocol surrounding the wedding and then, I will be happy to answer any and all questions you might have about any of it."

"Ten bucks says she made packets," Derek muttered to the cousins under his breath.

"You're on," Gary nodded.

"So..." Maddie reached into her bag and pulled out a stack of folders. "I put together some folders for you."

"Damn it." Gary groaned, pulling his wallet from his pocket to pay his brother.

"In the folder..." Maddie's eyes narrowed.

"Packet," Derek interjected, sending a rumble through the group.

"In the packet," Maddie smirked. "Are all of the details about the wedding; where you need to be, when you need to be there. First, the wedding is at St. Paul's Cathedral promptly at eleven o'clock. I have cars lined up to have you there when you're supposed to be there which is..." She flipped through her notes. "Ten. You will be escorted to your seats. Following the ceremony, you will be taken to Buckingham Palace where there will be a luncheon for all of the guests. You will have a bit of a break after the luncheon and that evening there will be a private reception back at Buckingham Palace. This will be more in line with what you think of when you think of a wedding reception."

"Except the Queen of England will be there," Hannah offered.

"Exactly," Maddie smiled. "You will have a car and driver available to you the entire time. They
will know when and where you need to be. They will pick you up at the house in enough time to
have you to St. Paul's. They will take you back to the house between the receptions, allowing you
time to relax and change."

"Maddie," Gary raised his hand. "You keep saying, the house..."

"Ah yes!" She grinned. "The Middleton's have generously offered to allow you all to stay in one
of their homes while you're in London. There is enough space for all of you to be there, over eight
bedrooms on acres of land. They have made it available for three weeks before the wedding
through three weeks after the wedding...in case you want to sneak in a vacation."

"Wow..." Her grandmother smiled. "That's very sweet of them to do that."

"Yes," Maddie smiled with a nod. "It is. I know that this is, for most of you, the first time you've
come to England...or Europe for that matter and nobody wants you to have to live at a hotel for an
extended amount of time so a house just made sense. But, if you would prefer to stay at a hotel a
few nights or travel to another country, that won't be a problem. Just make sure you tell my travel
agent that when you call to set up your dates. Which reminds me..." Maddie pulled out another
sheet. "I need you all to contact my travel agent, Gerilynn. She needs to know when you are
planning on coming, when you are leaving and what sort of plans you want to make while you're
there. She will take care of the flights, the cars; everything. And then she'll send me the bill."

"Maddie..." Dena's eyes went wide, her head shaking slowly. "That is...incredibly generous. You
truly do not need to..."

"Don't worry about it," Maddie waved her hand; dismissing the issues in much the same way she
had seen Harry do. "Please. I want you all to be there. It's...it's so important to me to have you all
there and this is not at all a normal wedding and I have quite a bit of money in savings and...it's
not an issue. So please. Please just...take what time you want off from work, figure out what you
want to do while you're there and just...let me and my travel agent handle the rest. Okay?"

"Okay," Dena nodded. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Maddie smiled as the others echoed Dena's sentiment. "Moving on...You
should all be expecting a phone call from Joan Schuler. She is coordinating the wedding and she
will work with the men to get your sizes for your suits and she will work with the ladies to arrange
for hats or fascinators to go with your dresses. Yes you have to wear them. There is no negotiating
this."

"Is there a dress code?" Amy asked. "Other than the hats, is there a hem requirement or..."

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "There is a sheet in here about what is appropriate for St. Paul's and the
luncheon and then a looser dress code and guidelines for the evening reception."

"Great," Amy nodded.

"Speaking of dress code," Maddie sighed. "I want to talk for a moment about protocol with the
Royal Family. There are a few pages of colored pictures, with names and titles of Harry's family.
If you could all take those out, I want to start with who's who."  

"Hey look!" Kyle's excitement brought a bit of laughter to the group. "It's Harry. I know him!"

"Hold up," Derek moved forward in his seat, finding a serious moment in all the frivolity. "His
actual name is Henry?"

"No," Amy shook her head. "His actual name is His Royal Highness Prince Henry of Wales."

"Seriously?" Derek looked up at her.

"No," Maddie shook her head with a smile.

"That is his title," Jenna offered. "His name is actually Henry Charles Albert David...Wales? Windsor? I don't know..." She looked to Maddie with the same raised eyebrows as Derek.

"Okay," Maddie's voice was calm. "Everyone take a breath. I'll walk you through it." She tried to bring comfort to the room. "Let's start at the top. This..." She pointed. "Is the Queen of England."

"We're not idiots, Maddie. We know who the Queen of England is," Derek rolled his eyes. "Maybe you should start at the bottom. Who's at the bottom?"

"You," Kyle nodded to his brother and laughter erupted.

"Lovely," Maddie laughed, sighed and sank onto the couch. As Maddie reached for her drink, it was her quiet Uncle Patrick who brought it all home.

"Maddie...this list...it's put together based on order to the throne, no?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded, sipping from her glass. "Why?"

"It's just..." He smiled at his niece, feeling silly for only now realizing it. "Harry is...close to the top."

"Yes," Maddie nodded, a wave of seriousness washing over the room as they all focused on the sheets in their hands.

"I mean, after the Queen, he's...one, two...three. Third."

"Yes," Maddie nodded. This wasn't news to her, but she absolutely understood the impact the realization had.

"So..." Jenna looked down at the paper in her hands. "If something happens to William before he has children then Harry would be..." Her eyes rose, large as saucers.

"The King of England," Kyle finished her thought; the solemnity in the room deepening.

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "If something happened to William before he had children then...eventually...Harry would become the Sovereign."

"Wow..." Gary breathed, sitting back in his chair.

"Yes," Maddie nodded again; trying to wade through her mucked up feelings on the issue—trying to stay focused and not get drawn off into the land of a very real 'what if'.

"But then that would mean that you..." Amy pointed at her and all eyes focused on Maddie; wide and amazed as it dawned on them.
"Yes," she gulped, took a breath, and took her opportunity to control the conversation again. "That is a possibility...an unlikely one, but a possibility all the same."

"Wow..." Even her grandmother was shocked.

"Yes," Maddie smiled and cleared her throat. "Now. The Queen..." She turned to the papers. "You address her as Your Majesty the first time you meet her. After that, it is acceptable to call her Ma'am. She is not Your Highness. She is not Your Royal Highness. She is Your Majesty. It's incredibly important that you understand that. When you speak of her, you can call her The Queen or Her Majesty..."

"Do we...I'm sorry," Jenna apologized for cutting her off. "Do we curtsy?" Maddie grinned.

"Well...here's the thing. The Queen doesn't expect you to curtsy and bow. The family doesn't expect you to curtsy and bow."

"But?"

"But...they are probably going to be the only people in England who do not." Maddie sighed. "If you do then the stories will probably be about the American's coming to England and bowing before the Queen. If you don't, then the stories will be about the Clampetts visiting Buckingham Palace, if you know what I'm saying."

"Now there's untapped movie potential," Kyle cracked a much needed joke.

"Yes," Maddie laughed. "Look, it really is entirely up to you. I just want you to know the outcomes of both decisions."

"What about you?" Kyle asked. "What would you prefer we do?"

"Hmmm..." She smiled. "I would prefer that you curtsy to the Queen, to the Duke of Edinburgh, and to Harry's father and Camilla. And, even though it would probably make him uncomfortable, Harry's brother. If you don't want to do the others, that's fine. But those four are either the current Sovereign or in direct line to be and I would appreciate it if you would."

"Seems reasonable to me," Patrick answered for the group, his eyes scanning them all. "It's a moment in our lives and I think you're the one who has to deal with the outcome of it so...I think we can all do that. Right?" He looked at the group who all quickly fell in line and nodded their agreement. Nobody in the room wanted to make this more complicated for Maddie than it needed to be.

"Wait," Amy spoke up. "I'm sorry. I know this is just my American ignorance here but...how. How do we curtsy?"

"Ah yes," Maddie smiled and reached into the folder. "On this DVD are a few short instructional videos from you tube. You can check those out. Also on the disc is William and Catherine's wedding just...so that you can get an idea as to the flow of things.

"Awesome," Amy nodded. "Thank you."

"Hey Maddie? Can I ask you a question?" Dena spoke up.

"Of course."
"You're...you're really not going to be an American anymore?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "I'm not. I've passed all of the required tests for citizenship and after the first of the year, I will have met my residency requirement and my application will be filed. Once the application is approved..."

"You'll be what? An English citizen?"

"British," she corrected. "I'll be a British citizen."

"You're not going to do some sort of dual citizenship?" Gary asked, intrigued by the process.

"Nope."

"Wow..."

"Will you still be able to do American things?" Derek asked.

"Like what?" Maddie smiled.

"I don't know...sing the National Anthem?"

"Oh I'll sing a National Anthem, it will just be different from yours."

"You won't get to vote for the President anymore," Gary pointed out, knowing her love for that particular civic duty.

"Nope," she shook her head. "I'll have a Queen now."

"Harry's grandmother," Amy grinned, still processing the craziness in that sentiment.

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "And a Prime Minister."

"Do you vote for him?"

"It is an elected position but I won't vote. I can't."

"Because you used to be an American?" Jenna guessed.

"No. Because I'll be a member of the Royal Family. We do not vote. We remain politically neutral."

"Wow..." Dena shook her head. "The Royal Family."

"Yes," Maddie smiled sweetly, understanding how odd it sounded.

"What about the Fourth of July?" Gary asked.

"What about it?"

"It was your favorite holiday," He pointed out, remembering childhood barbeques and parties. "Surely you're not able to celebrate like you used to, like we used to..."
"No. No I can't. I suppose Harry and I will celebrate differently."

"How?" Kyle lifted his eyebrows.

"By re-enacting the Revolutionary War," Maddie responded with a straight face. "Maybe I'll occasionally let Harry win." She winked, effectively managing to lift the mood in the room as they laughed.

"I can't believe you're going to be a Princess..." Dena shook her head.

"That's because I'm not going to be a Princess," Maddie pointed out, taking another drink.

"Wait..."

"Harry will be made a Duke right before the wedding," she explained as though she had heard it a million times; maybe she had. "So I'll be a Duchess."

"Like the Duchess of Cambridge?"

"Exactly," Maddie pointed at Jenna.

"What will you be the Duchess of?"

"Hmm..." Maddie let the smile flicker across her face, an inside joke running through her mind. "Sussex. The Duchess of Sussex."

"Wow."

"Right?"

"And you'll live at the palace?"

"I will live at a palace. I'm not sure which one you're thinking of but..."

"Which one? How many are there?"

"I don't want to tell you."

"Fine. Which one will you live at?"

"Kensington," Maddie's face grew bright as she remembered Harry's gift to her just before she left London. "There are apartments there that are nothing like what you think an apartment is," she laughed. "The one we're moving into..."

"Moving into?" Hannah cut in. "I thought Harry had a place at Kensington."

"He did," Maddie was quick to answer. "He does. We do. It's just...we want to have children someday and it's not big enough so...we're moving into his mother's old apartment."

"Holy..." Jenna sat back in her chair slowly, her mind processing the information.

"You're going to live in Diana's place?" Even her grandmother was stunned.
"Yes," Maddie smiled, remembering the joy in Harry's eyes.

"Wow," Dena sighed. "Seriously, Maddie...does the history ever just..."

"Take my breath away?" Maddie finished the thought.

"Yeah."

"Sometimes," she nodded truthfully. "Being at Buckingham Palace still blows my mind and honestly, it probably always will. But the other stuff, it's kind of settled in a bit. It's become more a part of my everyday life and it gets a little easier every day to sit in it. But this wedding...it's going to be a great big deal. There are going to be foreign heads of state there; Queens, Kings..."

"Will the President be there?"

"Of the United States?" Maddie asked, laughing internally that she had to seek clarification.

"Yes."

"Yes," she nodded, glancing down at her hands. "The President and the First Lady will be there."

"I'm not even sure what to say to that," Patrick shook his head in awe.

"Yeah. I know..." Maddie smiled sympathetically.

"Forget them," Jenna chuckled. "Maddie's in laws are going to be Charles and Camilla! Can you even imagine..."

"Yeah." Maddie took a breath. "Listen. I know this is all a little crazy. I get that. I mean...it's not just a wedding. It's...there's a Queen and Prince Charles is going to be there and...and you watched his wedding to Diana, you watched them become parents. And maybe you've even read some of the books and interviews and maybe you know some of what happened between the two of them. I know that. And maybe...maybe you already have an opinion formed. But please, please. Keep this in mind. You know Harry. You've met him, you've had meals with him, you've spent time with him. And these...these are his parents, his family. Diana wasn't The People's Princess...she was his mother. So. Before you let it sweep you away, before you get caught up in that...try to remember that. Trust me, it will be hard at first. But you'll get it. And if you have any questions, please...ask me." The room stayed still, silent for a beat before Kyle cleared his throat and broke the tension.

"I actually have a serious question."

"Yes?" She smiled up at him, tired and thankful for his voice.

"Do you curtsy to Harry? I mean...you know...for fun?" His eyebrows wagged.

"Ha!" Maddie was the first to laugh, setting off the domino effect to the group. "No. No, I do not curtsy to Harry."

"Good to know," Kyle winked at her. "Wow, Maddie. You're getting married..."

"I am."
"To a Prince."

"Yes," she grinned. "Is it too much? All of this, is it too much?"

"No way." Gary answered, patting her hand.

"Of course not," Derek shook his head.

"We're in," Kyle assured her. "We like to give you a hard time but like dad said...we're all on board."

"Good," Maddie let out a long breath. "Now. Can we take a break? I need a drink."

"As you wish, your highness," Amy winked as she moved from her seat, the room shuffling around as they transitioned from meeting to party.

"Actually," Maddie sighed dramatically. "It will be Your Royal Highness."

"Oh good God," Kyle groaned. "I'm not sure I'm going to be able to handle this..."

And, with a rumble of laughter and a smattering of hugs and kisses, the group was effectively moving on.

All of their family traditions stayed in place that Christmas. They watched "A Christmas Story," they ate Chinese food, they went to church and then they came back to Hannah's and opened gifts late into the night as the drinking and merriment continued. After everyone went home, Maddie climbed into her bed with a smile on her face and warmth in her heart. She was so incredibly thankful for her family—for the amazing group of people that had assembled into this wonderful collection of souls. She was so lucky.

And then it hit her again. This was her last Christmas at home, her last with this wonderful group of people. She willed the tears away, trying to push down the sadness that inevitably came with something like this, trying to replace it with the overwhelming love she had for Harry.

But she couldn't help it. Ultimately the tears came—even though the smile remained in place. And the next morning, Christmas Day, over the requisite pancakes and stocking stuffers, Maddie listened more closely to her mother, hugged her tighter; she made it a point to commit these moments to memory because, soon, that was all she would have of her small, quaint Christmas.
"Madeline!" Jenna called to Maddie who was loading her bag into the back of their SUV.

"Jenna!" Maddie called back, leaning around the side of the vehicle to look at her.

"Your phone is ringing!" Jenna was already inside, buckled and ready to roll. "Here!" She called as she held it out the window. Maddie, laughing at the easy atmosphere that surrounded the group, even at this early hour, as they packed up to head into the mountains for a long weekend. Maddie, Gary, and Jenna were riding together through Denver to pick up Derek and Dena (who were leaving their little girls with grandpa) and the five of them—and Maddie's security detail—would be meeting Kyle and Amy at the place they had rented in Beaver Creek. A quick glance at her screen drew a wide, silly grin to her face.

"My darling!" She exclaimed as she answered the phone. "My love...my life..." She could hear his laugh before she heard his voice.

"Good morning," he drawled. "Have you been drinking already?"

"No," she sighed happily. "I'm on a natural high. I get to see my man tonight."

"Of course."

"I can't wait to see you Harry," her voice lowered suggestively. "I want you here with me. Now."

"I'm boarding a plane as we speak, love." He didn't care that she was being bossy, ordering him around—his grin stretched further. "I'll see you before the night is over."

"Thank God!" She sighed.

"You know..." Harry laughed as he handed his bag over and looked at the plane. "I have made an executive decision. You can't be this far away from me again."

"Agreed," Maddie's cheeks hurt from the smile that pulled at her cheeks as the flirtation began.

"I've actually considered having your passport revoked."

"Well there's really no need for that as I have no intention of leaving your bed again..."

"Ha..." His laugh was low, gravelly; hiding the rush of need and want that flooded his body. "You say that now."

"I mean that now."

"What about the tub?" He lifted an eyebrow.

"Excellent point," she nodded and sighed; missing him more than she had before the call. "You're on a plane right now?"

"Just about," he looked to the steps, lowered and waiting for him. "You're on the road to the mountains?"
"The car is loaded. They are just waiting for me to get in and..."

"Go." He waved his hand as though she were there. "Get in the car. I'll see you soon."

"Call me when you land?"

"Yes."

"Kiss me when you arrive?"

"Be careful what you wish for."

"I hope you're well rested and hydrated when you get here."

"I love you Maddie."

"Love you too Harry." And with bright, shiny eyes and a blush of a smile, Maddie ended their phone call and moved to join her cousins in the SUV.

The trip into the mountains was relatively short and full of humor. They laughed the entire way in, even when the snowfall began, even as it grew heavier. And, when they finally arrived, Maddie's security team worked quickly, checking the place out before they all moved their stuff in.

They had been doing this since they were children. Their parents would rent a huge cabin and everyone would go to the mountains to celebrate the New Year. It wasn't until recently that their parents bowed gracefully out and let the cousins continue the tradition. Kyle and Amy had already arrived and had already begun the celebrations. After Maddie settled into what would be her and Harry's suite—right across from the set of rooms that would house their security detail—she hurried downstairs to the wide, open living room/game room to partake in the festivities.

And that's exactly where she was, hours later, when the sun gave way to the moon and Harry's arrival drew imminently closer. They had ordered pizza from a consistently amazing local pizza place and the bar was incredibly well stocked. And, though they had every intention of hitting the slopes first thing the next morning, they also had every intention of knocking back a few that night. Maddie kept a close eye on Arthur, knowing that he would know before she that Harry was there, and she sipped happily from her fourth glass of wine.

"Okay, Maddie..." Amy's face was flushed red from the wine and the laughter that flowed so easily with this group. "Can I ask you a few more questions about this whole...royalty thing?" Her eyes flashed wide when she smiled the word royalty.

"You can ask me anything you want before Harry gets here," Maddie waved her hand; feeling open and honest with her family around her. She preferred they ask rather than assume or go to another source for their information.

"Okay. So." Amy took a breath and grinned. "After the wedding, will people have to curtsy to you?" Maddie rolled her eyes with a sigh.

"Have to? Not necessarily..." She sighed again. "But they probably will. Not everybody though...but...yes. I will be a curtsiable person after the wedding."
"Right after the wedding?"

"Umm..." She bit on her cheek as she thought about it. "I think so. I mean...yes. I think so. Harry will be a Duke and then I'll be his wife so...Yes."

"So when we see you at any one of your receptions..." Amy's eyes flickered in a devious sort of way. "We should curtsy to you?"

"Oh God," Maddie groaned, her head tilting back. "No. No you should not curtsy to me. No."

"Will everyone else be curtsying to you?" Dena couldn't help but join in on this conversation.

"Some will—probably. I don't know." Maddie shrugged and took another drink. "This is my first royal wedding too."

"Fair enough," Amy laughed along with her. "It's really going to be something, huh?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "It really is."

"Hey ladies!" Kyle called out as he and the other two men rejoined them, fresh beers in hand. "What are we talking about?"

"Maddie's new life," Jenna answered him, tilting her lips up to kiss Gary as he sat next to her.

"Ah..." Derek chuckled. "I was actually wondering..."

"Yes?" Maddie turned a smile to him, amused by the direction the conversation was taking.

"Your security detail...they go with you everywhere? Or did they just have to come with you on this trip because you left England without Harry?" Maddie's eyes met with Arthur and they shared a smile—they had gone through the bumps and turns that came with the beginning of this new, unique relationship, and now they felt incredibly comfortable in it all.

"They are with me wherever I go," Maddie offered a wink at Arthur who shook his head at her with a toned down smile. "Except when we're at the Palace. When we're behind gates or secured areas, they don't have to be right with me. But when we're out in London, they are out with me. Just like they are now."

"Is it always two?"

"Nah," she shook her head. "It depends on what we're doing, where we're at. There is always one officer with me, with me. And usually there is one in the car. But again, it all depends."

"Have you had any incidents?" Derek, having been in the military, had a unique interest in it all. When Maddie's eyes met Arthur's this time, they were both more serious.

"No." She shook her head simply. "Not that I'm aware of."

"Are they really going to...I don't know...stand between you and a mad gunman?" Maddie's head whipped to look at Derek.

"Excuse me?" Her voice was high, her mood lowered for a moment. Security was not something
that anyone around her in London took lightly. Members of Harry's family had been in some very dicey moments, barely sidestepping disaster in a few instances. She had to take a breath and remember—this was foreign to them. Her cousins still found it novel that she had a security detail.

"Sorry," he smiled softly. "I didn't mean to...I was just curious. You're just...you're not blood royalty. You're an American. Is the expectation still the same?"

"I..." Maddie cleared her throat and looked to Arthur who, moving forward in his seat, decided it was time for him to be an active participant in this conversation.

"If you don't mind, I would be happy to take this one?" He lifted his eyebrows in Maddie's direction; checking for her permission.

"Please," she nodded and watched as Arthur turned his attention to Derek. With a breath and a stone-serious expression, he nodded.

"Yes." It was clear. It was calm. It was concise. "The expectation is that we remove the Protectee, in this case Doctor Forrester, from a situation before it would require such an intervention. But, if it arises, yes. The Officer, myself included, is to stand between her and a mad gunman. American, non-blood—it doesn't matter."

"Wow..." Derek shook his head, easing back into his chair. Maddie looked at Arthur, suppressing the overwhelming urge she had to hug him and thank him—knowing he would most certainly balk at that. Instead she smiled at him and, taking a drink, moved the conversation away from him—allowing him to fade back out just as he preferred.

"Okay," she looked to her cousins. "What else do you have? Let's get it all out now."

"Okay," Kyle cleared his throat, surprising Maddie. "This may be none of my business and you can tell me that. I just wonder, with all of these changes you're making, all that you're walking away from—which I totally understand and support, by the way—what happens if...what happens if it all ends?"

"How do you mean?" She could see that he was concerned about her.

"Did you have to sign a prenuptial agreement?"

"Kyle!" Amy nudged him in the ribs.

"No, no," Maddie smiled at the two of them. "It's fine. It's a valid question." She took a breath. "He's a high ranking member of the British Royal Family. Of course there was a pre-nup. Of course. And I was not, nor am I, offended that I was asked to sign one. I expected that to be a part of this."

"What did you..."

"No," Maddie cut her cousin off with a shake of her head. "I'm not going to go into that. I'm not going to talk money details with you. I had a job before him, I could have a job after him. All you need to know is that..." She took a deep breath and let it out. "I would be taken care of. Well taken care of. More so if I had children. I will always have a place to live at Kensington if I want it and I will always have protection with me. And that is all you really need to know."

"Fair enough," Kyle nodded. "I just wanted to make sure you were going to be okay."
"Well," Maddie laughed. "I'll be well provided for. But if Harry and I don't make it...honestly...I'll be far from okay."

"Aw..." Jenna smiled at her. And then she did exactly what Maddie thought she would and she moved the conversation back towards the slightly silly, though incredibly real part of Maddie's life. "So. How's your wave?"

"My wave?" Maddie almost choked on her drink as her cousins laughed around her.

"Your wave," Jenna nodded, elbowing her husband who was rolling her eyes. "You know...in the car on the way to the church, in the carriage on the way to the palace...." She gasped with a wide grin. "From the balcony! You know...your wave..." She demonstrated amidst the giggles. "Have you been practicing your wave?"

"No," Maddie laughed, slouching back into the couch as she giggled. "I haven't been practicing my wave. Do you think I really need to do that?"

"I don't know," Jenna shrugged. "Let's see your wave."

"Yes!" Amy laughed, clapping her hands. "Let's see your wave!" And then, as the rest of them joined in on the clapping, Maddie rolled her eyes and gave them a wave and the laughter burst throughout the room.

"See!" Maddie's face hurt from her smile. "I got the wave down. I'm good. No practice for me."

"Very nice," Derek shook his head.

And just like that, the room moved back to the frivolity it had been hosting for the majority of the day.

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It was less than an hour later, while the boys set up a beer pong table—a relic from their college days—and Amy helped Dena in her quest to bake chocolate chip cookies while substituting at least two ingredients, when Maddie caught the signal. She was gathering up the empty glasses on the table, laughing as Jenna added logs to roaring fire, when she saw it. Arthur glanced to the doorway where Sampson stood. With a small, discreet nod, he turned to scan the room—taking in Maddie's location—and then he stood and slipped from the room.

And Maddie knew.

Harry was there. Or he was incredibly close. Sampson and Arthur were going to greet Nathan and Jim, Harry's team for this trip, to pass on information about the location, to show them where they were set up. Though her heart instantly picked up speed knowing she was going to see him in a matter of moments, she steeled her reaction. Moving very casually, wanting to buy herself a moment of privacy, she took the empty glasses to the kitchen and smiled at Dena and Amy before she slipped out, completely unnoticed.

She hurried quietly through the halls, up the main staircase to the front door of this magnificent home that was situated on the slope of the mountain.

"Ma'am," Arthur smiled as he saw her.
"I'm onto you," she held one finger to the side of her nose as she pointed at him with the other.

"Yes ma'am," he laughed lightly.

"How close are they?" She asked, leaning against the railing; her arms crossed as she looked to the open room below and past that to the wall of windows that was the back of the house.

"Minutes," Sampson answered.

"Traffic?" Maddie raised her eyebrows.

"Little bit of snow," Sampson joked; knowing fully well the depths were increasing outside.

"Any problems?"

"None at all, ma'am."

"Good," she sighed, noticing the way her fingers were tapping against her own arm, the way she was already biting at her lip. The last week hadn't been nearly as hard to be patient with as this last minute was proving to be.

They stood in silence for less than thirty seconds before there was a small, quiet knock on the door. Maddie's natural instinct to answer the knock was quickly swiped aside as Sampson moved forward. Nathan stepped into view first and Harry's voice followed behind him.

"Christ!" He called out. She could tell by the way his voice twisted that he was smirking. "A little snow?! What the hell kind of..." He stepped inside, brushing snowflakes from his mess of red hair, with Jim right behind him locking the door.

"Little bit of a cry baby, no?" Maddie grinned as Harry turned in her direction; his eyes searching and locking with hers. "Aren't you the very same Prince who trekked across the Arctic to the North Pole?"

"One and the same," his eyes glinted happily as he dropped his bag to the side and moved directly to her. Maddie's arms stretched out, her fingers pulling at his coat, tugging him near.

"Come here Your Royal Highness...I'll warm you up," Maddie flashed her eyes to their security officers who were already moving towards the hall to their side of the house. "Hi baby..." She wrapped her arms around his neck as his encircled her waist, easily folding his body around hers.

"Hi," Harry's voice was low, gruff; his lips moving to hers on a mission. Maddie, finally feeling the ease and comfort that came with being at his side, sighed into his lips; eased into his arms.

"Mmmm..." Maddie grinned against him; her face warm from the alcohol, from the kissing. "I missed you." Her fingers tickled the back of his neck.

"I missed you too," he kissed her again; looking in her eyes, taking in her flushed neck and cheeks. "How far ahead are you in the drinking?"

"Pretty far," she giggled lightly, her hands moving down to pat his ass playfully. "You have a lot of catching up to do big boy."
"Oh love...I think you're smashed." God he was happy to see her. It had been too long for him, and there were too many people around for the way he really wanted to greet her. But DAMN, he was happy to see her.

"I think maybe you're right," she nodded and kissed him again; her hands slipping into the back pockets of his jeans. "I saw pictures of you at Sandringham. You looked sad...or tired."

"I saw pictures of you at a small country church," he countered; his hands taking in the curves of her body as they ran over her. "You looked like you were sitting far too close to the man next to you."

"You mean Arthur?" She giggled, pointing down the hallway to where they had all disappeared. "My Protection Officer?"

"Does he really need to be so close?" His head tilted. He was playing with her and she knew it.

"He had to leave his piece in the car with Sampson..." She explained anyway, her hands moving back around him to tug his coat off of him.

"Why did he have to do that?" He tossed it to the bench next to the door and immediately moved back around her.

"He couldn't take it into the church," she shrugged. "Wait. How did you see me at church?"

"Apparently while licensed Protection Officers aren't allowed to take in their weapons, teenage girls are allowed to take in their camera phones."

"Ah yes, of course," Maddie sighed. "What can you do?"

"Very little," he shook his head. "So...where is everyone?"

"Down in the family room," she stepped out of his arms, but took his hand. "But come on...get your bag. We're over here."

Harry pulled at her hand, bringing her lips to his once more before he reached for his bag and followed her down the hall; slowly and lazily—happy to finally be home with her.

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"Hey..." Maddie called as they rounded the corner back into the large living room where her cousins were now playing an active and lively game of beer pong. "Guess who I found just roaming around..."

"Harry!!!" Maddie laughed as the room erupted; greeting him just like the patrons on Cheers greeted Norm every time he walked in. He was smiling wide, beaming really, as they all moved to greet him and Maddie could tell—he was happy they were so happy to see him. And she loved how easy he fit in, how easily they accepted him.

"Welcome to the party man!" Derek extended his hand to shake Harry's.

"Thanks."

"Drink?" Gary called out from the kitchen.
"Please!" Harry nodded as he shook Kyle's hand. Greg pulled a few extra bottles out and headed back as Harry hugged Dena and Jenna hello.

"Harry," Amy grinned as she leaned in to kiss his cheek. "Oh! Wait!" She giggled as she moved from him. And then, with a quick, smirky side-glance at Maddie, Amy dipped into her very best tipsy version of a curtsy. "Your Royal Highness."

"Niiiiiiice," Harry shook his head, his smile twisting his lips. "She gave you the packets, didn't she."

"Ha!" Amy giggled as she rose to her feet. "Yep. She gave us the packets."

"Damn it!" He smacked his hands together, a laugh pushing through his lips. "I wanted to be here for the packets."

"Go ahead," Maddie rolled her eyes; sinking onto the couch with Harry behind her. "Make fun of the packets. I don't even care." She laughed. She didn't care. Harry's hand found home on the inside of her thigh as he settled next to her. They could laugh all they wanted; nothing would dampen her mood.

"Did you watch the DVD?" He asked the group as Gary handed him a beer and moved back to his spot at the beer pong table with Derek. "Thanks man."

"No," Maddie laughed, answering for them. "They haven't watched the DVD."

"You have to watch it!" He called out, taking a swig from his bottle.

"They don't have to watch your brother's wedding," Maddie sighed. "I just put it on there so they could see how it was all going to..."

"No, no," he laughed; his hand squeezing her leg lightly. "Not that. I mean...here. Who has a packet?"

"Why would we bring a packet with us to the mountains?" Gary laughed.

"Fair point," Harry laughed with a wave of his hand.

"I have mine," Jenna offered as the room rumbled in laughter.

"Of course you do darling," Gary shook his head.

"Can you go get it?" Harry asked.

"Sure," Jenna shrugged, heading out of the room.

"Really?" Maddie eyed him suspiciously. "Why would you want them to watch an hour long wedding..."

"Cause I didn't put the hour long version on the DVD."

"What?" She sat up slightly, turning to look at him. "What do you mean you didn't put the hour long version on the DVD?"
"You'll see," he smirked, offering her a wink before taking another drink.

"Harry..." She warned; nudging him with a toe.

"You'll see," he repeated; chuckling into his beer bottle.

"Here it is!" Jenna returned, mostly skipping.

"Perfect," Harry patted Maddie's leg before he rose from the couch, meeting Jenna at the large LCD TV mounted to the wall. "Okay..." Harry stepped back from the TV and addressed the group. "Trust me...you're going to want to watch this." And, since most of them were drunk and curious, they turned their attention to the TV. Standing to the side, Harry crossed his arms, bit his lip, and waited. The very second the overly British, twirly voice of the narrator came over the speakers, Maddie knew exactly what had happened.

"The Roooooooyyyyyaaaallllll Weddiinnngggg! Abridged." And so began a minute and a half of hilarity as Harry narrowly dodged the pillow Maddie threw at him.

"You had one job Wales!" Maddie called out over the laughter that now dominated the room.

"This is the best thing ever," Kyle shook his head.

"Are they going to do this to your wedding too?" Dena giggled next to Maddie on the couch.

"Harry!"

"Ah come on! This is much better than the real one," Harry turned sweet eyes to her. "You terribly mad?"

"No," she let out a breath with a roll of her eyes.

"Let's watch it again!" Jenna clapped her hands together as it came to an end.

"Let's turn it into a drinking game!" Dena smiled wide.

"How?" Derek laughed at his wife. "How do you turn it into a drinking game?"

"We take shots every time we see Harry," she raised her eyebrows.

"Fine," Derek chuckled, moving to the bar for shot glasses and tequila. "Let's do it."

And so began the most ridiculous drinking game Maddie had ever been a part of. She had no idea how many times they ended up watching that ninety second video. She couldn't remember how far in it was before her cousins began mimicking the voice of the narrator, before they began reciting the narration—word for word—falling all over each other as they laughed along.

Maddie watched as Harry held his stomach, tears in his eyes, as he laughed at Kyle taking over for the voice of The Queen.

It was wrong; wrong.

Maddie knew it was wrong. But the laughter continued and Harry led the way. So she sat back,
her legs twisted up with his on the couch and watched as her family moved from the video to telling embarrassing stories to a vicious card game before, finally, they called it a night.

"Come on smudgy," she whispered into Harry's ear; kissing the pulse point just below. "Let's get you to bed."

"Now you're talking," Harry didn't think twice as he allowed her to pull him up from the couch. Amidst a chorus of good-nights and thank you's for the video, Harry followed Maddie as she tugged him towards their room.

"Mmm..." Harry's hands were firm on her shoulders as the stepped into the room, kissing at her neck from behind. "It's about time we retire to our room..."

"What?" She laughed as she turned towards him; the door shut and secure behind them. "You said you wanted to go downstairs and..." He silenced her with his mouth; his hands cupping her neck, tilting her face up towards him. "...say hello." She grinned against his lips.

"I did," he nodded, his nose nudging hers as he moved. "I did. But now..." His grin was sly. "Now I want to say hello to you..."

"Ohhhh..." She groaned as he pressed her body flush to his. "Good." She sighed as his lips moved to her neck. "Cause I've been saying hello to myself long enough."

"Ohhhh..." He moaned into the crook of her neck. "I love it when you talk dirty."

"And I love it when you pretend that you haven't had entirely too much to drink..." Maddie chuckled; her fingers moving through his hair.

"What's that supposed to mean?" When he pulled out of her neck, the look in his eyes was full of lust with the slightest pinch of a man who was being called to a challenge.

"It means..." Maddie bit at her lower lip, her chest rising and falling with her deep breaths. "It means that we're drunk, sunshine. Maybe we're more likely to pass out than to..." She smiled wide. "Say hello."

Somewhere in her foggy mind she then remembered that simple little rule; never tell a Windsor man what he can and, more importantly, cannot do. It was like awakening a beast. She actually saw it take over him; his eyes focusing, his tongue wetting his lips, as he pulled it together. In his mind, she had just presented a challenge.

A challenge he had every intention of rising to.

"You..." His voice was rough as his arms wrapped around her, folding her into him, as they moved further into the room. "...have waded into very dangerous territory."

"Oh?" She arched an eyebrow. "Am I in trouble?" The backs of her legs met the bed as Harry nodded.

"You are absolutely in trouble." It was a promise; a special kind of threat. Maddie's breath sucked into her lungs, her skin standing on alert—his blue eyes twinkling in the dark room.

"Harry..." She began; ready to mount a light protest, ready to offer warm, slow morning sex before they hit the slopes. But he had no intention of hearing her proposal. He was done with the
discussion.

"Shh..." He shook his head slightly and then, denying her any further word on the matter, he was moving her back on the bed; his mouth capturing her gasp of surprise.

She had expected him to be sloppy, to fumble a bit as he moved over her. But he wasn't. He was in complete control. He was steady as he moved her up to the pillows on the bed. He didn't fumble once as he took her clothes from her body, pulling his off with ease. His lips were firm and warm and purposeful when his mouth returned to hers, his hands gentle as he pulled her up to meet him. His arms wrapped around her in a way that made her feel small, delicate, taken care of. His hands moved up into her hair as his lips began their assault; dancing with hers, his tongue moving against her tongue.

Fuck, she thought. She had missed him. As if he heard her, as if he knew what was going through her mind, Harry chuckled very lightly before he pulled his lips from hers only to move to that spot on her neck; that spot that made her...

"Fuck..." Maddie couldn't help the groan that came when he kissed her there, when he kissed her like that.

"Hmmm..." He grinned against her skin, his mouth moving down her neck to her collarbone. "Let's see if we can get you to say that again..."

"Harry..." She breathed, her hands being forced from his shoulders, running along his neck to his hair as he continued his trek down her body. He stopped to pay homage to her breasts; loving how close she came to the end when he pulled them into his mouth; kissing and sucking and stroking in time with the way she moved against him.

"Too drunk..." His voice was so soft she barely heard him. As he passed over her stomach, as he skimmed past her hips, he nudged her legs apart gently; making room for him. And just before he settled in, just before he committed to his mission, he looked up at her—that evil cocky grin stretching from his lips to his eyes. "Really Madeline, I would think you would know better by now than to challenge me..."

"Ha!" She giggled; feeling light and young and full of anticipation. "You would think I would..." And when his lips found her, when his breath warmed that most intimate of places, Maddie's hands clenched—one in his hair and one in hers. "Fuck..." She breathed; knowing without seeing—just how smug he must have looked.

The last time they had made love had been so intense, full of emotion; heavy with it. He had said good-bye to her with a deep, slowness; making sure she felt loved and whole. But now, as his mouth worked—tongue, lips moving together in this blindingly wonderful way—to drive her to the edge, he was saying hello with passion, with thoroughness. He was celebrating their reunion with a driving strength maybe she hadn't been quite prepared for.

"Harry..." She gasped; her head rolling back on the pillow, her hips jutting towards him involuntarily. "God...yes..."

"Mmmm..." He moaned against her, drawing short breaths from her lungs; feeling her thighs press against him; pushing him closer to her. He knew she was close, incredibly close. He knew without looking that her face was flushed, that her cheeks were pink, that her lip was pulled between her teeth; that her eyes were pressed closed and she was clenching the sheets next to them. He knew that because he knew her. He knew her so incredibly well; well enough that he knew how to
bring her to this point quickly, how to move her to this edge and exactly what to do to give her
that final push. Reaching for her hand, his fingers tangled with hers, the very same way her other
hand was tangled in his hair; holding him to her.

"Harry..." She gasped. And then, squeezing her hand in his, he moved his tongue just so; he
moved his mouth just slightly. And just as he suspected, just as he knew... "Fuck!" Maddie called
out into the room.

And just like that, she was falling apart; trembling against his mouth—her moans were primal, her
breath labored. But he held tight to her, he maintained his post and, when she released her hold on
his hair, when she let her fingers slack their grasp on his hand, Harry finally moved. Leaving small
kisses to the inside of her thigh, to her hips, to her stomach, the soft underside of her chest, the scar
on her shoulder, the dip in her neck, her jaw—he moved to her side; smiling wide as he looked
down at her recovering body, her eyes still pressed closed.

"Are you okay?" His voice was soft, sweet, as he moved the rumpled blankets out from
underneath them.

"God yes..." She sighed, opening her eyes to his wide grin as he looked down at her; his head
propped up in one hand as the other adjusted the blankets around the two of them.

"Good," he leaned to kiss her; her hands holding him to her for a deeper kiss before letting him
go.

"You look...awfully proud of yourself," she felt her cheeks blush; feeling silly as they did.

"I am," he admitted shamelessly. "I'm...honored...that you let me be here," his fingers traveled
over her still sensitive body down to his favorite place. "I feel privileged that you let me kiss you
here, that you feel so comfortable, so relaxed, so at ease that you'll let me make home there..." He
moved to kiss her neck. "And yes...I am...satisfied when you're satisfied. I get an ego boost when
you hold me there while you moan my name...when you refuse to let me move while you clench
around me. Yes. I'm proud."

"Harry..." She breathed; her body igniting at his words, her skin tingling.

"And if you think it doesn't make my head swell to the size of this room when you look at me like
that..."

"Like what?"

"Like you want me to do it again..."

"Wow..."

"Do you want me to?" He arched an eyebrow, his voice low and rough. "Do it again?" She
gulped.

"No..." She shook her head and pushed at his shoulder; forcing him to his back. "If you think I'm
going to let you play all by yourself..." She moved over him then, straddling him as she bent to
kiss him. Her hair made a tent around them as her tongue pushed into his mouth, his hands
reaching up into her hair. And then, with a nip to his bottom lip, Maddie moved. She was only
able to land two kisses, one to his neck and one to his chest, before his large hands wrapped
around her arms and pulled her back up to him.
"Really?" Maddie's eyes flashed wide with surprise. "No?"

"No," he shook his head softly; moving her to his side; wrapping his arms around her, wanting her to settle against him. "Not tonight."

"I don't know what to..."

"You were right," he sighed; smiling down at her as he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'm too drunk."

"Well okay..." Maddie let out a breath; her arm wrapping around him as her leg moved to tangle with his. "Tomorrow maybe?" She was surprised at the yawn that came then.

"Tomorrow definitely," he laughed lightly, moving to kiss her again. "I love you..."

"Oh I love you too," she grinned against his lips; her heart feeling whole again. It didn't matter that they were thousands of miles from their actual home, that they were staying in a luxurious rented cabin, neither of them had felt more at home in the last week than they did in that exact moment. "I am so happy that this was our last Christmas apart."

"Me too," he couldn't have agreed with her more. Being with his family without her had been rough on him, made him feel lonelier than he should being surrounded by so much. He took a deep breath and let his eyes close.

"Good night..." Maddie yawned; nuzzling closer as she began to fade; happy and content and so full of peace.

"Good night." And then, with Maddie locked firmly against him; he allowed sleep to overtake him.
Chapter 88

Harry had awoken that morning to Maddie; her mouth warm and soft and waking him up in the most magnificent way possible. And before he could pull her back up to him, before he could move her so that she was under him, she had asserted her dominance over him and had moved him past the point of protest.

Face it. She knew his body as well as he did hers and he would be bold faced lying if he said he wasn't putty in her hands. Or her mouth as the case may be.

And as Harry lay on the bed, his mind spinning, slightly dizzy as his body recovered from her wake up call, Maddie slipped from the sheets, from his grasp. With her own cocky grin and a slight bounce in her step, she made way to the bathroom; calling over her shoulder for him to join her in the shower—they had a full day ahead of them.

In no time, they were back to business; drying and dressing for the cold, snowy weather outside. As tradition dictated, they—along with Maddie's cousins and their other halves—would be spending the day on the slopes. Harry was beyond excited, noting it had been much too long since he had last snapped on a pair of skis and let gravity do its wonder. And he was admittedly no slouch in the talent department—a point he made certain to make with Maddie.

"I know you think you have this skiing thing locked down," Harry eyed her competitively as he pulled his thick socks onto his feet. "But I don't think you know who you're messing with."

"Please baby," she rolled her eyes; adjusting her pants and shirt that would be her first layer of clothing. "This is my backyard. I was slaloming these slopes before you could even say Switzerland in that lovely British accent of yours."

"Those are some mighty big words, Doctor," Harry shook his head, his natural need to win edging through. "It's going to be a long day."

"Well...your royal highness," Maddie grinned as she spoke the words. "I suppose it will be for you...trailing behind me and all."

"Ha!" He tossed his head back.

"Laugh away," she warned before moving away from him, walking to the bathroom to tie her hair back and away from her face.

"Well at least the view will be worth it," Harry shrugged; focusing on her ass as she walked away from him.

"Hey!" Maddie snapped her fingers, grinning as she did. "Eyes up here."

"Aw come on!" He groaned with a matching grin. "I'd let you stare at my ass."

"Oh yeah?" Maddie laughed; twisting a tie around her hair.

"Absolutely," he stood and turned around, making a show of bending over to retrieve his shoes. "Look away love. This ass is yours."
"My own private ass?" She raised her eyebrows as she moved back to him.

"Your own private ass," he laughed with her; moving to pull her into his arms, his shoes still on the ground. "Come here..." His face nuzzled into her neck as her head tipped back in laughter.

"Mmmmm..." Maddie sighed as he kissed her there; moving up to her ear as his hands pressed against her back, pushing her into him and then suddenly, he was moving away from her. Maddie watched him, confused, as he stepped back—his eyes wide, his smile wider.

"What?" She read him so easily. His smile was beyond Cheshire, past 'cat got the canary'. "What is it?"

"I...I can't believe I forgot..." He shook his head and took a deep breath. "I have a gift for you."

"A gift?!" She sighed into a light giggle. "Harry, we had..."

"Rules," he finished her thought. "Yes I know. But it's not from me." He held up his hands; mounting a quick defense to what would most definitely be a lecture.

"Oh?" Her forehead crinkled. "From who then?" He smiled, kissed her quickly, and walked across the room.

"Kate," Harry called back to her as he moved to his bag, pulling out a small, beautifully wrapped gift.

"Well that's...odd." Maddie's forehead crinkled. "I have hers at home. I just...assumed...we would exchange gifts in London."

"Don't look at me. She asked me to bring this, I said I would..." He shrugged and held it out to her.

"Weird." Maddie took it from him. "Weird that she wouldn't wait..."

"Maybe it's edible," he offered with a chuckle.

"I'm sure that's it," she rolled her eyes and peeled away the paper. "A book. A children's book. That's..." She turned it over in her fingers and looked to Harry who was watching her with his arms crossed over his chest. "Is she...I don't know...is she helping me restock the library in Bendal after the earthquake?"

"No idea, love," Harry shook his head, though Maddie sensed something that made her think that wasn't entirely true.

"It is a good book though..." She smiled as she opened the front cover, reading the handwritten note there, and suddenly everything about her drew to a halt; her thoughts, her voice. Her eyes were the first thing that moved, snapping to meet Harry's. "Is this..."

"Yes." He nodded, that Cheshire smile returning.

"You mean..." Maddie's eyes teared up.

"Yes."
"It says 'Please read this book to me Aunt Maddie'..." She giggled as she bounced on her feet. "Harry! It says Aunt Maddie! I'm going to be an aunt?!"

"Yes!" He bit at his lip, his eyes wide; his smile contagious.

"Oh my GOD!" The book clenched in her hand, she lunged to him; her arms flinging around his neck. "Oh my God!" She pulled back to look in his eyes. "She's pregnant?"

"Yes." He caught her in his arms with enthusiasm. Harry was even more elated than she; and that was saying something. "They told everyone at Christmas. They gave us each a gift something like that..." He grew serious for the slightest of moments. "They are worried that it's going to get out before her first trimester is up."

"How far along is she?" Maddie pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "When is she due?"

"She is about two months along and they are due at the end of July." He couldn't help the way he beamed every time he sat with the realization that he was going to be an uncle.

"Oh wow..." She sighed. "I am so happy for them. Really. I..." She felt tears in her eyes again as she remembered the conversation she had shared with Kate so long ago. "I'm so happy for her. And him! And...oh God. Your father must be..."

"Beside himself?" Harry offered. "Yes he is. I know she wanted to tell you in person but she didn't want to wait and risk the world finding out before you came home."

"Of course," Maddie waved her hand; dismissing it as she pulled the book back between them. "Harry...we're going to have a niece...or a nephew."

"I know." He kissed her quickly, loving how she chose the word 'we'.

"I can't wait to hold him and snuggle him and smell his soft little head..."

"I know," he laughed into a sigh. "And I can't wait to buy him drums."

"Ha!" Maddie shook her head at him. "They are going to love you."

"Please," he rolled his eyes. "As if they don't already."

"Wow..." She sighed, her entire face registering the blissful way she felt inside. "This is just...it's the best news ever. What a wonderful gift..." She moved to stash the book in her bag.

"Yeah," Harry nodded and moved to the bed to put on his shoes. "Hey. I know this goes without saying, but this is something that is definitely a secret."

"Oh of course," Maddie nodded, zipping her bag and turning to face him. "I won't repeat it to anyone. It's not mine to tell."

"Thank you," he tilted his head up to kiss her.

"Don't mention it...Uncle Harry," she nudged his nose with hers before she left him with a giddy smile and returned to her preparations for the day of skiing.

Maddie and Harry, her cousins, and what was becoming quite the entourage of security detail spent the entire day on the slopes. Harry had always known Maddie had a competitive edge to
her; that she strived to be the best; that she loved to win. What he hadn't realized along the way was that this drive was something that was ingrained in her family; it wasn't just her.

It was all of them.

And so, at the end of a long day on the snow, when Kyle was throwing jab after jab towards the two of them as they clipped out of their skis on the deck of their place, Harry realized that Maddie was coming from a family closer to the Windsors than he had ever imagined. Beside him Maddie chuckled as Harry shook his head.

"I don't know why you're laughing," he eyed her. "He danced laps around you too."

"Of course he did," she sighed with a smile in her eyes. "I lived at sea level in Bendal for over a year and now I'm in merry ol' England with you. Kyle lives here. He does this all of the time..."

"And you're weaklings," Kyle called out with a smirk. Truth was, Harry had held his own.
Maddie had held her own. They were both incredibly athletic and skilled in what they were doing. They were just simply no match for Kyle who had grown up in the back-country and had kept up with his love for the sport. And he was enjoying this moment, as Maddie had always given him a run for his money when they were younger.

"I'm not sure I like Kyle anymore," Harry joked, hoisting his skis up into the rack on the side of the house.

"I'm not sure I'm going to be able to sit down for a week," Maddie groaned, rubbing at her backside.

"That was quite a fall," Amy smiled sympathetically. "You sure you don't want to get it looked at?"

"My ass?" Maddie laughed. "God, can you even imagine the headlines on that one?" She and Harry shared a knowing look, a small inside joke. "Thanks. But I'll be okay. I'll get Harry to rub it for me."

"Done," he grinned as Amy rolled her eyes.

"Actually," Dena smiled. "After we eat something, maybe we should hit the pool. The hot water might help."

"Now we're talking," Maddie nodded, pulling off her ski boots and running in her socks to the door; thankful for the ski in/ski out accessibility of their place.

"So..." Jenna summed it up. "Dinner, pool, party...fireworks in town at the lake?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded as she ran it through her head. "Sounds right to me."

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"You know, there is a big benefit to it being so cold outside," Harry leaned closer to Maddie. It was nearing midnight and, after a great dinner and a swim with her rowdy cousins, they had all decided to walk to the lake in town for the fireworks at midnight.

"Oh?" Maddie grinned, her cheeks pink from the crisp, cold air.
"Mmmm..." Harry nodded, his hand reaching for hers. "We're so bundled up that nobody knows who we are."

"Ah yes," Maddie's grin stretched as she looked around the gathering crowd; tons of people sitting together, drinking from thermoses of hot beverages, listening to the music as they waited. "The ever allusive anonymity."

"Exactly," he nodded. "For instance...I can do this..." His hand tugged on hers, drawing her to a stop before he pulled her to him. His fingers tugged her scarf down and his lips were warm against hers as he kissed her; full on the mouth in front of everyone. He pulled back just enough to wink at her. "And it won't even appear on the internet."

"Oh I like that..." Maddie giggled, tipping her face to meet his again. "We should take advantage of that."

"Agreed," he kissed her again before taking her hand and falling back into step with her family as they made their way through the crowds.

"Do you remember this time last year?" Maddie asked as her mind wandered.

"Sean and Kiki's wedding," he grinned as his mind joined hers.

"Yes."

"I remember it being much warmer than this," Harry laughed. "And I remember spending the night in that big chair with you...asking what it would mean to be married to me."

"Yes," she grinned. "And this time next year...I'll know."

"Best of luck to you love," Harry's eyes twinkled.

"Thank you," Maddie laughed and reached for the thermos full of hot cocoa that he had in his other hand. "Can I have that please?"

"Absolutely," he handed it over.

"Want to add some peppermint Schnapps to it?" Maddie raised her eyebrows, patting her flask in her jacket.

"Nah," he shook his head.

"No?" She smiled. "Not drinking tonight?"

"Laying low," he shrugged.

"Really?" She laughed lightly. "Why's that?"

"Because..." His voice dropped as he stepped closer. "I have every intention of making love to you tonight."

"Oh." Maddie's throat went dry; her cheeks flushing even more. "You do?"
"The good old fashioned way," he seemed confident, cocky even.

"You mean missionary?" She smirked.

"Ha!" he laughed. "Not necessarily. I mean...I mean I don't want the alcohol to...

"I know what you mean," she stepped into his space, his arms moving automatically around her. "I look forward to that."

"Oh?"

"Mmm..." She bit her lip and smiled up at him. "As a matter of fact...if you want to skip this whole thing, we can head back there now and bring in the New Year on our own."

"Ohh..." Harry's hands moved to her arms; rubbing up and down as though the friction might warm her. "What about the fireworks?"

"I've seen fireworks before."

"You've had me before," he pointed out.

"But my appetite for you is insatiable."

"You're killing me here."

"Let's go. Come on. Let's go back to the place. I'll tell Kyle. We can be alone...with security but..."

"Hey stragglers!" Gary's voice called back to them where they stood. "There's a free spot over here by an outdoor fireplace. You coming with us or what?" Maddie turned her eyes up to Harry.

"Yes!" Harry called back, stepping away from Maddie and taking her hand. "We're coming!"

And then only to her, "You've missed the last few years of this. Let's not miss this year."

"Fine," she huffed though, deep inside—past her own growing desire for him—she knew he was right. "Fine. We'll watch the fireworks. We'll bring in the New Year."

"Grumble, grumble," Harry mocked her; narrowly missing the slap at his arm. "Come on baby. Let's get this year over with." With a wide smile and eyes full of love, Harry pulled her along with him towards the group.

"You're really pushing your luck Wales..."

"Seven..."

"You're sexy when you're like this."

"Six..."

"Like what?"

"Five..."

"All pent up and impatient."

"Four..."

"I am not pent up and impatient."

"Three..."

"You are. Look at the way you're biting your lip and tapping your toe. And your eyes are all crazy and...sexy as hell."

"Two..."

"Harry, you are driving me absolutely..."

"One..."

"God, Madeline...you're beautiful..."

"HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

As the fireworks boomed and 'Auld Lang Syne' sounded out from the band, Maddie moved away from him, towards the house. "Come on Wales. It's time."

"Wait, Maddie..." Harry grabbed her hand. With a wide, amused smile, he pulled her close and tugged her scarf from her face.

"Wait?" She smiled warmly up at him as she settled close to his chest.

"Happy New Year," he grinned and leaned down to kiss her.

"Happy New Year," she whispered just as his lips met hers. Just as she was leaning into the kiss, into him, he pulled back. "Hey..." The beginnings of a pout on her lips.

"I'll race you home."

"Hey!" She called out; pausing for the briefest of moments before she took off after him, yelling her good-byes to her cousins as she ran.

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"Oh...my...God!" Maddie stumbled into their bedroom; taking deep, gulping breaths. They had shed their winter wear in the entryway and had hurried up the stairs to their own space. A burst of laughter made it through her lips as she shut the door behind them.

"I told you..." Harry was trying to laugh through his heavy breathing. "We should start running through the park together. I'll even chase you if you want." And though it pained her slightly to do so, she started laughing.

"It's just the altitude," Maddie pressed a hand into her side. "And we spent the whole day skiing..." She leaned back against the door for support. "So you can stop with the crazy talk and..." Catching the look on his face, the flicker in his eyes, Maddie's voice faded.

"Are you tired?" Harry asked as he took a step towards her, his smile was warm, welcoming; dangerously charming.

"No..." Maddie whispered, watching as he pulled his sweater up and over his head; his t-shirt threatening to go with it.

"Can I get you something to drink?" He tossed it aside and stepped up to her then, his body framing hers against the door. "It's important to be hydrated."

"It is," Maddie agreed, her lower lip pulling between her teeth. It was a heady thing; when Harry focused his attention like that, when his eyes swept over her as he took another step.

"And well rested." His fingers stretched out, palm pressing against the door behind her as he leaned closer; kissing her cheek.

"Yes..." Her skin felt warm to his lips.

"So?" She could feel his breath on her skin, the heat from his body.

"So..." Maddie sucked in her breath, her hands reaching out to tug at his t-shirt.

"Can I get you something to drink?" He repeated his question; amused at the way she was growing antsy, the way her once steadying breath growing uneven again.

"No," she grinned as she shook her head, her nose nudging his as she did. "I'm good."

"Good," he looked wicked, teasing as his eyes swept over her; taking her in. "Something to eat or..."

"Come on Harry," her voice tipped towards pleading. Her hand reached out to stroke the strong line of his jaw. "Would you stop with the nonsense and..."

Feeling the weight of him pressed against her, sandwiching her between him and the door, was the most wonderfully satisfying pressure. He was warm and strong and hard and his lips were pulling at hers in a head-spinning fashion.

A tiny, muffled gasp fell from her mouth into his. Her hands moved to his waist, finding the skin under his t-shirt hot and smooth and she wanted more of it under her fingers. Reaching the hem, she pulled and in one fluid motion, he was shirtless. Returning his lips to hers, his arms pulled her from the door, into the room, into his arms and into the New Year in that "old fashioned" way;
laughing, sighing and moaning his name.
Chapter 89

Waking on New Year's Day, tucked close to Harry's warm body was exactly the way Maddie wanted to start the New Year—the new year that held in it such an abundance of joy. She was marrying Harry, Kate and Will were going to have a baby. With a great big, drawn out sigh, she snuggled even closer, her feet burrowing under his legs for warmth.

"Don't get too comfortable there," his voice was heavy with sleep. "It's our last day to ski..."

"Don't care," she grumbled into his shoulder.

"Ha!" He laughed, his fists rubbing his eyes awake. "Tell me you don't want to take Kyle down a notch or two."

"I don't want to take Kyle down," she grinned against his skin.

"Right," he rolled to his side, exposing her face as he hugged her to him. "Now tell me with a straight face."

"Fine..." She huffed. "We'll ski."

"That's right we'll ski," for a reason that completely escaped Maddie at the moment, Harry was wide awake and lively; ready to take on the day. Pressing a quick kiss to Maddie's lips, he moved to rise from the bed.

"Whoa, whoa! Hang on there captain," she pulled him back to her, catching him with her lips. "Happy New Year Your Highness."

"Oh..." He chuckled against her; rolling so that he was laying over her. "Doctor..."

The slopes would wait.

Okay, who's hungry?" Maddie asked as their SUV rolled back into her hometown after a day full of skiing. They had dropped Dena and Derek at home and Amy and Jenna had gone back into Denver together as they had some post-holiday shopping to do. So it was just Maddie, Harry, Gary and Kyle—who were going to work on something at Gary's house over the next couple of days.

"Starving," Harry groaned.

"Me too," Gary stretched his legs. "Is your mom at the house?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "She had her school Holiday party tonight. She wasn't really expecting us back until tomorrow. We could grab something in town?" She suggested as they drove through.

"We could," Kyle nodded. "You two okay with that? Nobody gives a shit if Gary and I show up in town but you..."

"It's fine," Harry waved his hand. "I'm used to it by now."

"Maddie?" Kyle lifted his eyebrows to his recently famous cousin.
"Please. Nobody around here is going to care about me."

"Right." Harry shook his head slightly with a grin; knowing better. It was amusing to him how there were still times when Maddie could sit in a space in her mind where nobody knew who she was.

"Great." Gary laughed at the unspoken interaction between the two of them. "Now. Where do we go?"

"Oh that's easy," Maddie laughed in a way that clearly communicated a sarcastic, please.

"Leachmans?" Kyle glanced back at her.

"Leachmans." She nodded, her stomach growling at the thought.

Walking into Leachman's was like walking into her grandmother's basement; familiar and ancient. She had been coming to Leachman's for as long as she remembered and it still looked exactly the same as it did when she was a child. It was old, with dark wood walls and an intricately carved bar along one entire wall. The room was dark and warm and welcoming. There were two men who sat at the bar talking animatedly across it to the bartender who Harry figured had been around for his grandmother's coronation. It looked like just the kind of "hole in the wall" that Harry knew Maddie adored; locals scattered throughout at large booths and tables. Off the back of the room was a billiards table with a bit of a rowdier crowd.

Their small group took a table off to the side with Jim and Sampson taking a smaller table next to them. Though the waitress gave them a bit of a second glance, Maddie was sure she didn't recognize them as she took their order and brought them their drinks; buckets with bottles of beer situated in ice. The food was quick, plentiful and completely satisfying. When they were done, Maddie sighed a happy sigh as the waitress gave them another bucket of beer and took the check from Gary and she rose to head to the restroom. Since Sampson had a line of sight visual on the bathroom, he stayed in his chair; watchful and alert. It wasn't long before she was heading back to the table when she was stalled on her way by somebody who clearly recognized her. Harry saw Sampson's focus shift a bit so he turned around to look.

"Hey..." Harry swallowed a mouthful of beer and nodded towards the bar where Maddie stood. "Who is that talking to Maddie?"

"Hmm?" Both Kyle and Gary followed where Harry was looking. "Oh." Gary groaned as Kyle rolled his eyes; settling back in his chair.

"That's Travis Meeks," Kyle's voice seemed less than thrilled.

"Travis Meeks?" Harry looked between the two of them as he took another drink.

"Her high school boyfriend," Gary grumbled.

"Oh really?" Harry's interest peaked as he glanced back at the two of them talking; his lip twitching into something of a smirk. So this was Number One. He looked him over, working hard to keep the annoying twinge of jealousy in check. The guy was tall; not as tall as Harry, but tall. He looked like what Harry figured was the All-American look; blonde hair, blue eyes, muscular. Probably played American football. "So that's him..." He took a breath and reminded himself who he was; who he was to Maddie. No need to sweat this.

"Yep." Gary's response was clipped, the tone crystal clear and Harry caught it.
"Why do you say it like that?" Harry nodded his head across the table at him.

"He doesn't like him," Kyle offered.

"As if you ever did," Gary shot him a look. The two men shared a glance, shared a silent conversation. And Harry caught every second of it.

"Fair enough."

"Neither of you like him?" Harry was confused. In all honesty, he and Maddie had only ever had a handful of conversations about this particular ex-boyfriend and in none of them had she mentioned that her cousins didn't like him. Silently they shook their heads. "Why not?"

"Well..." Gary adjusted in his seat, clearing his throat. Harry could tell he was debating, he could tell that he was trying to decide just how much he was going to let out, just how truthful he was about to be. Harry recognized this look, this thought process—it was a big part of his own life. He wanted to say something, to remind them that he was marrying Maddie, that he loved her—that it was acceptable for him to know what they were thinking. But it turned out he didn't need to remind them. They knew.

"Fine..." Kyle waved the universal gesture for Harry to lean forward; they were going to let him in. With a quick glance back at Maddie, Harry did just that. He glanced between the two cousins and raised his eyebrows.

"Listen," Gary was the first to speak. "He wasn't a bad guy. He was nice."

"Nice?" Kyle smirked bitterly.

"He was. Their relationship was fine. It was a high school thing, you know. Nothing big, nothing serious. Just...there. It was the ending that was bad."

"Oh?"

"I say the whole thing was bad," Kyle had never been one to beat around the bush. "I can't say I was ever a fan of the guy."

"Really?" Harry's forehead creased. He liked Kyle, he trusted Kyle and he was the cousin that Maddie felt closest to, the one she said was closest to her. And his intense dislike for this guy got Harry's attention. "What was his problem?" Harry took another drink.

"Well, from the looks of things, you're about to find out." The distaste was evident on Kyle's face.

"What?" Harry chuckled.

"She's bringing him over," Kyle sighed and nodded behind Harry's head.

"Why is she bringing him over?" Gary groaned. But before any of them could crack a joke at an answer, Maddie was approaching the table, Travis Meeks not far behind her.

"Hi," she smiled, slightly uneasy, at the three men.

"Hey," Harry met her eyes. There was something intriguing about the confusion he now sat in, the way Maddie was playing nervously with her engagement ring, the way her cousins instantly hardened when they approached the table. Harry caught all of it.

"You both remember Travis, right?" Her eyes shifted to her cousins across from Harry, willing the
"Yeah," Kyle nodded and rose to his feet; his hand extended. There was a smile on his face, he was raised right, but his eyes remained cold. "Travis."

"Kyle," Travis shook his hand. "Gary."

"How's it going," Gary extended the same courtesy as Kyle.

"Good. Good." Travis nodded as Harry watched the interaction; years of practice in bullshit told him that was exactly what he was watching. It was clear that Travis was well aware of the tensions and the issues that Maddie's cousins had alluded to. This was all too familiar to Harry; the pretentions, the inevitable show that people put on. His life was full of this, but finding it here, in Maddie's hometown, with Maddie's family, was a new experience.

Finishing off his beer, Harry rose to his feet. With a wide smile he took in Maddie's Number One. Harry was definitely taller than him, by a good few inches and he didn't look that much bulkier than Harry did. Maddie's eyes sought refuge in his as she introduced them.

"Travis...this is Harry Wales, my fiancé," she grinned as she said the word. "Harry, this is Travis Meeks."

"Good to meet you," Harry was the first to extend his hand, standing tall and secure as he met Travis' eyes.

"You too," Travis nodded; an all-too-fake smile reaching his lips.

"Care to join us? We have plenty of beer." Harry waved a hand at the table and he could almost feel Kyle glaring at the back of his head. But he didn't care. Harry was not easily rattled and he was admittedly a bit curious about this guy and the history he had with this family.

"Sure," Travis nodded and moved to the empty chair next to Maddie, who sat just to the right of Harry. Maddie took a deep breath and cleared her throat, moving to explanation.

"Travis is an old friend," her fingers found Harry's knee, feeling more at ease as she came into contact with him. "From High School."

"I see," Harry's hand covered hers entirely; squeezing reassurance into her.

"Ah come on," Travis pulled a grin from the corner of his mouth. "An old friend from high school?" He laughed; a loud sort of a bark that gained the attention of the people at a table close by. "We were more than that, weren't we Mads?"

"Mads?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, prepared with a joke that fell silent as he read the reaction to that particular nickname. Reaching for another beer from the bucket at the center of the table, he took the cap off and took a drink; ready to watch.

"Ha!" Maddie tried for a laugh, tried to avoid the look on Kyle's face; the look Harry caught completely. "You know, I used to hate it when you called me that..."

"As I recall," Travis drawled, his voice dropping low. "You used to hate quite a bit about me."

Harry leaned forward in his chair, glancing around Maddie towards Travis, his shoulders squaring, his jaw tightening. Okay, he looked then to Kyle, what the hell is happening right now? Clearing his throat, Kyle adjusted in his seat. Nobody was sitting well at this table.
"Oh..." Maddie tried to laugh it off as she reached for her drink. "That was such a long time ago, wasn't it?" She gathered herself and turned her well-practiced smile his way. "Tell me, what have you been up to?"

"I'm building houses."

"Great!" She smiled easier. "With your dad or..."

"Yes," he nodded.

"And are you still living in town or did you..."

"Yes," he cut her off. "I'm still living in town. Just as you said I always would."

"Travis..." Maddie's voice was soft. "Do we really have to..."

"No. We don't," Kyle spoke up across the table and all eyes turned in his direction. If Harry hadn't been so focused on watching Maddie, on trying to read her stance, how she felt, he may have laughed at Kyle's obvious tone and stance. But he was just as surprised as everyone else at the table.

"Kyle!" Maddie hissed.

"We don't, Maddie." He narrowed his eyes at her. "We don't have to do this. Again."

"Excuse me?" Travis leaned forward. "You have something you want to say to me?"

"Actually, I really do," Kyle wasn't mincing words as he met Travis gaze for gaze.

"Kyle!" Maddie's voice grew more serious as her eyes traveled from her cousins to Harry. "Let's just...not...okay?" She wanted them to back down. She wanted them to stay in their seats. She wanted them to let her handle this. And although he was growing more and more uneasy with the situation, Harry sat back a bit and let her take it.

"Fine." Kyle held a hand up and tipped his bottle back; mad at the situation.

"I heard that you're a doctor," Travis spoke only to Maddie; his words and his smile slurred.

"I am," she smiled, taking a breath; hoping they were moving on. "A Psychologist actually."

"And you're getting married."

"I am."

"Congratulations," he smiled bitterly; a sad sort of twisted expression before his eyes shifted from Maddie to Harry. "And you too man. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Harry nodded, smiling at Maddie as his arm moved around the back of her chair in a way that appeared casual and easy but was every bit of protectiveness that he intended it to be.

"I mean..." Travis chuckled into his beer. "I can't say I ever thought Maddie would end up the marrying type..."

"Excuse me?" Harry raised his eyebrows; getting less amused and more annoyed with all of it.

"I mean...you know...cooking dinner, greeting the hubby at the door with a cocktail. Thought she was 'above it all'...I thought it wasn't exactly her kind of 'job'." Feeling Maddie's hand on his knee,
Harry took two seconds to take a breath and think before he responded. But Kyle wasn't interested in waiting.

"Maybe it wasn't the job she had the issue with..." His eyes met Travis'. "If you know what I mean..." Harry almost smiled at that; if Maddie weren't so tense next to him, he might have.

"Kyle..."

"Maddie this is..."

"I know," she cut him off. Patting Harry's knee before she pulled her hand back, she turned to Travis. "Look, Travis. I don't really think this is the time or the place to rehash something that happened so long ago."

"So long ago?" He laughed. "You act like it was twenty years ago." His laughter faded and his eyes grew cold. "You walked out of town that day and haven't said a word to me since..." He shook his head. "And then I came to your father's funeral..." Maddie flinched visibly and everyone at the table shifted; Harry's hand falling to her back. "And you couldn't be bothered to say a word..."

"That was..." She took a small breath. "That was a pretty rough day Travis, surely you can understand that I..."

"And now look at you," he waved his hand towards her and Harry. "Crazy isn't it? How you were so hell bent on leaving town, leaving me so that you wouldn't end up a housewife. And now...you've ended up being just that. Nothing but a housewife." He bit off the last word harshly. Maddie flinched and Harry had had enough.

"Maddie," his voice was low but the meaning was incredibly clear.

"I know," she nodded to Harry before focusing on Travis. "You know, I think maybe it's time for you to go."

"Go?!" He laughed loudly. "What? You're so high and mighty that you can kick people out of bars now?"

"No," she shook her head, desperately wanting to avoid the scene he seemed to be gearing up for. "You don't have to leave the bar. Just...this table. I think maybe it was a mistake to..."

"A mistake?!" And this time, when Maddie glanced to the side, she saw Sampson and Jim who had just moments ago been calm and relaxed and laughing over something. But they weren't calm and relaxed any longer. They were watching her. And Travis. And neither of them was laughing. "You know...maybe the papers are right..." Travis' eyes met hers and everything about him; his glare, his words; everything was meant to hurt her. "You really are quite the high class bitch. Probably always have been."

"Okay. That's it." Harry was done. Past done. The chair below him creaked against the wood as he moved to stand. "I think it's time for you to excuse yourself."

"Look at this guy," Travis laughed, a crazy sort of laugh before his face grew serious. And, when his chair rocked back and he rose to his feet, everyone else at the table followed. The tension mounting instantaneously as Maddie's cousins moved to back Harry up. "You wanna take a swing at me?"

"More than you know man," Harry took a step forward.
"Harry!" Maddie's voice was a tense whisper as she stepped between them, her hand sliding to his chest. "You don't want to do this."

"Bullshit."

"Whatcha waiting for?" Travis egged him on. "Go for it."

"Please..." Maddie's eyes were huge as she looked up at him. "Think about this..." And he did. He looked at the sadness in her eyes, he looked at Travis—drunk and steaming—and he looked out over the rest of the bar.

"Nah..." He let out a breath, his fingers flexing out of the fist they were working into. "Five years ago? I'd meet you outside and we'd finish this." His eyes were severe as he focused on Travis. "But now...if I hit you and you hit me back, then that guy right there... He has to shoot you. That's a mess of paperwork, we would have to go back to London early and of course you..." He chuckled. "You would be rightly fucked. But no. I think I'll save that hit for somebody else."

"Rightly fucked?" Travis laughed in their faces. "Sure thing buddy."

"I don't know Gary..." Kyle looked to his brother. "How much paperwork do you have to file if I hit him."

"None." Gary's voice was cold. "None at all."

"Bring it on Kyle." Travis' attentions turned.

"I've been waiting for this for a long time."

"Come on guys," Maddie kept one hand on Harry's chest as the other reached out towards them; her back to Travis. "Come on. Let this go. We don't need this right now. Let's just leave. Let's go home." She smiled towards Sampson who was on his feet, radioing Arthur to bring the car around. Maddie was ending this and, as they began to move away from the table, they were going along with it. "Let's just go. It's not worth it."

"What did you just say?!" Travis demanded and, in a split second, made a fatal decision; a grand error of judgment.

In one second his hand reached out, his fingers wrapping around Maddie's arm to pull her back to him.

And in the very next moment, his face was crashing to the table; his arm bent behind his back as a hand pressed him down with a force he would have never expected.

"Bad decision," the British accent in his ear was low and rough and spoke of nothing but business. "Really bad decision."
"Holy shit!" Gary couldn't help the wide-eyed expression on his face as he and Kyle followed hurriedly behind Maddie and Harry who were being rushed from the bar to one of the cars by Jim as Arthur waited in the car and Nathan went inside to assist Sampson.

"That was insane," Kyle shook his head. The cousins were impressed; minds blown. It really was something to see the Security Team in action. But Harry, who had been through something like this more than once, was focused. This was Maddie's first and she seemed to be the tiniest bit rattled.

"You okay?" He studied Maddie closely as she slipped into the car with him right behind her. "Madeline?"

"What?" She looked to him, a little dazed as her cousins hurried in and the two officers with them pulled away from the curb; leaving behind two agents and the other car.

"Are you okay?" His hands ran over her hair, her shoulders, her arms; patting softly, making sure.

"Of course," she swallowed and nodded. "He barely got a hand on me and..." She glanced back towards the bar in a slight panic. "Are we just leaving Sampson and Nathan there?"

"They have a car," Harry shook it off; his body and his attention turned towards her. "Jim and Arthur have to take us home." He felt so different explaining it to her; so adult-like.

"Of course," she swallowed again, looking to the front of the car, an apology written across her face. "I'm so sorry guys! I know this means more work for you and papers and..."

"Don't worry about it Doctor Forrester," Jim spoke up, his eyes meeting hers in the dark space. "You did nothing wrong. You tried to de-escalate the situation and, when it blew up, you didn't put up a fight while we pulled you from the scene. We're in the car and out of danger. Everything went just as it should."

"Okay." Maddie nodded, a slight smile crossing her face as she felt tears come to her eyes. "Okay..." She blinked and turned away from Harry then, looking out at the night.

"Hey..." He was loving with her; gentle. She was scared. She felt bad. She felt guilty. He had been there before. "It's not your fault."

"Do we..." She wiped at her eyes and turned back to him. "Are we going to have to go back to London early? I don't want to leave my mom yet. We haven't even..."

"Nah," he shook his head, his fingers reaching to stroke her face. "I'll call my father when we get back to the house but I think we'll be fine. Hey..." He cupped her face. "We're fine. It's fine."

"Jesus..." She exhaled sharply, her body finally relaxing. She seemed to recover, seemed to calm significantly as she slumped back into the seat. She took a moment, her mind running it all over in her head and when she looked up at Harry, she shook her head. "I can't believe that just happened." Harry reached for her hand, squeezing her fingers in his with a soft smile.

"I can't believe you brought him over to our table," Kyle offered from the seat in front of them.
"I know," she groaned. "What was I thinking?"

"What were you thinking?" Kyle echoed her sentiment. Harry watched the interaction between the two of them; much like the interaction he sometimes had with his father. They held eyes for a moment before Maddie nodded, giving in to the unspoken argument Kyle was making.

"I know..." She sighed again. "I know."

"You're too nice sometimes," Kyle shook his head, letting it go.

"Yeah..." She took a deep breath and leaned forward then, talking to him over the seat. "Did you know he was there?" Kyle raised his eyebrows. "At dad's..."

"Yes." Kyle answered. "I knew he was there."

"I didn't even see him."

"Look, don't even start feeling guilty about that Maddie," Kyle turned completely around to look at her. "You didn't need to worry about him that day! You didn't need to worry about anyone."

"I know..."

"Plus...he was probably drunk then too."

"Kyle..."

"He was! My understanding is that he's drunk most of the time."

"Really? Nobody told me that."

"Why would we? You left town, you moved on. You forgot about him, thank God." Kyle was on a roll, not afraid to offer his opinion. "Look at your life Maddie. Would any of it be better with him in it?"

"Of course not," she rolled her eyes. "I'm not saying that. I'm just...I had no idea what had become of him."

"Yeah well..." Kyle sighed as the car pulled up to Maddie's home. "After the way things went down, the very least he deserves is you having no idea what happened to him." With a sympathetic smile, Gary followed Kyle out of the car. But Maddie stayed put, anchored to her spot for a moment. Harry followed suit; watching her as she processed it all.

"Thank you," she spoke softly as she turned to him.

"For?" His hand ran over her back.

"Not hitting him," she offered a small smile.

"Ah yes," Harry nodded with a shrug. "Well, the not hitting him wasn't for you."

"No?" She smiled wider.
"That was for Jim," Harry grinned. "He's had to pull me out of more shit than he ever should have. I figured I should give him a break."

"Very thoughtful of you," she sighed and leaned back against the seat, leaning into him. She waited another beat, looking out the windows at her cousins who were on their way to their cars, the agents who had moved up to the porch, giving them distance. She noted that her mother was still gone.

"Come on love," Harry nudged her shoulder. "We're giving this situation too much time here. Let's get out of the car. We'll call my dad, we'll meet with the team and then we'll move on. It could have gone worse, but it didn't. Okay?"

"Okay," Maddie let out one last breath and smiled. "Okay."

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Harry waited until much later to bring it up again. He waited until they had said good-bye to her cousins. He waited until they had spoken to all four members of their team, till they had spoken to his father—who was actually more concerned about Maddie's state of mind than he was about the incident. He waited until they were inside her home, till they were alone before he turned to her with curious eyes and crossed arms.

"So. Do you want to fill me in on Travis?"

"Ugh..." Maddie groaned; her head tipping back in a mix of frustration and exhaustion. "I really don't. I don't want to talk about Travis. I don't want to think about Travis. I just wanted to come home for the holiday and...God..." She exhaled; pulling her head upright. "Do we really have to talk about him?" Harry studied her for a moment before shaking his head.

"No." He shrugged. "No, we don't have to talk about him. I just...up until tonight I thought he was just some guy you dated, some guy you loved once..."

"He was!" She exclaimed. "He was just that. Some guy I dated once."

"Yeah. I don't think so." Harry chuckled. "But hey. If you don't want to tell me, you don't have to tell me. I don't need the details Maddie. I have you."

"You know when you say things like that..."

"Yeah?" He lifted his eyebrows with a smirk. For a moment she contemplated tossing the conversation altogether; kissing him mad instead. But that moment passed, leaving her with a story to tell.

"Okay." Maddie took a deep breath; in and out. "I'll tell you about Travis."

"You sure?"

"Yes..." She paused for a moment, deciding how to start. Harry watched; quiet and casual as she began. "In high school Travis was..." She looked off into the room, searching for the right words. "He was that guy."

"That guy?" Harry's forehead crinkled in confusion.
"You know...that guy..." Despite herself, she smiled. "The popular guy, the funny guy, the sexy
guy, the guy all of the girls wanted to..." She stopped her list as her eyes caught his, a small smile
creaking across her face. "You know—you were that guy."

"What?" Harry laughed.

"Probably still are that guy," she mumbled, amusing herself.

"You're sidetracking," Harry pointed out with a smirk.

"Fine," she sighed and jumped back into her story. "I had known his family forever because it's a
small town and we both grew up here. But when I started High School, he was a year older than I
was and he was..."

"That guy," Harry offered.

"Yes," she rolled her eyes; knowing he was biting back at least a joke or two. "Anyway. I was
smitten. I was young and immature and naïve and silly and...smitten. So we started dating when I
was fourteen and..." She took a breath. "And we dated until I left town."

"Four years?"

"Four years."

"That's a long time."

"Hmm..." Maddie nodded, looking down at her fingers as they turned her engagement ring
around her finger.

"What happened?" He studied her.

"Well..." She let out a long, ragged breath. "He wanted to stay in town, work for his father, raise a
family. And I wanted to go to college. Nobody in my family had gone and I was dead set on
going."

"So you broke up?" He offered, still confused about the level of hostility he saw in Travis.

"Yes..." She seemed unsure. "Though not exactly." She took another deep breath. "I was clear,
the whole time we were together, that I wanted to go away to college; that I wanted to leave town
and do different things. Not better things or worse things, just different things. So, I found a
college. I applied, I was accepted, I made plans to go..." She shook her head, remembering. "And
Travis..." She let out a long breath. "I don't know. I don't know if he just wasn't listening or if he
thought I was kidding or...I don't know. But either way, he wasn't really expecting me to go. And,
when I told him..."

"He got pissed?"

"He proposed." Her face grimaced as she remembered.

"Whoa." Harry's face registered shock.

"Hmm..." Maddie smiled weakly. "Thought you were the only man who wanted to shackle
himself to me forever?"
"Never," Harry shook his head. "I've always known I was in the company of a wide following."

"Please!" Maddie rolled her eyes; easing a bit.

"Did you say yes?" Though he was half joking, Maddie grew completely serious.

"I've only said yes to you," her eyes narrowed a bit. "I only ever wanted to say yes to one man...to you...to the person I was actually supposed to marry." Harry nodded, quieting himself, waiting for her to continue. "He had brought it up during my senior year, tossed it out there in casual conversation. I had told him again and again what my plans were, that I wasn't ready for that kind of commitment, that I wasn't ready for that kind of decision." She looked down at her fingers. "And then...after I had graduated, after I had been accepted, we had the talk..."

"The talk?"

"I told him I was leaving. I told him that maybe we should see other people..."

"Ouch," Harry winced.

"I told him we could still see each other but that I need time and space."

"And he took that to mean that you actually wanted him to propose?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, Kyle did say that it ended badly," Harry smiled sympathetically.

"Oh I'm not done." Maddie shook her head, a tight bitter laugh pulling from her chest. "I still can't believe..." She took a breath and looked to Harry, meeting his eyes. "It was in public."

"What was?"

"The proposal," her mouth twisted as she spoke the word, as she remembered. "It was...God. It was at this event in town. Everyone was there; my family, his family—both of which stood there as he took a microphone and..."

"No," Harry shook his head in disbelief.

"He didn't." Maddie exclaimed. "I just don't... You know, a public proposal is a ballsy move even if you're sure she's going to say yes. But when she's told you she's going to say no...it's. I don't even know what it is." She shook her head again, running a hand through her hair. She was getting annoyed with the conversation. "But he took the mike and right there in front of everyone he laid out his plans for our future, he went on about how much he loved me and then he got down on one knee..."

"Yes!" Maddie exclaimed. "I just don't... You know, a public proposal is a ballsy move even if you're sure she's going to say yes. But when she's told you she's going to say no...it's. I don't even know what it is." She shook her head again, running a hand through her hair. She was getting annoyed with the conversation. "But he took the mike and right there in front of everyone he laid out his plans for our future, he went on about how much he loved me and then he got down on one knee..."

"He didn't." Harry wasn't sure what he felt in that moment; disgust or embarrassment.

"Oh he did!" She sighed. "My parents were...My dad was so confused." She laughed then, remembering. "My mother was mortified. And when I looked down at Travis I just...I felt terrible. I know it's crazy but I felt so bad for him. And when I said no..." She shook her head again, much like she had on that day, though this time without the tears. "When I said no, he just...exploded."
"Exploded?"

"He said some terrible things. He...he called me names, told me I had wasted his time, that I was a...how did he say it? The worst kind of tease." She chuckled as she thought of that night, of the absurdity of it all. "He trashed me pretty good in front of the whole town; saying I thought I was too good, that I was too proud, that I was better than everyone else."

"And nobody did anything?"

"I think everyone was in shock. I know I was. I had never seen him like that...so mad at me. Finally Kyle stepped in between us while Gary cut the power to the microphone. My parents took me home." With a deep breath and a sigh, she shook her head. "I thought...when I saw him tonight...I thought for sure he had moved on. It's been so long and so many things have happened since. If I had any idea that he was going to go off like that I would have never..."

"I know," he nodded. "Don't worry about it."

"I can't believe he's still hung up on..."

"You?" Harry offered with a laugh. "Is it completely cheesy if I say that I understand where he's coming from? If you had refused my proposal I would probably wallow for at least twelve years."

"I never would have refused your proposal."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she smiled and shrugged. "So...that's Travis."

"That..." Harry shook his head. "That explains so much."

"Oh?" Maddie laughed.

"When I asked you to leave Bendal and come to London, when you thought that I found you the interview..." His mind worked back over some of the bigger moments in their relationship. "You were thinking of him; of that moment."

"No," she shook her head. "I wasn't thinking of him. I have very rarely thought of him. But...I suppose at some level...I adopted this gut reaction, this reflexive instinct to leaving what I had worked so hard towards for..."

"Some guy," Harry supplied, remembering.

"You were never some guy, Harry." Maddie's face softened. "You've never been some guy." She smiled as her mind wandered to a far off place; her eyes growing wet and shiny. "That night when my parents brought me home, my dad...He sat me down and told me how proud he was of me; that I was following my heart, my dreams, my plans. He told me how proud he was to tell his friends and our family that I was going off to school, that I was leaving town. He told me that Travis wasn't worthy and that..." She had to take a breath, had to collect herself. "He told me that when the right man got down on a knee and asked me to marry him, I would have no doubt; only absolute certainty. And that's how I would know."

"Hmmm," Harry smiled; trying to keep his own emotions checked. Maddie was silent, still, as she watched him then.
"Thank you, by the way."

"For?"

"Being that man; the one my dad told me about."

"Maddie..." He could barely speak to that.

"You were never some guy." She held his eyes till he blinked and turned away, needing a moment. Maddie looked down at her hands, her fingers moving to the ring on her hand, his gift to her in that moment of absolute certainty her father had promised. After a minute passed, Maddie sighed and shrugged. "Thank God for Travis though, you know?" Harry's eyebrows knotted in confusion. "If it weren't for him pushing so hard back then I might never have gone so far away, I might not have had the drive to continue on to Graduate school, to Bendal..."

"Well..." He moved in on her then; eyes soft and fixed on her. "Then it wasn't all for nothing, hmm?"

"No..." She stepped into him; his arms opening up for her as she moved. "It wasn't all for nothing." Maddie snuggled closer to him. "Can we be done talking about him now?"

"Talking about who?" Smirk firmly in place. His curiosity had driven him to ask about him, but his confidence and his security in Maddie, in their relationship allowed him to drop the conversation just as quickly as Sampson had dropped Travis at Leachman's. With a blink of an eye, he was gone from Harry's mind—having long been gone from Maddie's.

"Come on Wales. Let's go get settled in our room before mom gets home and we get roped into stories from her party."

"Our room?" He raised his eyebrows, allowing her to pull him down the hall. "Is this a trick?"

"No," she laughed.

"Your mother approved?"

"She assigned."

"Really?" He paused just outside the door to her childhood room.

"We can sleep in the same room now," Maddie held up her left hand, wriggling her ring finger. "You bought the cow, darling."

"The cow?" Harry laughed as she pulled him through the door. "Did you just refer to yourself as a cow? A cow that I purchased?"

Maddie's giggle joined his as the events from the evening faded completely leaving room for only this; these last few days of holiday with Maddie's mother, in Maddie's home. When she finally arrived home from her party, Hannah hugged Maddie tight and Harry even tighter before she dragged them both to the kitchen for hot tea and cookies; love warming the three of them.
When Maddie and Harry returned to London, they were returning to a barrage of excitement and action. They had six months before the wedding and quite suddenly everything seemed to be rushing around them. It was the storm before the calm, Maddie would smile and nudge Harry playfully. It was a prelude to the main act, Harry would shake his head and warn.

Either way, things were moving at record speed and all they could do was move with the flow; and hang on.

Kicking off the delightful ride was Maddie's citizenship. They had been home for ten days when Thomas requested a meeting with Maddie and the family attorney. With a small smile, he informed them that Maddie had met all of the standards for citizenship, including the mandatory residency requirements. It was time to send in her application.

"I just need your signature here," the attorney had slid the paperwork across the table to Maddie with a nod to the flagged signature line.

"You sure about this?" Harry spoke up next to her; smirk on his face, gleam in his eye.

"Are you?" She arched a defiant eyebrow as she signed her name and passed it back to the attorney, her attention turning to Thomas. "What's next?"

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Next was tea. With the Queen. At Buckingham Palace.

"No big deal," Harry had told her with a slight upturn of his lips. "You've been there before. You've done this before. How many times is it going to take before this is a casual cup of tea with gran?" He watched as she crossed their room in a flutter of scarves as she tried to dress for the afternoon with his grandmother.

"How many times is..." She took a deep breath and walked right up to him; squaring her shoulders and looking him in the eye. "You really want me to start treating this casually?"

"I really want you to relax," his hands met her shoulders soothingly. "She said I could marry you. She asked about you at Christmas. She wants to see how you are, make sure I haven't chased you away yet."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed; rolling her eyes at herself. "I'll relax. I just need to figure out what to wear and I'll relax." She kissed him then. "I promise."

And she did; relax. She found the scarf she had been searching for, she slipped into the perfect pair of shoes. She eased into the car, sighing into a settled mode for their ride to Buckingham. She was calm as they stepped from the car, smiling a greeting to the Queen's personal assistant as he stepped aside and escorted them into the Palace.

She was at peace, serene even, as they turned over their coats and walked through the halls—her arm linked loosely through Harry's. She was completely relaxed; right up until they rounded the corner and the assistant smiled warmly.
"You'll be joining Her Majesty for tea in the Drawing Room." The way Maddie's body halted, reflexively pulling Harry to a dead stop along with her, was instinctual; outside of her control.

Harry turned confused eyes to her, his smile warm and in place. "Maddie?" He wanted to laugh, wanted to poke fun at whatever was happening inside her mind at that moment but his grandmother was waiting; The Queen was waiting. "Everything okay?"

"I..." She stammered, glancing around as a red flush filled her cheeks. "The Drawing Room?" And it hit him. If he had any self-control, he would have tampered down the wide grin that stretched his cheeks as recalled the last time they were in this very room; what they had been doing. But his control was failing him and the amusement was just too much.

"Come on love," he tugged gently at her hand on his arm; taking the last few steps towards the infamous room. "It's time for your first lesson in behaving badly." His voice was so low she almost hadn't heard him.

"Harry..." She wanted a way out, or at the very least a word of guidance.

"What's the saying?" He asked as the assistant moved to open the doors. "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time? This is us...doing the time."

"Oh Lord, give me strength," Maddie muttered, taking a large, deep breath and pulling a smile to her face; calling upon her years of training to sustain her.

The doors opened and there she was, The Queen of England...Harry's grandmother, sitting on the very same couch Harry had taken Maddie on in a selfish, passionate moment immediately following their engagement interview. This was them serving penance for the acts they had committed on that couch. Maddie cleared her throat and Harry fought the smug, cocky smirk that desperately wanted to surface as they stepped forward and greeted his grandmother.

"Harry, Madeline," her wonderfully charming voice called out; a beautiful smile gracing her face. "I'm so happy you were able to join me for tea. Won't you come in?"

"I was pleased to see that you chose the Strathmore Rose Tiara for the wedding," Gran was smiling warmly, everything about her was open and welcoming and wanting Maddie to feel at home. And, save for the intense embarrassment that seeped to her bones, Maddie felt exactly that. It was difficult not to in such a presence.

"It's a beautiful piece of artwork," Maddie smiled, continuing in her efforts to push from her mind memories of Harry's lips on her skin, his hands on her body. "Thank you so much for allowing me to wear it."

"Of course, dear. As I am sure you are aware, my mother wore it when she married my father..." And then, as the Queen began to tell Maddie stories of her mother, of her father, stories from history that books never held, that articles never neared—Maddie's mind cleared of Harry. Her entire focus turned to what his grandmother was telling her; the world she was sharing with her. The tension flowed from her fingers and she relaxed to the melody of her voice. It was so magical; like spun sugar with the authority and importance that held stronger than the Palace they now sat in. Suddenly Maddie felt bad; sad for those who would never have the enormous opportunity to witness it in person.
An hour later they were standing, bidding the Queen good-bye; kissing her cheeks and thanking her for the tea, for the stories. Finally, when she stepped from the room and the door closed behind her, Maddie let out a sigh of relief with Harry chuckling next to her.

"You pulled through quite nicely," his voice was low as his hand moved; fingers dancing on her shoulder. With a flick of her hand she brushed his hand from her body. "Hey!"

"Oh no," she turned to him then, shaking her head. "No touching me in here."

"Ah come on," he laughed; his hands moving to her waist, pulling her to his side playfully.

"I hate you," she tried for stoic and serious but even her lips knew she wasn't being honest.

"No you don't," he laughed louder.

"That was...horrendous."

"I thought the tea was fantastic," he joked.

"I'm not talking about the tea."

"You're sexy when you're mad at me," his lips graced across her cheek before she pulled back from him.

"I want to just...go back in time before I let you pull me into your lap on that couch and slap myself."

"Really?" He lifted his eyebrows; nuzzling closer. "Because I really want to..." As his hand moved over her ass, Maddie's hand clamped over his mouth.

"If you really think I'm going to get on with you here, again, you are out of your mind."

"Let's find another room then," he held tight to her; despite her reluctance.

"Harry!" She pushed at his chest.

"There are plenty of rooms here..."

"Yes," Maddie grinned, giving in; letting him pull her tight to him. It really was fruitless with him sometimes. "I know." She let her mind wander as his lips pressed to her neck, his arms enveloping her against him. "You know...when you really think about it...I wonder how many of them your grandmother has..." Harry grew stiff around her; his lips halting their journey. "You know..." Maddie's voice dropped, a slight giggle coming from her turned lips.

"No I do not know." His voice grew colder.

"Think about it though."

"I don't think I will."

"She has probably had sex..."

"I beg you..." He pleaded.
"In all of these rooms."

"Oh God. Would you stop?!" He stepped completely away from her then.

"Come on," Maddie's smile pulled wider. "She was twenty-five when she moved in, she is a Windsor and...I'm sorry...but your grandfather..."

"No." Harry shook his head, a finger lifting to her in warning.

"He's hot."

"No!" His hands moved to his ears.

"He is Harry."

"No. Just. No." Harry shook his head as he moved towards the door, deciding that if she wouldn't stop talking, he would stop listening. "This isn't funny Madeline."

"Oh come on Harry!" She called out to him as he pulled open the door. He could hear her laughter as he stepped through it. "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time!" Maddie let out a little sigh as she reached for her bag; feeling more and more relaxed at Buckingham Palace.

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It was the middle of January when the big bomb dropped. The heir to the heir was going to be a father. Catherine was pregnant and the world erupted. They were nearing the end of their first trimester and Kate wasn't feeling well. The admission to the hospital was simple, routine in the world of medicine. But nothing was simple and routine in this royal web they lived in. So the news was leaked.

And, though Maddie was among the first to call her, she and Harry among the first to visit, the stories of a Kate and Maddie rivalry were already running rampant.

Kate stealing the spotlight with her "conveniently" timed pregnancy.

Maddie jealous over the attention the expectant mother garnered from the Windsor Men.

The two sisters-in-law were, according to many in the press, already entrenched in a fictional tug-of-war that would follow them throughout their lives.

Maddie tossed aside the notion as Kate tossed aside the articles and, as they sat together in that private hospital room, they promised the other that should any real issues arise, they would do their very best to address them in person. And then they loved on this baby that wasn't even there yet.

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"I see you're jealous of the baby," Ella couldn't help but joke with her best friend as they sat in Maddie's bathroom at Kensington. Harry was away for the week and Tara had agreed to come to Maddie to try out a few wedding hairstyle options. Maddie only knew that she wanted her hair up and tonight was the first of three styles Tara wanted to try with her. Tara smiled at the two friends; feeling included and welcome in this exclusive circle. She had never imagined that, almost a year
ago, when she did Penelope a favor and sneakily colored and cut Maddie's hair while Harry was deployed, that she was securing for herself one of the most important styles of her entire life. The engagement interview had been one thing, a royal wedding was a completely other.

"Right," Maddie laughed into her glass as Tara pulled her hair tight; finishing and spraying. "Can you even imagine that? I don't know where they come up with half of this shit."

"How is she doing?" Ella sipped from her glass of champagne as she did her main duty; entertain the bride to be while Tara worked on her hair.

"She's doing great, actually. She's so happy..." Maddie's cheeks grew warm as she thought about it. The two women had spent an entire day mooning over the baby that Kate had worried would never come, the baby Maddie couldn't wait to snuggle.

"Good," Ella nodded. "Oh Maddie. Your hair..."

"Shush!" Tara waved her hand at Ella with a grin. "Not yet."

"Sorry!" Ella laughed, her hand pressing to her lips as she tried to physically shush herself. Maddie laughed at the attempt.

"Okay." Tara took a step back from Maddie's hair, looking it over for a moment. "Now..." She turned away from Maddie's hair for a moment and reached for a box that was sitting off to the side near where Ella was perched to watch this dry run.

"What's in the box?" Maddie's neck twisted so she could see and her heart flit-fluttered.

"Oh my God..." Ella's voice dropped as Tara lifted the item from the box.

"What is that?" Maddie felt tears in her eyes.

"This..." Tara turned to face them both. "This is a weighted replica of your tiara. They are used so that you and I can make sure we're ready for the real thing on the big day. I'm just going to..."
Before Maddie could protest, before she could prepare herself, Tara was placing the weighted tiara on her head, moving around her with pins, blocking Ella's view.

And then she stepped out of the way and Maddie didn't even need to look in the mirror. The sob from Ella was all it took. She felt tears in her own eyes as she looked up at her best friend.

"You think I should have gone with a different tiara?" Maddie lifted an eyebrow in a stab for humor.

"Ha!" Ella laughed, sniffing through her tears. "I think you should have gone with a different bridesmaid. I am in no way going to be able to hold it together."

"It's okay," Tara smiled at the both of them, her own eyes bright. "You can cry...you should cry. Get it out now. Maybe it'll help you on that day..."

"Nothing is going to help me on that day," Ella grinned, moving to her knees in front of Maddie. "I know you hate it when I...but you look so much like a Princess right now I can't even..." She swallowed, her cheeks flushed.

"You really do," Tara agreed, her own face flushed with excitement for the bride. "Do you want
"I don't know," Maddie shook her head, her voice hoarse as she looked to Ella.

"Come on Doc," Ella held out her hand as she rose to her feet. "Let's get a good look at what's going to bring that Prince of yours to his knees." Without a word Maddie allowed Ella to pull her from her chair. Facing the mirror, her heart pounded in her chest.

"Oh my God..." She whispered, moving closer to the mirror in a slow cautious way—as if she wasn't sure she knew the person in the reflection. "Oh my..."

"I know," Ella was unashamedly wiping at tears.

"Do you like it?" Tara asked softly; hoping for real feedback. "What don't you like? What do you like?"

"I love it," Maddie was still whispering. She couldn't help it. "I...there's nothing I don't like. It's comfortable. It's secure...It feels easy enough but it looks...Tara, it looks beautiful."

"It really does," Ella nodded, holding tight to Maddie's hand. "And the way you worked in the tiara..."

"I think we've found a hairstyle," Maddie turned from her reflection then, wanting to pay Tara the respect of her attention. "This is perfect Tara."

"Are you sure?" Tara bit her lip as she moved closer, joining the other two women in the reflection of the mirror. "You don't want to try another or..."

"No," Maddie shook her head, smiling wide. "This is it." Her eyes welled up and she knew—she was going to be a mess on the wedding day. "This is it."

"It is," Ella agreed, pulling Maddie to her side so she could kiss her cheek. "Such a Princess."

"Stop it," Maddie's eyes focused on the replica tiara in her hair; choking up as she remembered her conversation with The Queen, as she recalled the history in the original. She turned to Ella with wide eyes and a cracked voice. "This is so crazy."

"It is," Ella nodded, her arm still wrapped around Maddie's shoulder. "You know what's crazier?"

"There's something crazier than all of this?" Maddie waved her hand around her place at Kensington, pointed to her tiara.

"In five months, people are going to start calling you Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Sussex. They are going to curtsy to you and bow and..."

"Stop." Maddie held up her hand; tears in her eyes. "Just...wow..." Maddie took a few deep breaths; letting them out slowly. "Just promise me something?"

"Yes?"

"I don't want you to ever be that person. I don't want you to curtsy to me or call me that or..."

"But you're going to be the Duchess, Maddie. I can't..."
"Ella. Please." Her eyes were pleading with Ella's. "We lived together in a tiny apartment in Bendal. We've been through an Earthquake, we've seen some of the worst...and some of the best...please Ella. You've seen me naked. It's just me; Maddie."

"Okay," Ella nodded; her voice barely there. "I can promise to never do it in private. That's all I can do."

"Okay," Maddie accepted that; wiping at her eyes and turning to Tara. "This is absolutely perfect," she took a deep breath. "But you're going to have to take it all out before I just..."

"Of course," Tara laughed lightly, moving immediately back to her station behind the chair. Maddie squeezed Ella's hand and returned to her seat. As Tara's fingers worked to remove the tiara, Maddie took another deep breath.

This was happening. So fast, so soon; it was happening.

Maddie had never felt so excited and so nervous at the same time.

This was happening.

It was the storm before the calm. It was a prelude to the main act.
Valentine's Day

With a heavy sigh, Maddie stepped into their home, shutting the door behind her with another sigh. Yes, she knew she was being overly dramatic; staging a bit of an overreaction. But dammit—she had sacrificed Valentine's Day last year to the British Army, she really hadn't planned on sacrificing this Valentine's Day to the Royal Family.

But this was her life. When the family—or in this case his father—called, they had to go. Now it was just Harry but in a few short months it would be her too. What could she do other than allow herself the briefest moment of pettiness to sulk and then suck it up and move forward?

Dropping her bag to the floor, she kicked off her shoes and turned to face her night alone.

And that's when she saw it. A small box wrapped in a red, shiny foil with a gold bow on top sitting on the middle step of the staircase. Her heart warmed, a school girl giggle coming from her lips as she moved quickly to the box. Taking a seat on the very same stair, she pulled the box into her hands and pulled the lid up.

"I'm so sorry to abandon you tonight—H."

Though she felt the slightest twinge of guilt, she couldn't help but feel giddy as she pulled the tissue paper from the box reveling a long, gold, loop necklace that took her breath from her lungs. It was stunning. As she shook her head, wishing he were there to help her with it, to receive the thanks and love she desperately wanted to bestow on him, her eye caught something nestled on the landing above her.

Another box. Larger, more square, but in the same red foil.

"What did you do?" She called out to him, a bit of a smirk on her face as she rose to her feet and hurried up to the box.

Pink suede Manolo Blahnik heels with a note "I promise to make it up to you."

This time her sigh was sad; missing him. She smiled to herself, wondering if he had some fantasy conjured up in his mind that involved just her in these shoes and necklace. Looking down the hall towards their room, she spotted another small note on the floor. Stretching out to reach for it, she opened it up.

"I sincerely hope your stomach is well and that you are not lying on the floor of your bathroom in your pajamas." There was only a flash of confusion before it hit her. The jewelry, the shoes, the stomach and the bathroom and...

"Harry?" She called out into the house. "Are you here?" Pulling herself up, she picked up the shoes and the necklace and, holding it all awkwardly in her arms, she moved down the hall to their room. Pushing the door open, she scanned the room quickly.

"I hope I don't have to go to the bathroom for the rest of the day." She said, laughing. "If you do, I'll be sure to let you know."
side with abandon and lifted the note from the top.

"You have one hour."

"Ah!" She clapped her hands together before she took into the tissue paper. She gasped when she saw it; a stunning, luxurious Elie Saab in the softest red flowy fabric.

She was giddy.

One hour. An entire outfit. That could only mean one thing. Without any further deliberation, Maddie jumped from the bed and began to strip her clothes from the day. She had one hour to be ready and dammit if she was going to waste any more time.

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It wasn't just that she felt good in the dress, it wasn't just that it fit her perfectly and flattered her figure in a flawless sort of way that came with this high end kind of craftsmanship. It wasn't just that the dress swooshed around her legs as she moved, that the neckline showed off just enough of her cleavage to tempt him for a comment, but not enough that it would bring one from anyone else.

It wasn't just those things.

It was that she felt unbelievably...sexy.

She felt it from her hair—tossed and teased—to her toes—cradled comfortably in the pink suede Manolos. She felt gorgeous and powerful and so incredibly well-loved. He knew her so well, knew her body so much so that he could gift this amazing ensemble to her—knowing how it would make her feel. Knowing it would make her radiate from inside.

As she stood in front of the floor length mirror, her eyes sweeping over her makeup one last time, she secured the necklace in place and took a deep breath. Her hour was drawing to a close. Reaching for the gold clutch that had been wrapped with the dress, she quickly transferred her essentials and stepped from their room.

She didn't know where she was supposed to be in an hour or what she was supposed to be doing, but she guessed that it wasn't primping in their bedroom. With an air of confidence and self-assuredness, she took to the stairs.

And right on time, right as the clock clicked to the hour, the doorbell rang. Without a glance in the mirror in the entryway, Maddie pulled the door open.

The car was waiting. The driver smiling wide at the door. Arthur, dressed in his black tie finest, standing off to the side. Maddie pulled her wrap around her shoulders and stepped out into the crisp night; shutting the door behind her.

"I see this plot stretches across a multitude of conspirators," her voice was light, just like her step; her smile a permanent fixture.

"Good evening, Ma'am," the driver smiled, moving ahead of her to open the car door.

"Good evening," she nodded to him gracefully. "Arthur, what do you have to say for yourself?" She looked across the top of the car to him with narrowed eyes.
"Not a thing, Ma'am," he smiled back.

"Right," she drawled out the word with a shake of her head before she sighed and stepped into the car. It didn't matter. Whatever it was they were all 'in' on, it was making her heart soar. "Thank you," she called to the driver as he shut her door and moved to his own.

It was a matter of seconds before the car was in motion and all Maddie knew for sure was that this plan of Harry's made her feel young and free and full of the most exciting kind of anxiety. Careful of her dress, she leaned back in the seat and watched as London flew past her—so happy that she didn't even try to guess their destination based on the turns they took.

It didn't matter. She was ready for anything.

When they arrived at the airport, Maddie grew nervous; a happy sort of nervous that spoke of butterflies and hair perking on end. Her eyes were wide as they scanned the grounds for him, for a sign of him. And when the car turned around, it all came into focus.

The small, chartered plane.

And Harry—in a tuxedo standing at the base of the stairs, smiling wide as the car came to a halt. She hadn't seen him in a week and her heart reacted accordingly; pitter pattering in her chest. Maddie's hand reached for the door handle but Harry had been waiting for a long time and he beat her to it.

"Madeline," his voice was low and drew a chill to her skin as his hand held out for hers.

"Henry," she echoed his tone, her hand reaching into his; the heat warming her as she stepped from the car. Though everything moved around them—the driver pulling a bag she knew she hadn't packed from the trunk and loading it to the plane, Arthur stationing himself at the base of the steps, talking quietly and causally to Jim who was dressed just the same—for Maddie and Harry the world seemed to pause.

"You look amazing." Though he knew she would, his body, his mind was continuously stunned by her beauty.

"I don't know what to say..." She blushed and glanced down at their joined hands, unexplainably nervous. "This was...is...quite a surprise..."

"Really?" Harry chuckled softly. "I thought once you got to the shoes you would have figured it all out. Were you expecting somebody else?" His eyes gleamed in the night sky.

"Bishop," her voice and her attempt at humor was light.

"Of course," Harry rolled his eyes playfully. "You know, one of these days you're going to give me a complex about..."

"Shhhh..." Maddie cut him off, her hand slipped from his and tugged at his lapels; bringing his lips and his body to hers.

The kiss was hot and steamy and full of the edgy sort of sexiness Maddie had felt since she had
slipped on the long, beautiful gown. As her tongue pressed into his mouth, she felt the stun slip from him. She felt him recover and take a step forward; taking control of the kiss as his head tilted over hers, taking control of her body as his arms wrapped snuggly around her.

"Happy Valentine's Day," he whispered to her, his nose nudging against hers.

"Happy Valentine's Day," she sighed; slightly weakened by his mouth, by this extravagant plan. "Should we..." She smiled a bit bashfully under his gaze. "Should we get in the air?"

"We should," he nodded, still not moving an inch away from her. "We do have opera tickets..."

"Yes," her grin stretched across her face. "And Northern Lights?" Her eyebrows lifted curiously.

"Well..." He shrugged easily. "I did promise you I would take you..."

"You're good," she admitted.

"Better with you," he dropped his hold on her then, capturing her hand in his. Pressing his lips to the back of that hand, he nodded towards the plane. "Shall we?"

"Absolutely," Maddie nodded and with a deep breath, her lungs filled with the cold crisp London air and her heart warmed completely.

Harry had rented an apartment for their weekend stay in Oslo—though, to call it an apartment seemed to be an understatement. The building was immaculate; even the elevator was stunning. When it arrived at the top floor, Harry smiled sleepily at her and nodded towards the penthouse that awaited them. She stepped into the room, letting her eyes travel over the vast opulence as Arthur and Jim went about their business.

"Harry..." She turned a soft smile to him as she moved closer.

"Did you enjoy the opera?" He lifted his eyebrows, his arms encircled her, pulling her into the private space they created with soft voices and a close proximity that shared heat from each of them.

"The opera was beautiful," she nodded, pressing her body closer to his. "This..." She waved her hand towards the place. "...is beautiful. Thank you for this," she tipped her lips up to kiss him.

"We're not done yet," he murmured against her lips.

"No?"

"No," he shook his head, his eyes reanimating; awakening. "Come with me." Taking her hand he pulled her through the room, towards the large windowed wall on the opposite side. "Here..." He reached for one of the large, fluffy, warm coats that hung on a hook next to the door. Holding it out for her, she slipped her arms into the coat; instantly warming even further. After slipping into his own, Harry pulled open the door and beckoned her with a look in his eyes. Following faithfully, Maddie stepped out into the frigid night and, hand wrapped in his, moved with him towards a staircase. The stairs wrapped around the building as they moved up and Maddie stayed focused on her footing, one hand on the railing, the other in his.
And when they reached the landing, the rooftop, she took her first glance up.

"Look..." Harry's voice was low, solemn; his eyes focused outward as his breath made puffs of white from his lips. Maddie's eyes turned to where his were fixed and her lungs hitched in her chest.

"Oh..." It was all she could say; all she could find within her at the moment. It was beautiful. It was past beautiful. It was amazing, a phenomenon, a wonder of the world. She couldn't find the right word—she wondered if there even was a right word. "Harry..." She wanted to cry—afraid her eyes might freeze shut if she allowed tears into them. She had always wanted to be here, always wanted to see the wonder that was the Northern Lights. She had promised herself, more than once, that someday she would get here. But, life happened; things came up. And quite easily that goal had slipped from her mind.

But it hadn't slipped from his. He had heard her tell him once how much she had always wanted to see this, how she had made this a goal of hers. He had heard her, he had listened and now...he had made it a reality.

"Amazing, no?" He held her hand but made no large effort to move her to him, to invade her space, her moment.

"Yes," she nodded, gulping back the lump in her throat. "Thank you...for bringing me here, for making this happen..." She took a deep breath, the cold air stinging her lungs, and turned to face him.

"You're welcome," he smiled and looked off behind them where there was a large, comfortable looking bench with warmed blankets waiting for them. "Want to sit for a moment?"

"Yes," she nodded enthusiastically. They moved to the bench, Harry tucking the blankets around them. Settling against him, nuzzling close to his side, Maddie felt warm and safe and loved. Under the blankets, his hand found hers, his gloved fingers intertwining with hers as his lips pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

It was minutes before he spoke, his warm, deep voice breaking into the silent peacefulness that surrounded them.

"How are you doing Madeline?"

"Right now?" She smiled, her face turning up to look at him. "Or this week?"

"Sure. Right now, this week...with all of it..." He looked to the sky. "The wedding, the planning, the house, the spotlight, the press...how are you doing?" He was checking up on her, checking in; making sure. The things he had learned from studying the past.

"Great," she answered, somewhat surprised by the answer herself. "The wedding is...Well, Joan is a star. The planning is going incredibly smooth and everything seems to be coming together..."

"And you?" He watched her closely for reaction. "You're getting what you want?"

"Well..." She snuggled closer. "Are you still planning on making an appearance?"

"At the wedding?" He laughed.
"Mmm." She nodded.

"Yes. I'll be there."

"Then yes. I'm getting what I want."

"Good then," he couldn't help the wide grin that came with that.

"Renovations started on your mother's place last week. You saw that plans, approved them even."

"Ah yes," he nodded.

"You didn't look them over, did you?"

"I trust you." Was his response; shrugged out with ease. Maddie shook her head, a warm laugh in her throat.

"You know...Thomas sent over an interesting proposition for me today."

"Oh?" That roused his curiosity.

"An organization that would like me as a Chief Patron."

"I thought there was a list of organizations."

"There is."

"What makes this one stick out?"

"It's a branch of Walking with The Wounded."

"Oh?" His face brightened as her words instantly evoked feelings and memories that he had held with him for years.

"It's called Walking with the Women," she explained. "They are women soldiers who were wounded in battle. Obviously they want to tap into my association with you and your association with their founding organization." She took a breath. "They are planning their Inaugural trek for the North Pole..."

"And they want you to go with them?" His eyes were alive.

"They do," she nodded, biting on her lower lip. "What do you think?"

"When will you go?"

"Next Spring. They wanted to gauge my interest and wait to announce after the wedding. Training would start this summer and..." Her eyes scrunched up as she watched the excitement mount on his face. "You think I can do this?"

"I think you're going to freeze your ass off," he laughed. "Of course you can do this. Do you want to do this?"

"I really do," she nodded, her smile pulling her lip from between her teeth. "It's an amazing
"It is," he agreed wholeheartedly.

"And it's aligned with work I've already done and..." She paused. "Wow. I think I've chosen my first organization."

"Congratulations," he nudged her with his shoulder. "An excellent choice."

"Thanks," she smiled; sighing closer to him, her shoulders relaxing. "I'll tell Thomas when we get back to London."

"Okay."

"When will that be, by the way?" For the first time since she opened the dress, she had questions about the trip. "How long are we staying? Do I have other clothes or is it Elie Saab for the weekend?"

"We're staying for the weekend and yes, you have other clothes. Though..." He tipped his lips into her neck. "...I'm fine with this being a clothes optional weekend."

"Of course you are," she laughed; low and deep as her hand moved around his neck, pressing his lips closer to her. "We should go inside..."

"What about the lights?" His eyes lifted to the sky.

"They'll be here tomorrow," Maddie mumbled, her lips pressing to his cheek. "It's much too cold out here for clothing optional..."

"It is," he grinned against her skin. "Come on." And he was up, pulling her with him towards the stairs in a fit of lively giggles. They navigated the stairs expertly, slipping back inside the warm apartment. Harry's hands were eager as he pulled her coat from her arms, hanging it next to his. His eyes scanned her in the dress, a wide smile of appreciation. "You're so beautiful..."

"It's an amazing dress," she stepped up to him.

"Mmm..." He nodded, dismissing the dress; his head dipping to press a kiss to her exposed collar bone, his hand finding home at her waist.

"Harry..." She breathed, feeling his fingers working their way to her zipper. "Jim? Arthur?"

"Across the hall," he knew exactly what she was asking as his fingers found their mark, tugging at the small slip of metal.

"Ah..." She sighed, feeling the dress loosen around her, feeling the warmth of his palms on the skin of her back. Not to be outdone, her hands pressed into his jacket, pushing it over his shoulders, forcing his hands from her body as it slipped from his arms to the floor behind him.

Before his hands could return to her, she was pulling at his tie, fumbling with his buttons on his shirt. Joining her in her efforts, he helped her pull both from his body before he caught her hands in his and stalled them.

Bringing both of her hands together in front of him, he kissed the tops of them; each in turn. Then
he pulled them apart, his lips moving to the inside of her wrist, dropping one hand to focus his
attention on the other.

A soft giggle escaped her mouth as Harry kissed the inside of her elbow, her bicep, tickling her in
the slightest. Her free hand moved to his side, pulling him closer to her, seeking the warmth his
body provided. With nimble fingers and infinite grace, Harry slipped her dress from her shoulders,
offering his hand and his steadiness as she stepped from the mound of elegant fabric.

"Wow..." He was stunned into stillness as he looked her over. "Has that been underneath this the
whole time?"

"Yes," she nodded, her head tipping to the side seductively, her eyes shining—the sexiness she
had felt the whole night had only increased, leaving her with this feeling of euphoria. Clad in the
lightest of lingerie and her pink suede shoes, she reached for his hand and took a step backwards;
beckoning him with a curl of her finger. "Want to see what's underneath this?"

"My God yes," he nodded; his nerves on high alert, his body ready to follow her anywhere.
"Where are you going?"

"I have no idea," she laughed; pulling him with her anyway until her legs hit the couch. "Maybe
right here?"

"I can work with right here," his eyes had glazed over, moving into full on predator mode as his
hands hugged her waist; pulling her to him. His lips kissed hers, lightly; teasingly. "Come here..."
He spoke into her mouth; her body arching into his as she met his kiss with her own.

"You come here," she smirked; her hands pulling at the waist of his pants, her eyes holding onto
his as she pulled the zipper and pushed at the fabric.

"Yes Ma'am," he drawled; amused at her bossy nature, turned on by her eager hands, her
impatient lips, her enthusiasm. And when she tugged him with her towards the couch, he went
willingly; his arm reaching out to brace their descent, lowering them both to the warm cushion
beneath them.

"Hi..." Maddie smiled wide as his body slid over hers, his hips resting between her thighs as her
legs wrapped around him.

"Hi..." He breathed; his fingers moving to push her hair from her face. And just as Maddie was
about to speak, just as she was about to offer up some pithy remark or smart comment, Harry's lips
were moving against hers, his mouth closing over hers, his kiss taking the place of her wits.

Her body arched up into his as it always did, as if it were a magnet pulling towards the source of
all of its needs. His fingers left her face, tracing a light trail of sensation down her arm that was
tossed over his shoulder, along her side, over her hip. It slowed when it reached her thigh, it stilled
as it found her knee. Wrapping tightly around it, he pulled her leg up, away from him—allowing
him to move from her grasp. Maddie groaned as he left her, moaned when he returned; pressing a
kiss to the inside of her knee as he sat up on his own knees.

Looking down at her, hair askew and eyes dark with lust, he shuddered out a breath and reached
for the tiny bit of garment that covered her. As he slid it slowly from her legs, he watched a sigh
strangle from her lungs. She was as ready as he was. And as his head dipped down to taste her, he
verified that assumption. Her hips pushed up against his mouth, her legs pressing tightly to him;
her hand fisting into his hair.
This was always a double edged dance between them. These moments where it was all passion and drive. He loved to do this; make love to her with his mouth, push her to the edge with his tongue. It drove him wild to drive her wild, to make her writhe beneath him.

And she loved it, she looooooooved it—in that primal, animalistic moan of a way, she loved how personal it was, how close and intimate. And she loved how good he was at it; loved that it pushed everything from her brain leaving her only tie to sanity at the will of Harry's skilled lips.

The problem was—if you could really call it a problem—that sometimes this was enough for him. He would bring her to her orgasm, pull it from her shuddering body with a wicked smile and soft sort of air about him. And then he would be done. Maddie would try to reciprocate, try to pull him to her but he would shake his head and press lingering kisses to her thighs, her stomach. And the kicker was, it really was because that had been it for him; his goal, his end result. To make her come apart at the mercy of his mouth and, once she did, there was no other high for him to reach. And sometimes that was enough for her; to come apart and find herself pulled into the protectiveness of his arm, playing the role of the small spoon as they drifted to sleep together.

But sometimes that wasn't enough for her. Sometimes she wanted him deep inside of her; pushing into her in a way only he could, pressing spots so hidden that nobody else had ever reached them. Sometimes she needed him to leave her completely spent, worn and tired; unsure if her legs would even work as they were designed to. Sometimes she wanted him to lunge and pound and demand that she tumble over the edge with a fierceness that only came from an intense desire, a powerful love, a drive they shared in only these moments.

And this, this night in Oslo under the Northern Lights, this was one of those moments. She wanted him to take her in that way that was reserved only for him, in that way that reached deep inside of her and pulled his name out of her lungs in that strangled, desperate way that only made him press harder before he would tumble behind her; his own body releasing into her in a fantastic finish—leaving them both sweaty and breathless.

"Harry..." She called out into the room, her breath already labored as she tugged at the red mess of hair between her fingers. When he responded to her with a flick of his tongue, she moaned, bit her lip, and tugged again. "Harry..." She swallowed a gulp of air and found her voice. "I swear to you, if you don't fuck me tonight..." She felt his brief pause, his reaction to her choice of words and she let out a slight laugh, her hold on his hair relaxing. Maybe she had found the secret language she had been searching for. "Harry..." She called out. "Baby..." His tongue pressed into her, pulling a gasp and a moan and a conflict that Maddie would never be able to resolve as long as she lived. "I want you to fuck me Harry..."

She felt his chuckle as his lips left her body, his head shaking slightly between her legs. "Madeline..." She recognized that tone. He was warning her.

"You know you want to," her hips moved slightly, her eyes meeting his as he looked up from her for the tiniest of moments. And then, with a newfound drive, motivated by the way her words were driving his body mad, his lips returned to her; on a mission. "Oh!" She called out, hips bucking up to him.

"Mmm..." He moaned into her, his fingers holding tight to her hips, holding her to him as he continued. In seconds she was there, in seconds she was coming undone, in seconds she was pressing up into him as she fell apart around him.

"Harry...I..." She was gasping for air and before she could come down, before she could even
begin to recover from that intensity, he was moving.

"You want me to fuck you baby?" His eyes were dark with heat and Maddie's only response was a gasp. And that's all she had time for because his lips smeared against hers as he captured her; her mouth and her body. Without warning, without precipice, he was plunged deep inside of her; his hands pulling at her legs, stretching them wide to make room for him.

"Oh..." He pushed breath from her lungs when he pulled out only to push back in; hard and deep. Still fresh from her first orgasm, Maddie's nerves were on end, every sensation she felt, she felt tenfold. And it was almost too much for her sensitive skin, her recovering body. His arms moved under her then, wrapping around her and holding her tight to him; wrapping his entire body around hers as he kissed her swollen lips.

"If you...want me...to...fuck you..." His words were coming out in bursts with each thrust of his hips, with each groan from her.

"Harry..." She gasped.

"Then I will..." He pushed into her, holding himself there as they both struggled with where they were headed. His breath was hot against her face as he stalled, as he held her in this amazing purgatory, her body pushed to the edge. He kissed her then, his tongue pushing into her mouth, tangling with hers as she struggled to keep up.

"I can't," she shook her head, referring to her ability to handle the feelings that surged through her body.

"Yes you can," his mouth was hot on her neck, sucking just enough to pull the skin into his mouth, but light enough so as not to leave a mark—not there. "Come on baby...You wanted to be fucked..." He pulled out, pushed back in; her head tipping back in his hands, hair tangling in his fingers as she groaned.

"I..." She gasped, the pressure and heat swelling and building and. "Harry..."

"Yes," he nodded; pushing in and out.

"I..."

"Yes." He commanded; relentless.

"Please..."

"Well, since you said please..." He chuckled into her neck and released his bear hug around her. One hand moved to her hip as the other moved to cup her breast, thumbing her nipple as he adjusted his speed, adjusted his depth. "I love you Madeline," his breath drew heavy and quick. "Come with me..."

And then he went. He was loud and strangled and heavy as he pressed into her, sending her over for the second time that night.

It was with great joy and tangled limbs that Maddie took his weight as he laid into her; his heart beating feverishly in his chest as he pressed his face to her heaving chest; allowing a soft, sweet kiss to her still tender nipples. He sighed; relaxing against her. Maddie's hands fell limp on his shoulders, her eyes blinking back tears born of relief and intensity as a giggle slipped from her lips.
"I would say fuck..." She breathed. "But after that I'm not sure my body can handle what comes next..." His laughter came from deep inside of him, traveling through her as he looked up; his chin resting on her breast bone.

"Are you okay?" He ran soft hands over her hip bone, down her thigh; soothing away the way he had roughed her up only moments before.

"Yes," she was certain, assuring him with a nod and a smile. "Beyond okay."

"Okay," he smiled, stroking her leg that was still wrapped around him. "Okay."

"And you?" She ruffled his hair.

"Hmm..." He grinned into the skin of her stomach, kissing her there before he moved away from her, leaning to kiss her lips. "Yes. Yes..." He kissed her again. "Absolutely yes. I'll be right back," he sealed his promise with another kiss before he rose to his feet and made way for the bathroom.

Maddie turned on her side, feeling warm and giddy, and watched as he walked away from her. He had an amazing body, he really did; toned and muscular and every inch of it was hers to kiss and love and call her own. It was a heady thing—to watch him move and know that she would be spending the rest of her life with him, with that unbelievable body and his equally beguiling mind. She stretched her arms up over her head and sighed into the blissful state that always followed making love to Harry.

"Are you hungry?" Harry called out to her as he returned to the room.

"You know me so well," she sighed, pulling herself into a sitting position.

"Why don't you put on some pajamas and meet me in the kitchen?" He leaned to kiss her once more before pulling his boxers up to sit low on his hips while he shrugged into his t-shirt.

"Okay," she grinned. "Care to tell me where my pajamas are?"

"Ah yes," he smiled and nodded to the hall behind her. "Our room's at the back. Your things are in there."

Maddie was quick on her feet, hurrying down the hall to the massive room that was theirs for the next two nights. Pulling open a few drawers, she finally found her stuff. A wide, sweet smile on her face, she hurried back to the living room.

"I have to say, I'm impressed."

"Oh?" He called out, confused. "How so?"

"When faced with packing my clothes for the weekend, you went with my more modest and more comfortable pajamas." He laughed to himself as he looked to the pajamas in her hand.

"Yes well, the others seemed more self-serving, if you know what I mean."

"I do. Though surely on a weekend such as this, you could afford to be a little self-serving."

"If I knew then what I know now..." He grinned.
"Maybe a compromise?" She pulled on the pajama top and slipped into her lacy boy shorts from earlier.

"Perfect." He smacked his lips as he looked her over, trying to ignore the pull in his stomach.

"Okay now..." She pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "What was this about food?"

"Ah yes," he clapped his hands together. "The kitchen. I'm going to cook."

"You're going to cook?" She stared after him in confusion.

"Yes," he laughed at her as he moved around the already stocked room, pulling out items as he did. "A very wise man once said that you can tell a lot about a man by cooking a meal with him..."

"Oh really?" She smiled.

"Yes," he leaned to kiss her lips. "And I have been preparing to prepare this meal for quite a while."

"Preparing to prepare?" She crossed her arms over her chest, taking inventory of the items he had pulled from the cupboards and the fridge.

"Bernard gave me a few...tips."

"Tips?"

"He taught me how to make his pizza."

"Shut up!" She was stunned; flabbergasted. "I've been begging him to teach me since I moved in with you."

"Yes, well..." Harry thought for a moment and shrugged. "I guess he loves me more."

"I guess!" She shook her head, moving closer to him, looking at everything a bit more closely.

"Or maybe he loves you more and wanted to make me work for it..." Harry grinned, taking in the breadth of the task he was about to undertake. "Either way...I'm about to make you some pizza."

"This is lining up to be the best holiday ever." She clapped her hands together excitedly.

"And we're not even done yet," Harry laughed at her, holding out a bottle of wine. "Would you mind pouring a few glasses?"

"Not at all," she sighed and took the bottle from his hands. She had no idea what else it was he had planned for the weekend, but it was off to a magnificent start. Moving to locate glasses and a corkscrew, Maddie sighed into herself; content and happy and warm—from head to toe.

Bliss. Pure bliss.
Spring had come early in London. Or at least it felt that way at Kensington Palace. Their trip to Oslo had been the kind of reprieve the couple had needed before they returned to the uphill hike that would be the next few months leading up to their nuptials.

They had a lot to do, a lot of ground to cover. But the sun was shining. And the sun shining in London, in March, was a moment to be appreciated, and Maddie had every intention of doing just that. She slipped on a spring-y dress for the trip they would be taking to Highgrove for the weekend as guests of Charles and Camilla. She pulled her hair up, toyed with the thought of sandals but, realizing it wasn't quite that nice, she went for something a bit warmer.

She felt light and easy and the tad bit giggly as she almost bounced down the stairs where Harry was waiting for her. Their bags had been packed and loaded and they were simply waiting for her. She planted a kiss to his cheek and reached for her purse. Though he shook his head, he couldn't help but smile at her bubbliness. She could see the question in his eyes as he looked her over.

"I'm excited," she explained, running a hand across his chest as she passed him towards the door.

"I see that," he followed behind as though she had beckoned him. "Care to let me in on the joke?"

"No joke," she grinned. "I'm excited. I'm marrying you."

"In three months," he reminded, stepping out into the sunny day.

"I'm that excited," she shrugged.

"Wow..." He chuckled, slipping into the car behind her, the door closing behind him. "At least the car ride should be interesting."

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If Maddie had stopped to really analyze her life, she would have been embarrassed to admit how much of it was becoming routine.

The security detail. The driver of the Rolls Royce they traveled in. The meetings at St. James Palace. The casual way she went to The Prince of Wales' home for the weekend.

It had become such a part of her life that it no longer seemed a dream, no longer seemed something that belonged to him, to them. It was hers now too. If she would have taken a moment to really look at that, she would have been in awe at the surreal-ness of it all.

But on that early spring day, the only thing that was out of sorts was waiting to greet them when they arrived. Instead of Charles and Camilla, it was Charles and another older gentleman who stood in casual conversation as the couple pulled up the drive.

"Charles!" Maddie burst from the car with the very same energy Harry had been teasing her about all morning. She slipped into the slightest of curtseys before being pulled into his arms for a hug and kisses—his smile rivaling hers.

"Good morning Madeleine," he was joyed by her mood, even when he sent a look to his son who
"I think Bernard's slipping something in her eggs," he hugged his father hello, finding his friend's presence a bit more confusing than his peppy partner.

"Wonderful," Charles loved his children dearly—all of them, Kate and Maddie included. But he couldn't help but become more and more amused with the young blonde who now took it upon herself to greet their additional visitor.

"Good morning," she smiled at him, her eyes taking in his appearance, skirting through her memory to place him but coming up with nothing.

"Madeline, this is Ronald Young, an old friend of mine." Charles turned his attention to her. "Ron, this is my future daughter-in-law, Doctor Madeline Forrester."

"Good to meet you," Maddie stretched her hand to his; oblivious to the way Harry was watching the exchange.

"It's a real pleasure to meet you Ma'am," he smiled warmly, offering a firm handshake.

"And you've met my son before, Harry," Charles nodded to Harry who smiled and nodded in return.

"Mr. Young," his hand took the place of Maddie's.

"Sir."

"Well, shall we go inside?" Charles turned his body towards the door, the staff already shuffling in bags from the car. "Camilla is excited to hear wedding details and I believe that lunch will be served shortly."

"Fantastic!" Maddie clapped her hands together and, as all three men stood to the side, she moved past them into the house. As she walked ahead of them she missed the way Harry's eyes met Charles', she missed the unspoken questions, the unspoken answers.

But both were soon to come to her realization, both would be spoken. After lunch, Camilla asked Harry if he would join her in the study, help her look over some papers that had been sent up regarding a project she had been working on for him for Sentebale. Agreeing, he pressed a kiss to Maddie's cheek and smiled as his father suggested they take a walk through the grounds.

Maddie easily and quite eagerly agreed. It had been sometime since they had been to Highgrove and she always felt a connection to the property, to the land. Though it was favorable weather, she slipped into her rubber wellies and pulled on a heavier sweater before joining Charles and his friend for a causal stroll through the property. The air in Tetbury was chillier than it was in London and the remaining snow on the ground crunched under their feet. But Maddie didn't mind, she kept up the pace, keeping casual conversation as Charles pointed out newly roughed in areas for more orchard space, as he debated out loud, but to himself, over which herbs would be added to the mix. Out of the corner of her eye, Maddie swore she saw a nod pass between the two men before Ronald Young cleared his throat and went for a causal air as he turned to Maddie.

"I understand you've been receiving letters at St. James Palace?" His eyes shifted to the area Charles had been pointing to and then, as if the subject wasn't serious at all, he turned to his good friend and pointed. "Those. What kind of apples grow there?"
Charles had his hands behind his back, a smile on his lips. "Those are not apple trees, Ronnie."
He chuckled; low and deep. "It seems the city has finally won out over your country heart." The
two men held a long laugh together as Maddie looked between them.

This wasn't the first time Maddie had heard of the letters. Thomas had brought the concern to
Harry, Maddie, and Charles earlier that week. At the time, Harry had seemed more concerned
than Charles who had remained calm and casual and instructed them to pass it onto the Security
Team and to keep an eye on it. But now, as Maddie looked between him and his old friend from
home, she wasn't so sure.

"I guess," she shrugged, looking out over the vast land, inhaling a sharp breath of fresh air. "St.
James gets a lot of letters. Why should those be any more threatening?"

"We don't know that they are," Charles spoke then, his eyes trained in the distance. "But Mr.
Young thinks that maybe it might be time to put some paperwork in place, an order. A
precautionary measure if nothing else..." His eyes snuck to the side, wanting to gauge her
response.

"Oh?" Maddie's tone shifted from dazed and casual to inquisitive. A bright smile pulled at her
pink cheeks. "I'm sorry Mr. Young. We don't know each other at all. What is it that you...do?"
His smile was quaint, his nod was presumptuous; he was used to this questioning look.

"Mr. Young has served as an Advisor to myself and Camilla in the past," Charles spoke on his
behalf before he could even open his mouth. "He's well respected and discreet. I asked him to
weigh in on this situation. I assure you, his only thought is in our best interests, in looking out for
you."

"Of course," Maddie turned her smile to the only father she had in her life. Suddenly, she wished
Harry were there. She wished he had come on their walk, wondered if he had been left at the
house purposefully. It wasn't that she didn't trust Charles, it wasn't that she didn't know what to
think of Mr. Young and his suggestion that she sign paperwork—a restraining order Maddie
guessed. It was merely that her ability to read Harry's reactions was greater than her ability to read
Charles' and, through his eyes, she would be better able to gauge the seriousness of this moment.
Taking a deep of breath, and a great amount of faith in her father, she nodded. "Of course. If you
think it's for the best," she met Charles' eyes then, her trust in him evident there. "If you think it's
for the best then I'll do it...whatever you need me to sign."

"I do," Charles nodded, reaching out for her hand; enveloping her small fingers in his large,
protective paws. "I think it's for the best."

"Okay then," she took a deep breath and nodded.

"I'll have them ready to go before dinner tonight," Mr. Young smiled, nodding between the two of
them. "We can sign them before we are seated."

"Fantastic," Charles spoke the final words on the matter and moved on. Pulling his daughter's
hand through his arm, he dismissed Mr. Young to his duties and spoke in his more casual, his
more natural tone. "Now, Madeline. If you would humor me for a few moments longer, I would
like to show you what we've done out back."

"I would be happy to," she squeezed his arm and took the first step in that direction. Mr. Young
and his papers fluttered from their minds as their attention was drawn elsewhere.
"Mr. Young wants me to sign some paperwork," Maddie called out to Harry as they dressed for dinner. She stood in their bathroom, leaning towards the mirror as she slipped in a pair of earrings.

"Oh?" Harry called out from the bedroom, tugging a tie around his neck. "What kind of paperwork?"

"I don't know for sure," she shrugged as he appeared in the doorway. "Something to do with those letters Thomas told us about this week."

"Yeah?" Harry seemed more intrigued as his hands abandoned his tie, reaching for the necklace in her hands and motioning for her to turn around. "You're going to sign them?"

"Your father thinks it's a good idea," she smiled as his fingers tickled the soft skin of her neck before they pulled back, necklace in place.

"Well, if dad thinks it's a good idea..." He shrugged as he returned to his tie.

"Have you signed stuff like this before?" She watched him as he moved around the room, tucking and pulling and finishing up his look.

"Sure," he flashed a grin her way. "I've signed a ton of paperwork at my father's urging. Look..." He moved to her then, his hands settling on her shoulders as he smiled reassuringly. "I'm sure it's just a formality, just a precaution. They want to get something on paper in case they ever need to move forward on anything."

"Yeah," Maddie sighed. "That's what he said, Mr. Young. That's what he said."

"Well, I'm sure Ronnie knows what he's doing," Harry laughed lightly. "You're not worried are you?"

"What?" Maddie laughed, flipping off the light to the bathroom and stepping into their room. "No! Absolutely not. It's all just new to me. I've never had...fans...before..." Her face twisted as she said it.

"I disagree," Harry's smirk grew cocky. "Travis Meeks?"

"Ha!" She moved past it all, moved to his arms. "You're right. You're right." Leaning her head up she pressed a kiss to his lips; dismissing the discussion. "Let's go sign this stuff...I'm starving."

"Let's go," with a swift pat to her ass, Harry took her hand and pulled her with him from the room.

Maddie's early Spring chipper mood was drawn to a quick and jagged end when she was jarred from her sleep the next morning. Her phone rang out into their room, disturbing the sweet, wonderful slumber that came with the country air at Highgrove. Harry could hear her awaken, he felt her sit up. He knew she was trying to avoid disturbing him but it was all pointless. If she was up, he was up. He grumbled and pulled his pillow over his head; not the easiest person at that particular hour. He took a deep breath and pressed his eyes closed, hoping to hold onto that last thread of sleep but...
"Harry," Maddie was soft and quiet but she was most certainly waking him up. His pillow lifted away from him and the light from the rising sun joined in on her efforts. "Harry wake up."

"No," he shook his head in the slightest, his hand reaching out to her, hoping to pull her back to him, back to sleep.

"Harry, you have to wake up. Something's happened." There was just enough edge to her voice—Harry's eyes peeled open and he looked up at her.

"What is it?"

"It's Ella," Maddie swallowed the lump in her throat, blinked at the tears. "Her father's dead."

That did it. He was awake.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" Harry followed behind Maddie as she hurried to the car. As soon as she had hung up the phone that morning, she had kicked into gear. She had showered, dressed, said good-bye to Charles who was more than understanding and she was on her way back to London in a matter of minutes. Her Security detail and the driver were ready and waiting only for her.

"No," Maddie shook her head, her sorrowful eyes hidden behind her dark sunglasses. "You have to be at that meeting on Monday and I'm just going to...I'm going to go with her to Dublin. We'll be in the air tonight I would imagine."

"You'll let me know?" He pulled open the car door, leaning against it as he looked her over, wishing he could hold onto her, hug her close—but knowing she needed to go.

"As soon as I do," Maddie nodded, pressing her lips together.

"Bishop is on his way back?" He reached out, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Yes," she nodded, her eyes tearing up again. "But he's in China and...I hate that she was alone when it happened. She has such a contentious relationship with her family and..."

"Go," Harry nodded to the car. "You'll be there in over an hour. She won't be alone much longer. Travel safe. Call me."

"Okay," she smiled at him, thankful for his strength, for his support; for him.

"Are you going to be okay?" His fingers stroked her cheek and she knew exactly what he was referring to.

"Yes," she answered though her head shook slightly. A small, muffled laugh pushed from her lips. "Yes. I'll be fine." Her fingers wrapped around the back of his neck as she pulled him to her for a kiss. "I'll be fine. I'll call you with flight details and I'll be safe."

"If you need me, you call me," his eyes leveled with hers. "I can cancel meetings. I can rearrange things and..."
"I know," she grinned, kissing him one more time before releasing him and turning towards the car. "Go to your meeting. I'll call you when I get to London and know more. I'll call you when I get to Dublin. I'll call you with the plans..."

"Okay," he had to be satisfied with that. Though his heart hurt for Ella, his heart also hurt for Maddie—knowing what this was bringing up for her. "I love you Madeline."

"I love you too," she smiled a weak smile for him and then, with the slightest of waves, she slipped into the car. Harry shut the door behind her, gave a soft pat to the metal and waved as she moved away from him.

"How is she?" Harry spoke into his phone as he stepped into the car that would take him home. He had made his Monday meeting and now all he wanted to do was get home, get to Dublin, get to Maddie.

"She's..." Maddie smiled at her friend who sat across the room, looking through old photos with her mother while Bishop boiled water for tea in the kitchen. Maddie lowered her voice and turned away from them. "She's doing...okay."

"Yeah?"

"It's weird. I wish I could put a finger on it but..." She shook her head. "I don't know. Ella's not quite herself."

"Well her father just died," it seemed completely reasonable to him.

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "But she hasn't really been able to look me in the eye and...I don't know," she shook her head. "She's okay. Better now that Bishop is here actually."

"Everything's better when Bishop is there," Harry grinned, recalling the numerous times he had alleviated the chaotic nature of his own life.

"Agreed," Maddie nodded, recalling the same. "You'll be here tomorrow?"

"Yes," he sighed, thankful to finally be joining his friends where he was needed; where he needed to be. "The viewing's tomorrow?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded.

"This is going to sound crazy but I had no idea Ella was Catholic."

"Yeah," Maddie chuckled softly. "Bishop was just as surprised. He wouldn't shut up about it."

"He's hoping to see her uniform," Harry laughed.

"Of course."

"Viewing tomorrow, funeral the day after?" Harry confirmed the itinerary, wanting to make sure.

"Yes," Maddie nodded and gulped. "I'm glad you're coming."
"I wouldn't be anywhere else," he assured her. "Hug her for me?"

"Absolutely."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"I love you."

"I love you."


The day of Ella's father's viewing was a tense one. The time at home was beginning to wear on Ella, the time with her family beginning to drag her down. Planning a funeral for a man who had brought a lot of anger and instability to their family was only proving to highlight the anger and instability that resonated in those walls. Maddie and Bishop tried their best to be there for her, tried to shoulder some of the burden, but the fight was internal, the battle was inside. And it tugged at Ella in ways she hadn't felt since she was younger, before she left for school, Bendal, London.

Bishop, being the English gentleman he was, offered to drive Ella's mother to the church the morning of the viewing so that she could deliver her late husband's glasses and favorite tie in preparation for the services that night. Ella did not want to go. She didn't want to be anywhere near the event until she was required to do so and her brother wouldn't be there until later that night. So Bishop went and Maddie stayed.

"Is there anything..." Maddie's voice trailed off as she looked at her friend, staring out the window over the sink in the kitchen. Her face was broken, twisted as she struggled with the feelings she couldn't quite articulate. She glanced to Maddie then, wiping harshly at the tear that dared to fall onto her cheeks. With a nod, she bit off that emotion and sniffed.

"How do you feel about whiskey?"

"Whiskey?" Maddie's eyebrows shot up. "It's ten in the..." She caught herself, drew her caution back in and nodded. "Whiskey's good."

"Great." Ella clapped her hands together and moved across the kitchen. Kneeling down, she moved a few boxes of food from a cupboard; cereal, crackers and then with a crooked grin, she pulled out a bottle of whiskey. Rising to her feet she left the cupboard as it was; open with boxes scattered around. "You know..." She moved towards where Maddie stood. "When he was alive...if you touched this bottle, even if he thought that you had touched this bottle..." Her eyes welled up and her face twisted, hating that she was crying over this, over him. Swallowing she continued. "There would be hell to pay."

"Yeah?" Maddie wanted to hug her. She wanted to hug her close and tight enough so as to push these childhood memories from her mind. She knew Ella's father was a drinker and when he drank, he was mean. And he drank a lot.

"Yeah." She twisted the cap, a defiant smirk on her lips. "But he's dead now so..." She reached toward the counter, pulling a newly washed glass from the strainer and handing it to Maddie, pouring some of the dark liquid into the glass. Meeting her friend's eyes, she clinked the bottle to the glass and with the steadiest voice she had spoken with since they had arrived, "So fuck him." Maddie controlled her flinch, she held Ella's eyes and she raised her glass to her lips.
"Fuck him." It felt odd coming out of her mouth, but she said it anyway. Truth was, she hadn't known the man at all. All she knew of him was from the few stories from her past Ella would share on some hot, drunken night in Bendal or one of the few scattered times they became sentimental. She had known things were less than wonderful but she hadn't known that it was quite like this. As Ella tossed back a large slug of whiskey, Maddie swallowed back the burn in her throat and nodded.

It was ten in the morning. On the day of Ella's father's viewing. Harry was in the air as she stood there.

And she was drinking whiskey with Ella.

"If I don't remember..." Ella spoke then, smiling back another sip. "If I forget later...if I..." She laughed and reached out, her hand lingering on Maddie's arm. "Thank you for being here right now."

"Of course," Maddie's response was quick.

"It's not...pretty here. It's...ugh..." Ella groaned. "Once the family shows it's going to be so much worse and...if I forget...it saves me that you're here. You and Bishop and Harry. It saves me."

"We love you," Maddie felt tears in her eyes for the way her friend was struggling. "I love you."

"I love you too." Ella's voice drained, her head slumping down as tears slipped from her eyes. Shaking her head, she tried to fight it. She hated this more than anything.

"Hey..." Maddie moved closer, sliding next to her; their bodies touching from shoulder to hip. Ella took a moment, wiped at her eyes, and pulled her head up. Glancing at Maddie, she allowed the smallest of smiles for the briefest of moments.

"More whiskey?" She held up the bottle.

"More whiskey." Maddie nodded. If this was what Ella needed, this is what they were doing.

By the time Harry arrived at the house, Maddie and Ella had changed into appropriate clothing and had managed to put quite the dent into the bottle of whiskey. When Bishop had returned with Ella's mother, her eyes had gone instantly to the open cupboard, flashing right up to the bottle in Ella's hand. Her eyes were wide with fear.

"Would you like some?" Ella's eyebrows had lifted, her voice hot with a challenge. Her mother glanced to Maddie, to Bishop and retreated; a tired no shaking from her head. Before Bishop could ask anything, the doorbell was ringing and Arthur was stepping towards the hallway.

"Harry's here," Maddie met Bishop's eyes before she followed Arthur, Bishop sliding into the spot next to Ella that Maddie had just vacated.

When Maddie made it to the front door, Ella's mother was wide eyed and surprised as Harry shook her hand, speaking in low tones as he conveyed his sympathy for her loss. Maddie watched him for a moment, watched him work, watched him charm before she stepped out of the shadow of the hall and made her presence known with a small cough. Mrs. Marshall smiled softly at Maddie and excused herself to her bedroom. Maddie's eyes met Harry's as the door shut behind
him, Arthur and Brad exchanging information. He pulled off his overcoat and smoothed down his black suit as he looked for a place to distribute the stiff wool.

"Here," Maddie reached for it, taking it to the hook next to the door behind him. Turning to him, she blinked back unexpected tears at the sight of him, the relief that came with him. "Hi."

"Hi," he offered a small smile, reaching for her.

"Mmmm..." Her voice was muffled into his neck as she hugged him tight. "I'm so happy you're here." She lifted her lips to his then, pressing a kissing into his mouth; pushing for just a moment longer than one might consider acceptable in the hallway of a mourning widow.

"Are you..." Harry's tongue swiped over his lips as his eyes took her in; her pink cheeks, hazy eyes. "I'm sorry, are you drunk?" His voice was low as he whispered; his eyes glancing back and forth down the hallway.

"A little bit, yes," she muffled a half laugh with her hand. "I am a little bit drunk."

"You got drunk before a funeral?" He was torn between propriety and amusement.

"It's a viewing," she corrected him, taking his hand in hers and leading him towards Ella and Bishop.

"Still."

"Ella wanted to drink," she shrugged, her mind drifting to the mounting reasons behind that. "It's her father, it's...I had to."

"Had to?" Harry pulled her to a stop. "I'm sorry love, I know things are hard but..."

"No," Maddie shook her head, her eyes welling up as she stepped into him, lowering her voice. "It's not hard. It's...it's terrible. I'm...I'm ninety five percent certain her father would drink and get violent with her and her brother and..." She wiped at her eyes and took a deep breath. "She's my best friend. I had to...I had to shut off my Psychologist brain and drink with her. I had to."

"Okay," he nodded. He understood. He got it. He'd go down that road with Bishop no questions asked. "Okay," he nodded, scanning her. "You okay? You need anything?"

"No," she smiled. "Just you."

"You got that baby." He kissed her forehead. "Come on. Let's go to Ella."

"Okay," she sighed, tugging at his hand again. "I hope you brought your drinking shoes."

"My drinking shoes?" He couldn't help the laugh.

"I don't know," she sighed with a shake of her head. "I'm drunk. Roll with it."

When Harry joined the group, Ella was quick to offer him a glass of whiskey which he took. Though he was hesitant at first.
"What's the matter Harry?" She had teased him. "Is it too early for you? I think your English is showing."

"Nice," he had shaken his head and held out his hand. "Give me a glass."

"One glass of whiskey coming up," she clapped her hands together. "For Merry Ol' Harry." Though Bishop nearly lost his mouthful of his own drink, it caused a moment of laughter among the somber group.

And the drinking continued. Well, Maddie and Ella drinking continued. Though the men took down a few, they could both clearly see that Ella was heading towards a breaking point. Though none of them would ever think to put a stop to what she wanted, they recognized a downward spiral when they saw one. And, while Maddie went head first with her best friend, Bishop and Harry were going to be there to catch them when they hit bottom.

And they did hit.

Hours later when they were at the funeral home. The foursome had been escorted off to a side room to wait for the service to start. Ella's mother had gone in with her brother, taking a seat in the front pew while other mourners filed in.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Ella groaned as the door shut behind them.

"I told you mixing whiskey and gin was a bad idea," Harry shook his head as Maddie reached for a trashcan.

"Not from that," she rolled her eyes in his direction. "From this..." Her thumb jutted towards the room in the funeral home where her father laid in rest.

"Ella..." Maddie's voice was soft.

"All of these people? Pretending they loved him? Pretending they miss him?" She laughed; a short, harsh bark of a laugh. "It's annoying and irritating and a great big fucking joke."

"Hey..." Bishop's eyes were soft on her.

"I'm serious," she laughed again, wiping at her eyes. "Nobody loved that man. Nobody misses that man. But we're all going to go in there and pretend that he wasn't the great big asshole that he was!"

"Hey..." Maddie reached for her hand, worried that her voice could be heard among the mourners. "Come on."

"Come on?" Ella turned teary eyes to her best friend. "Madeline. I love you. I do. But you have no idea what I'm talking about."

"Ella..."

"You don't!" She yelled bringing a flinch from every person in the room. "Your father was an amazing man," she started to cry. "He loved you so much. He made you feel like you were worth something, like you were worth everything...like you mattered..." Though Bishop took a step forward, towards her, Ella took a step back. "That man out there!" She pointed; angry. "He was not like your father! He made me feel..." Her hand fell over her heart that was aching in her chest.
"He made me feel like I didn't deserve...anything."

"I'm so sorry," Maddie was crying too.

"I hate him..." Ella told her.

"I know."

"I hate him."

"I know you do," Maddie nodded. "But..." But there was a service. There were people.

"No buts!" She yelled out. "You don't get to tell me how to feel right now!"

"I'm not trying to tell you how to feel, Ella..." Maddie's own eyes spilled over.

"I hate him! I...I hate him..." Even Harry choked up at the sight of their friend folding in over herself. "I...I..." She shook her head, her fight deflating.

Maddie didn't know what to do. She wanted to go to her, wanted to pull her into her arms and run; shield her from this moment, from this day. But she couldn't. Ella didn't want that from her. She was right, Maddie had no idea what it was like to hate her father. To hate him and be expected to mourn him.

Maddie felt Harry's hand on her shoulder, holding her back and she watched as Bishop stepped forward. Tugging at his pants, he kneeled in front of where Ella sat. His hand found her knee.

"I hate him too," his voice was low, his expression stoic. Maddie bit her lip. "I hate him too Ella. Look at me love..." His hand cupped her cheek, his body inched closer. "I hate him for what he did to you and to your mother. I hate that he made you feel this way." He kissed the top of her knee. "You can hate him. Nobody is saying you can't hate him. I'll hate him with you. I'll sit right next to you and we'll hate him together. But right now...right now we have to go in there and sit in that church and... we'll tell the bastard good-bye."

"Yeah?" She met his eyes, not even minding the way her tears were falling.

"Yeah," he nodded kissing her hands in his. "We'll do this and then the four of us can head out. We don't have to be with all of these people. Harry will get us all drunk and then we can crash at the hotel till the funeral tomorrow."

"Yeah?" She glanced to Harry who nodded.

"Absolutely."

"Okay..." She took a deep breath and nodded to Bishop. When Ella rose to her feet, she clung to Bishop like he was her life line. Nothing in the entire world could have pulled them apart. She needed him like she needed air—more than she needed air.

Her eyes lifted to meet Maddie's, an apology forming on her lips. "Maddie..."

"Shhh..." Maddie shook her head, putting a stop to the words before they ever began. Her hand moved to squeeze hers as Bishop moved Ella past the two of them and into the church. Harry's hand graced his best friend's shoulder for a pause of a moment as he walked by him. And then it
was just the two of them.

"Are you okay?" Harry's concern turned to his heart.

"I don't even know how to..." She shook her head and wiped at her eyes. "I'm okay."

"Okay," he plucked her hand into his, brought it to his lips and then laced it through his arm. "Come on love. Let's go tell Ella's father good-bye." Harry paused. "The asshole."

"Bastard," Maddie whispered and, though a tiny smile tugged at her lips, she was full of complete and utter disdain for whatever this man had done to her best friend. But as they took their seats next to Ella and Bishop, she felt Ella's hand slide into her own and she held onto her as tight as she could; not at all ready to let her go.

"Thank God that's over," Ella was the epitome of relief as she slid into the booth at the pub the group had decided on.

"It was a nice service," Bishop offered, sliding in next to her as Harry and Maddie did the same on the opposite side. "What?" He smiled when Ella glared up at him. "It was."

"Should we have invited your brother?" Harry asked, relaxing into the dark leather of the booth.

"No," Ella shook her head with a yawn. "He has his wife and his gaggle of kiddos to look after. He'll be fine."

"I had no idea you had a brother," Harry laughed at himself. "Or nieces and nephews. I'm a terrible friend."

"No," she laughed. "I never talk about them, obviously."

"I am just surprised to find that there is so much I didn't know about you."

"Like what a terrible drunk I am?" Her smile wavered as her eyes focused on Maddie. "Madeline I am so sorry..."

"Please don't be," Maddie shook her head, her heart hurting at the look in her best friend's eyes.

"I didn't mean to yell at you back there, to take it out on you..."

"I know that," she reached across the table for her hand. "But you don't need to apologize to me. I love you. I adore you. You can use me as your punching bag whenever you need to..."

"Oh yeah?" Ella laughed through her tears, more upset at the way she had spoken to her friend.

"As long as we kiss and make up afterwards," Maddie winked and squeezed her hand.

"You got it," Ella squeezed back.

"Is it wrong to be turned on right now?" Bishop looked across the table at Harry, his humor returning.
"Little bit," Harry held his fingers centimeters apart.

"Ah fuck it," Bishop shrugged and kissed Ella's cheek. "I'm heading to the bar. What'll be ladies? Whiskey or Gin?" As a round of laughter passed over them, Ella decided they should lay off just a bit and suggested beer. With a small salute and a look of love, Bishop went to do their bidding.

"Now..." Maddie took a breath. "Without any judgment, I need to know. Are we going to the funeral sauced too? Because if we are...I need to pace myself. I'm not nineteen anymore."

"Ha!" Ella laughed, a solid, wonderful laugh. "No. No, I think I'll go sober to the funeral tomorrow. Maybe I've gotten it out of my system."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, leaning into Harry's arm that was wrapped around her. "I'm game though, you just...say the word."

"I love you so much," Ella stretched her hand out to Maddie's.

"I love you too," Maddie's fingers reached for Ella's.

"You two should hold off on this," Harry spoke up with a smirk. "Bishop's going to hate that he missed it."

Harry had no idea what time it was when rose from the booth and went on a mission. Maddie and Bishop had quite easily been drawn into an argument over their respective skills on the dart board and, having renewed their previous tipsy state, they had a battle on their hands. Ella had watched them leave and, with a small smile at Harry, excused herself to step outside for some fresh air.

Harry had nodded and allowed her space and time. But, as he ended the third round of "Row Your Boat" in his head, he decided it was time to check in on her. With a quick glance at Maddie and Bishop, he shrugged into his coat and followed Ella's route towards the back; Brad a quiet ghost behind him. Pushing out the door, he found her easily; wrapped up in Bishop's coat and perched on a bench towards the edge of the deck. She looked up to him as he approached; a welcoming smile in her eyes.

"They send you to check on me?" She cracked a grin. "Cowards."

"Nah," Harry shook his head, taking a seat next to her. "I came on my own. Cigarette?" He held one out to her.

"What?" She almost started laughing at him. "I don't smoke! And neither do you, or so I thought."

"I don't," Harry shook his head. "Not really. Not anymore. I just thought...we're here in Dublin, drunk as fuck. We're burying your father tomorrow so...what the hell, you know?"

Ella pondered on that for only a second before she nodded and reached for the cigarette in his hand. Harry grinned as he lit hers and then his; settling back against the bench.

"Listen..." Harry's voice was low, serious. "Maddie and Bishop; they have, had, wonderful parents." He felt Ella stiffen next to him. "Even with Bishop's parents divorced...they both had two parents who were sane and stable and loved them and..." He wasn't looking at her; was focused on something far away as he inhaled and exhaled puffs of smoke. "And weren't so caught
up in their own shit that they failed to realize that children could hear you and see you and...remember."

"I..." Ella was frozen, her heart pausing in her chest as she turned to look at him; his eyes cold and focused. She wasn't really sure she should be hearing this.

"My mother wasn't a saint Ella," he inhaled and held his breath for a moment. "Neither was, is, my father. I'm not going to pretend to know what it was like for you at home. I'm not sure I can entertain the images I have of what your father did to you to instill such a reaction. But I want you to know..." His eyes broke from their focus and turned to her. "I know what it's like to have fucked up parents."

"Harry..." She blinked back the tears in her eyes; unsure if they were for her or for him.

"I just didn't want you to think you were alone in that," he shrugged, an arm moving up and around her shoulders. "But it's good that we have them, you know?"

"Maddie and Bishop?" Ella raised her eyebrows.

"Yeah," he nodded. "They balance out the fucked up."

"Ha!" She laughed; her head tossing back into his arm. "Yes they do."

"Yes they do." They settled that way for a moment, letting it sink in; letting it be.

"He hit me." Ella's voice cracked into the night. "More than once. He would get drunk and go on these tirades and...nobody was safe. My mother, my brother...me." Harry held his breath, held back his urge to pummel her father. "It got to the point where I would barely leave my room. I would sit in there for hours on my computer and escape..." She smiled weakly as she remembered. "I would become obsessed with a new topic for like a month. I would learn all there was to know about a variety of things...medical professions, South Africa..." Her cheeks pulled a slight blush as she brought her fingers to her mouth, muffling a laugh. With a *fuck it* shrug, she continued. "The British Royal Family."

"I'm sorry, what?" Harry's lips pulled up into a slight smile as he turned his attention to her.

"Oh God!" She giggled, her hands flying to her face.

"Did you just say..."

"Yes," she groaned through her fingers before pulling them from her face. "It's not what it sounds like. I...It...It was just through Queen Victoria. I was obsessed with the protocol, the pomp, the history of it all."

"Well, well, well," Harry grinned wider. "Who knew? Little Ella Marshall...a fan."

"Oh shut up!" She nuded his ribs with her elbow. "I'm not a fan. And I'm not little!"

"It's okay," he shrugged. "Don't be embarrassed. You can admit it to me...you were in love with Will."

"Stop it!" She laughed, throwing another elbow.
"Ow!" He rubbed at his side. "It's not a big deal. All of the ladies were in love with Will."

"You're being annoying."

"I know," he laughed; his eyes meeting hers.

"I wasn't a fan." Her eyes were set.

"That's too bad," he winked. "Because I've always been a fan of yours." Ella's laughter faded, giving way for a genuine smile as she leaned closer to him.

"Thank you Henry."

"You're welcome." He squeezed her shoulder tight and kissed the top of her head. It wasn't long before Ella took a deep breath and rose to her feet. Pulling Harry along with her, she made her way back into the pub, her eyes quickly spotting Maddie and a defeated Bishop.

"Hey..." Bishop smiled up at the two of them.

"How are you?" Maddie looked to her best friend.

"Better," she sighed. "Much better. And tired. I'm ready to go to the hotel." She scooped Maddie's hand into hers. "Take me to bed?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Maddie grinned and, leaving Bishop behind with a shake of his head, the two women began towards the door.

"Looks like it's you and me," Harry winked at his best friend before patting his cheeks and turning to follow the women.

"I'm entirely too sober for this," Bishop mumbled before doing the same.

The funeral services for Ella's father were decidedly less dramatic. Not one of the four of them had anything to drink leading up to the service. Ella was less angry, allowing herself to feel the bit of sadness that came with not ever having the father she had wished she had; allowing herself to grieve the loss of the hope that she ever would.

When she dressed for the service, she felt the first of many tears that would be cried that day. When they arrived, she hugged her mother, she kissed her brother and she offered a weak smile to the others who had gathered. But before the service began, she moved from her spot up front and took her place with her family.

Maddie, Harry, Bishop. And when Collins arrived with the fatherly hug and paternal love he had always offered to her, Ella nearly fell apart. Though Khenda had stayed behind with a sick little Isaac, Ella finally felt like her family was complete. It was then, with Maddie on one side and Bishop on the other, that she was finally able to say good-bye to her father, to all that had come with him and all that was now, gracefully, gone from her life.
"Good morning sunshine," Maddie's voice was sugary as she slipped quietly into Harry's office.

"Good morning?" He looked up at her from his desk with a smirk. "It's noon." It was a lazy day, a casual morning. Harry was half dressed; worn jeans and a t-shirt with bare feet. Maddie had pulled on comfy clothes and tied her hair up. These moments of self-pace were few and far between and she liked to make the most use of them—even if it meant sleeping in late and lounging till lunch.

"Is it?" She moved around the desk, her hands working over his shoulders from behind as she leaned into him; pressing a kiss to his cheek.

"It is. And this chipper mood of yours...what's it been? Weeks now?" He patted his hand over hers, leaning to kiss the tips of her fingers. "It's starting to freak me out."

"Hmmm..." She sighed and stood tall. "I'll work on doom and gloom."

"Thank you," he grinned.

"Welcome," she yawned, dipping into the guest chair across his desk. "We have less than three months left, you know..."

"Less than three months till?" He lifted an eyebrow; playing with her.

"Till you're shackled to me forever."

"Is this the doom and gloom you were working on?" He laughed.

"No," she giggled. "But we start rehearsals in two weeks."

"Where I practice walking and standing?"

"Yes," Maddie snickered at his less than impressed expression. "Among other things...like pledging me your troth."

"I'll pledge you my troth right now. Here. On this desk."

"Oh yeah?" Maddie laughed. "Do you know what troth means?"

"Not a clue."

"Nice," she giggled and leaned forward, taking in his desktop. "What are you doing today? Working?"

"Yeah," he shrugged, waving a hand towards the paperwork in front of him. "I have a few things to look over before Monday's meeting. What are you going to do today? Take a nap? Relax? It's been a busy morning for you."

"Maybe," she shot a playful glare before she stretched out; her arms pulling up over her head. "I think I'll head out to that bookstore on Dayton. I haven't been in a long time and I wanted to pick up a book or two for Will and Kate's baby."
"You do know that we can afford to buy new books for the baby," he poked fun at her affinity for the used variety.

"I do," she sighed. "And you do know that a man who lives in a castle and is referred to as Your Royal Highness just might be able to find a deeper appreciation for the more antiquated among us."

"You would think," Harry grinned.

"You would," Maddie chuckled and pulled herself up from the chair with a sigh. "Need anything?"

"From the used bookstore?" He laughed. "No. Thanks. I'm good."

"Suit yourself." And, in her lazy sort of manner, she rounded the desk. Her hand ran up his neck to his jaw, pulling his face up towards her to kiss him. "I'll see you later."

"Mmmm..." He grinned against her lips. "For the pledging of the troth?"

"Yes," she laughed, easing towards the doorway.

"Can't wait." His smile and his eyes stayed trained on her until she disappeared from his line of vision. Only then did he return to the stack of papers before him.

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"Okay..." Maddie juggled the small stack of books from one arm to the other with an amused chuckle. "Let's see what I have...I'm sorry, are you laughing at me?" She looked up to Arthur with a playful glare.

"Not at all," he shook his head, fighting off a grin. "Would you like me to take those for you?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "That's not at all in your job description, now is it? Now..." She shuffled through the books. "Paddington Bear, Winnie the Pooh...are you sensing a theme?"

"Yes ma'am," Arthur nodded his head. He had been in this very same bookstore more times than he could count. At the beginning, he found it annoying; small, cramped, full of nooks and crannies. But the more he came, the more he saw the appeal and the more it made sense that she liked to go there. It was quiet, she could be alone; be Maddie and not the future Duchess. They were most often the only people there. She liked that. He understood that.

"I just need..." She looked around, hugging the two books for the baby, and a few for herself, to her chest. "I thought they might have a copy of a book I used to read as a child..." And one by one the books slid from her arms, thudding to the floor; bringing her and Arthur to laughter.

"Okay," he shook his head, bending down to help her gather them. "I'm going to get a basket for these. You go and grab the last one and I'll get these situated and I'll meet you back here."

"You're too kind," she smiled up at him, holding out her battered and roughed copy of Paddington Bear.

"Yes well, let's not let anyone in on that secret," he took the book from her hands.
"Deal," Maddie nodded and rose to her feet. "Thank you Arthur!" She called out as she moved away from him. "I'll be right back."

Maddie was quick on her feet, knowing exactly where she was going. She rounded a corner, than another and another and then, coming to a dead end, she stopped. Blinking, she turned around the small alcove and felt a little disoriented.

"Have they moved you?" She spoke to herself, to the books; her eyes scanning the titles, her finger tapping her chin. "Have they moved you somewhere else? Have they..." As her eyes reached the end of the shelf, she saw him. "Jesus!" She jumped, her hand clutching to her chest. "Sorry..." She recovered quickly, shaking her head at the older gentleman; old enough to be her father. "I'm sorry. You surprised me."

"Hello..." He smiled warmly, his eyes looking her over, taking in her surroundings. "Sorry. I heard you talking from over there..." He pointed behind him. "I wasn't sure if you were talking to me or..."

"The books," Maddie smiled, embarrassment flushing her cheeks. "I was talking to the books."

"Do they talk back?" He smiled; his lips stretching across his face.

"You know, sometimes they do," Maddie went for kind, friendly. "Except I can't seem to find the one I was looking for."

"No?" He raised his eyebrows, his eyes sweeping her over again. For a moment Maddie felt uncomfortable, as though he were looking too closely and then she watched as his eyes settled on her ring. And she shook off the weirdness. She was still getting used to this fame thing; still getting used to the way people looked when they began to put two and two together, when they began to realize who she was. With a small, reserved smile, she moved into "public mode".

"No," she shook her head, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as her arms crossed over her chest. "But it's been a while since I've been here. They may have moved it."

"Oh..." He nodded, his smile tugging further. "Maybe I can help you? I come here a lot."

"Oh!" Maddie laughed. "That's not necessary. I didn't mean to disturb you. Thank you though..."

"Oh it's no disruption," he shook his head. "I would be happy to help." He watched as her eyes shifted over his shoulder, looking off in the distance. Turning around, he looked to where she was watching. "See somebody you know?"


"Well, maybe I can point you in the right direction, at least. What were you looking for?"

"Um..." She took a breath, wondering how long it was going to take for her to finally be at ease with the sometimes over-eagerness of the people to help her. "It's a book called Amelia Bedelia. I read it as a child and..."

"Ah yes," He nodded. "My granddaughter loved that book as well."

"You have a granddaughter?" Maddie perked up.
"I do. Her name is Sara."

"How old is she?" Maddie sighed a bit; relaxing.

"Thirteen now," he smiled. "Anyway. Sorry to bother you, Ma'am. I'll just let you..."

"Oh you didn't bother me," Maddie shook her head, her hand reaching instinctually to rest on his arm.

"You know," his breath sucked in as his hand moved over hers. "I'm quite certain I saw a copy of that book back in the new tween section."

"Tween section?" Maddie's forehead knotted, her hand pulling out from underneath his.

"Ridiculous word, isn't it?" He laughed and held up the book in his hand. "I was picking up something for my granddaughter up in the back and I am pretty sure I saw a copy. I could...I could show you. If you want." He watched, waited; breath held.

"You know what," Maddie let out a sigh. "Sure. That would be great." She waved her hand out. "Lead the way." And, as she stepped from the alcove, she glanced around her, eyes peeled for Arthur, wanting to let him know where she was headed. But, not seeing him, she shrugged and hurried along. It was one book, how long could it take?

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Okay, Arthur thought as he held onto the basket and looked around the spot he had just left her. What are we searching for now? Arthur knew, from experience, that his protectee could get lost in this store—having personally spent six hours there with her in the past. Looking down at the shelf with the twelve copies of Sherlock Holmes, he sighed; he was in the right spot.

"Do you have a twenty on Doc?" He spoke into his radio; eyes scanning the dark and cramped book cases that created the maze around him. He waited a moment, knocked his knuckles against the stack of Sherlock Holmes.

"Nope." The female voice on the other end of the radio responded. "She hasn't come out front yet."

Pushing away from his spot, he took a step forward. This was taking too long. Making a sharp turn left, he looked. A sharp turn right, he looked.

Nothing but books. No blonde.

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"Are you sure?" Maddie felt a nervous laugh in her throat as she scanned the shelf the gentleman had point her to. "This is...I don't know..." She reached for an old, dusty map. "References?" She laughed and tossed the map down. "Are you sure they are making this a tween section?"

"Positive." His voice was low, his attention on her.

"Maybe we..." She caught his eyes watching her and cleared her throat. "Maybe we took a wrong turn when we came up the stairs or..."
"No," he shook his head. "It was..." He snapped back to the books. "It was on a higher shelf. Maybe up there." He pointed to the top of a shelf just off to the right behind Maddie. She turned to look before stepping. Her eyes scanning over the stacks; a copy of The Babysitters Club, Anne Rice, Harry Potter.

"Ah..." She breathed. He wasn't leading her on a wild goose chase. "You may be right." Moving around the corner, she rose to her toes, stretching her neck to look. "Let me see..."

"You look just like her, you know..." He had followed her around the corner.

"Just like who?" Maddie tossed back casually. "Your granddaughter?"

"Diana."

And though he couldn't see her, Maddie's eyes snapped forward; wide and suddenly incredibly suspicious. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong. This wasn't merely an overly eager fan of the royal family. What had she been doing? Following a strange man through a bookstore without...Stop. She shook her head slightly. Now wasn't the time for that.

"You know," she laughed lightly, coming back to her footing. "I'm not sure the book is worth all this trouble. I think I'll just..." She turned to face him then, to take in her surroundings.

"Young. Blonde." He took a step closer as Maddie took a step back. "But you...you're a smart one."

"I think I'll just..." She moved to her right. He was quick, he was focused and his step to his left was right behind hers.

"You're a doctor." Her heart thudded.

"Sir, I'm sorry. But I really should be going..." Still hoping she could just move around him, just move out of this moment, just make it go away.

"He chose well this time," his eyes scanned her then, making her feel naked; dirty. "He's making better decisions now." Maddie felt her stomach turn. He was talking about Harry; Harry who was most definitely going to kill her for ever walking anywhere with this man, much less off into the confines of this maze-like bookstore.

"Yes, well..." Maddie tried for casual, thinking it might help ease him back, keep him calm. But her throat was dry and tight and...fuck...she thought. What was she doing? Her time in London had washed away her Bendal instincts.

"Did you get my letters?" He bounced on his feet; excited at the idea. Maddie's chest hurt as realization sank deeper.

"Your letters?" Her voice was whisper-like.

"I sent them to the palace. Maybe they don't give you your mail..." He shook his head, his eyes drifting in thought for a moment. "Do they keep you in the dark like they kept her?" Maddie watched as his face turned hard, as his eyes grew dark.

"Her?" Her voice cracked.
"Diana." He spoke her name like a song, like a poem; his face softening as his eyes turned to her again. "You're so much like her. So young and innocent and beautiful..."

"I...I have to go," Maddie moved again; this time with more strike. But he was quick and trained on her and he moved too.

"It's okay," he shook his head, his smile meaning to comfort, meaning to calm. "It is. I'm only looking out for you. I won't...I would never hurt you."

"I didn't think that you would," she shook her head; wanting to keep him as far away from that idea as she could.

"But they will. He will." He nodded; certain. "Just like they hurt her. But I can help you..." His voice drew low, like he was conspiring with her. "This is your chance. I can take you away from them right now and nobody would even know. I can save you...like I never had the chance to save her..."

Maddie's eyes welled up, her stomach churning a bitter, copper taste into her throat. And she wished, wished that she were back in Bendal; in the desert with the militia—where things made sense.

"I have to..." She sucked in a breath of air and tried for steady. "I'm sorry. I have to go..."

"Go?!" His voice rose, his hand reaching out to slam into the shelf of books to his right. "No! I'm trying to help you!" His jaw clenched as he lowered his voice again. "Don't you understand?! He's no good. They are...no good! It will only end badly with them! It will only end badly."

And right then and there Maddie sent a prayer up to whatever God was listening that he wasn't speaking the truth; that this wasn't going to end badly.

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"Maybe she's looking through that collection of Shakespeare again," the female voice returned in Arthur's ear. "She spent an entire day down there once."

And normally Arthur would bite; he would submerse himself into that friendly back and forth that protection officers had. But there was something inside him that kept him moving, that kept the adrenaline flowing. He turned another corner.

Dead end. Another wall of literary volumes and dusty cookbooks that hadn't been touched in years.

He made one more turn and then he saw it. An entire section of children's books; toddler to young adult. There were a few teenagers gathered around a particular section while a young mother held a sniffing baby in her arms as she looked through the board books.

But no blonde.

And that's when Arthur abandoned the basket of books.

"I'm going to need a location on Doc ASAP." He spoke into his radio, his feet pulling him towards the back. "I'm taking in from the back right now."
"I'm in the front," the female responded; the back and forth dropped for something much more serious. And they both went to work.

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"Okay...Okay..." Maddie's voice was calm, though her heart was beating out of her chest. She was mad; pissed at herself for this moment. If she had more time, she would have chastised herself for letting her training and her instincts falter so much that she ended up in this secluded, dark corner of this bookstore. But she didn't have time for that. "Listen..." She tried for a smile, tried to gain back the sweeter version of the lunatic in front of her; her therapy skills running through her mind. "I appreciate your concern..."

"Concern?" He scoffed. "I would say that it's more than mere concern."

"Okay," she nodded, her eyes scanning him for signs of a weapon. "Okay. But I really should be going. I only came for a book and..."

"You're not listening to me!" He yelled out and Maddie jumped. Why hadn't anyone heard him yelling? Would anyone hear her if she started yelling? "I'm sorry!" He began to compensate for his anger, moving forward, wanting to comfort her. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Please," Maddie hated the waver in her voice as she moved further away from him, further into a corner.

"I didn't mean to frighten you..." He reached his hand out to her then and Maddie's gut kicked in. This was it. Fight time. "I just can't believe they let something like you out without detail..." His eyes raked over her, settling on her eyes with a wiry smile. "Not very smart now, are they?"

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As Arthur hurried forward, clearing another aisle of books, his heart was pounding in his head. Where the fuck was she?! And how the fuck had he lost her?! For a brief second, he contemplated calling out for her but he knew the long list of reasons why that was a bad idea. He knew it could only further complicate things.

So he sucked it up and continued moving forward; left over right, left over right. And then he saw it; a set of stairs leading up to a tucked away loft area.

"P2 heading up a set of stairs in the Northwest Corner towards References," he spoke into his radio, hand resting on the gun at his hip.

"Copy." The female voice acknowledged.

And he was climbing.

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"Okay, listen," Maddie's voice was more firm as she took a step to the side. "I don't know you and..."

"My name is Duane."
"Okay," she shook her head, not wanting to know his name, not wanting to know anything about him. "I still...I don't know you and you're starting to scare me and..."

"But I'm here to save you," he seemed so sure, so set in his mission that Maddie almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

"But I don't need saving," she shook her head and then, with a deep breath, she moved; her arms out in front of her, shoving him with all she had as she tried to move around him.

And though he tottered a bit, he did not topple. And his giant hands reached out; one wrapping around her arm as another wrapped around her mouth.

And just as she had decided to scream, it came out as nothing but a muffled gasp.

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"Son of a bitch," Arthur mumbled to himself as he moved around another labyrinth like corner and then, as he cleared the spot to his left, he heard it.

A muffled gasp.

His head snapped to the right. That was her.

"Son of a bitch!" His mind flew instantly to the letters. Those fucking letters they had spent all of that time reviewing from some lunatic saying he was going to save The Doctor from the Monarchy. Saying he would strike when they weren't looking, take her some place safe and then take them all down. One by one.

And Arthur made a decision. As he flew from aisle to aisle, he pulled out his radio and made the call. Presumptive or not, he was done taking chances.

"I'm going Code Black. Code Black!" He was intense, authoritative. "Secure all principles. Code Black."

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"Sir!" Jim's voice was loud, firm as he landed two hard knocks to Harry's door; stepping into his home. "Sir!"

"Jim?" Harry stepped from around the corner, worn jeans, t-shirt and bare feet. "Everything okay?"

"We're securing the principles." Jim was all business as he shut the door behind him, securing it with a twist of his fingers and pressing into the house. "I need you to stay right here."

"What's going on?" Harry stayed still, a mixture of confusion with a twist of a smirk on his face; his eyes following Jim as he moved to shut the door to the office and secure the curtains in the living room. "Is this some kind of drill?"

"Red is secure." Hand on his gun, Jim spoke into his radio.

"Red?" Harry laughed. "When did that change to..."
"We've got a code black," Jim didn't even blink against Harry's attempt at small talk.

"Code black?" His heart began to pump in his chest. "Where?"

"Seventh and Dayton."

"Seventh and..." His eyes grew to the size of saucers. "Maddie..." He was moving towards the door when Jim's hand flew up meeting his chest with the force of iron.

"No." Jim was firm.

"Yes."

"You cannot leave right now."

"You think you can make me stay here?!" His chest was heaving beneath Jim's hand; his mind wild with the worst kinds of assumptions.

"We both know I can," Jim was absolutely certain.

"Tell me what's happening!" His eyes were dark, cheeks flushed; his heart beating too big for his chest; he felt constricted, claustrophobic.

"I don't know."

"Bullshit!"

"I don't know." Jim's voice was low, undeterred, unfazed, by Harry's anger. This wasn't something they discussed. "I know there was a code called. I know the location. I know you're staying here until I'm told otherwise."

"Fine. Fine!" Harry huffed, pulling his phone from his pocket. In a second it was out of his hands. "If you won't tell me what's going on..."

"You're going to call her? What if Arthur has her secured and her phone goes off? You want to risk that?!" He waited a moment; softening slightly. "When I know something, you'll know something. Now stand down or..."

"Fine!" Harry shoved away from Jim, his hand slamming against the wall next to him. "Fine."

Making the decision to bite his hand was not a conscious process, Maddie's instincts kicked in and she bit. Hard. And though it only served to piss him off, it also made him scream and move. Just enough for her to push at him.

"Get off me!" She hated the way her yell came with a whimper. And then, as if God himself were speaking to her, she heard Arthur's voice through the stacks.

"Do it!" He yelled out; gun drawn and pointed through the spacing of the books. Maddie's head snapped to her left and she almost broke down in relief at the site of him. "Do it NOW!" The man who had joked with her earlier about her predilection for worn out books was gone. This man meant nothing but business.
Maddie's eyes met the ones over her and then, with a blink of her eye, he was off her. He had pushed her aside and, taking the gamble with the angle and the way the gun was wedged, he took off running.

Arthur was around the stacks to Maddie in an instant; his first concern to secure her. Gun still drawn, he called into his radio.

"White male. Dark hair and glasses. Late fifties. Down the stairs and out the front." He turned to Maddie then, his eyes wild, his breath full of relief. "Are you okay?" His hands roamed around her, his eyes searching for injury.

"I'm fine," she shook her head, tears pricking at her eyes. "I...I'm not hurt. I..."

"I have Doc secured. Repeat. I have Doc secured." He took a breath, said a silent thank you, and continued. "Perp has gone out the front. I have secured Doc. Heading home." Rising to his feet, he held his hand out to Maddie and in much more of an order than a request, he told her. "You are following directly behind me. I go first. Down the stairs to an immediate left. Out the back to Sampson. You understand?"

"Yes." She nodded, her fingers wiping clumsily at the tears on her cheeks. Arthur wrapped one arm around her and, with gun drawn, they began their way out of the bookstore.

Harry was in the worst sort of insanity as he paced the floor of his entryway. It took all he had in him to keep upright as he waited. It made his chest hurt to imagine, as if his ribs were suddenly a size too small. He looked around him in scattered sort of way.

Where the hell could he get out? More importantly, how the hell could he get to her? It had been less than ten minutes since the code was called; ten minutes since he had plunged into his very own version of hell.

"Okay. Copy." Jim spoke into his radio as he stepped away from his lookout at the front door. He turned to Harry then. "They've secured Doc. Apprehended the suspect and..."

"When you say apprehended you better mean blown his fucking head off!" Harry's anger won out in the moment as his eyes welled with tears; every emotion inside of him bubbling to the surface. He moved forward then, towards the door.

"Sir..." Jim's heart hurt at the look on Harry's face. He had seen entirely too much tragedy in his life and Jim wasn't alone in the desire to protect him from more.

"Where is she?!" He rubbed at the tears in his eyes with the palms of his hands.

"Sir. You should stay here..."

"Has the code been lifted?"

"Yes but..."

"Then we go where I want to go now." Yes, he could be a bit spoiled and demanding at times, but Jim understood.
"Sir..."

"No! I stayed through the code. Now. We go to her."

"She's on her way here...sir."

"She's..." That drew him to a standstill.

"Arthur and Sampson are bringing her home. The Family Doctor will meet her here...just as a precaution." He hurried to explain. "She's fine. No injuries were reported. But the Doctor wants to take a look just to be sure."

Harry's face twisted up as he nodded; tears pressing from his eyes. He was done fighting.

Wanting to give him space, give him time, Jim stepped out and left him alone.

As Harry sank to the stairs, his arms hugged his knees closer to him; his mind processing all that had just occurred.

To Be Continued...
Harry was still sitting on that step, his teeth biting at his already worn nails; his every sense perked and waiting for the tell that she was there. It was a physical drain on him to wait but Jim had been right; there was nowhere for him to be but where he was. He took a deep breath and scrubbed his hands over his face a couple of times, trying desperately to keep his mind from wandering down that path that he was hoping to avoid.

And then he heard it; the familiar crunch of gravel beneath tires. Without a thought, he was one his feet; through the door and four steps down the walk before he realized that it wasn't her. The car slowed to a stop and Dr. Parker emerged; bag in hand.

"Dr. Parker," Harry tried to pull his smile up to greet the familiar face, but it was clearly a struggle.

"Your Royal Highness," he offered a small bow of his head as he took Harry's extended hand. "I was asked to meet Dr. Forrester here to look her over after the...incident."

"Yes," Harry nodded, the lump in his throat returning. "I'm afraid you've simply beat her here. They should be pulling up any moment now, I would imagine."

"Yes," the older man looked Harry over, seeing his nerves, his worry. "You know. I spoke to the agents on scene and they said that she was fine; shaken and a bit rattled, but no injuries."

"I've been told the same thing," Harry nodded, his teeth biting at his lips as his eyes stayed trained towards the gates.

"Well, maybe I'll be able to give her something for the tension," the Doctor smiled softly, his eyes following Harry's gaze. "Maybe I can give you something?"

"Ha!" Harry's laugh was bitter and short. With a shake of his head, he turned a lopsided grin to the Doctor. "I'm not sure you're going to be able to help me with this one Dr. Parker."

"Well, let me know if there is anything I can..." As a hound on a hunt, Harry's eyes perked up at the first sight of arrival. The Doctor's thoughts trailed off as he turned to look. First down the drive was a car containing Nathan and Jim who were still on for Harry for the day. He watched as they pulled up and hopped from the car. He nodded a hello as they moved off to the side, ready to greet Maddie's team; following their own set of post-incident protocol. Harry didn't know exactly what it was and he didn't care. His eyes shifted to the two cars not too far behind them.

His hand rubbed at the back of his neck, knowing that if he looked at his cell phone there was most likely a lengthy list of missed calls. A statement had most definitely been released and their friends and family all over the world were finding out about the danger Maddie had just been in.

But he didn't care. He needed to see her before he dealt with any of them. His eyes shifted to the second car. It was her. His heart thumped in his chest. Harry drew in a breath and held it, watching her car like a hawk.

Driving through the gates to Kensington brought feelings in Maddie that surprised her. She felt relief; she had been expecting that. But as they drove closer, she started to feel nervous, anxious;
and that didn't make much sense to her at all. Her neck strained as she looked through the window, wanting to see her home; their home.

And suddenly they came into view; all of them. Her breath hitched in surprise. There they stood; Harry, Dr. Parker, along with a myriad of security staff. Tears sprang to her eyes; all of this attention, all of this fuss. She couldn't even look to Harry, knowing the expression that was bound to be on his face. All because she had gone against a single, simple rule and...

"Doctor Forrester," Arthur's voice was warm as it commanded her attention. He sat next to her; close and tight, he hadn't moved since he had put her in the car. Neither had she. It was funny. There was plenty of room for the two of them to move, to spread out. But neither of them could; both feeling the need to be sure of the other.

"Yes?" Her voice was weak. She cleared her throat and looked to him. "Yes?"

"Dr. Parker is here to look you over," he had told her that twice before, but he was telling her again. He wanted nothing about the rest of her day to be a surprise. He wanted her to be in the know on everything, to be in charge of everything.

"I know," she nodded. She had been prepared for him. She had negotiated for him instead of the hospital—just wanting to go home.

"Do you want..." He cleared his throat and glanced up to Sampson who smiled supportively back at him. "Did you want me to come in with you or..."

"No," she smiled, her hand resting on his arm. "I think you've done above and beyond the call of duty today, Arthur. There's no need for you to sit around while they check out my bumps and bruises."

"Okay," he nodded; not wanting to push but being completely honest when he told her. "Let me know if you change your mind."

"Thank you," Maddie smiled and, as the car slowed to a stop, she took a deep, steadying breath and readied herself for the emotions that threatened to flood her; internally and externally.

Sampson was the first to exit the car, moving to open Maddie's door. But it was lost on no one that she followed behind Arthur, scooting and slipping from the door he took. Both Harry and Dr. Parker moved around the car, both wanting his chance to look her over.

When Harry's eyes took her in, running head to toe, he felt the tears return to his eyes, he felt the lump in his chest expand and swell and he felt his knees weaken. She was surrounded by people; the doctor, her security detail, his security detail. But she was there. She looked shaken; hair rumpled, clothes jostled. But she was...

"I'm okay," Maddie's scattered eyes met his; a whisper of reassurance on her lips. "I'm okay. I am..." And Harry couldn't really speak, he couldn't really shuffle through all of the things that were running through his mind in that moment. So he nodded. He balled his fingers into fists and he nodded. Resisting every instinct he had to take her in his arms and run far, far away from there, he pulled it together and made his best efforts to make her feel comfortable, safe. He had to do this, maintain this face, or he was going to crumble.
"This is Doctor Parker," Harry tried to focus. "He's been seeing the Family for...forever." Harry took a breath. "He would like to talk to you about..."

"I'm okay," Maddie repeated, a fresh tear slipping from her eye as her fingers twisted onto Arthur's arm; reflexively, instinctually. Resisting every instinct she had to throw herself into Harry's arms and never come up—not for air, not for food, not for anything—she put on her best version of okay and turned to the Doctor. She had to do this first, or she never would. "I'm Madeline..." Her hand stuck out with a shake they could all see.

"Good to meet you ma'am," he smiled; trying for comforting, trying for ease. "Would you like to come inside? We can speak for a few moments and then I can leave you to..." He trailed off.

"Of course," Maddie nodded and took a step towards the house.

And the entire group moved with her. The Doctor with his bag. Harry with his heart on his sleeve. And Arthur who, despite her words to the contrary, was still in Maddie's grasp; figuratively and literally.

"I'm sorry..." Maddie looked up to him then and Harry watched as she struggled to release her PO. Her fingers rattled as she pulled her hand back from him. "I'm sorry. I don't know..."

"It's quite alright," Arthur assured her with a warm smile and pat to her shoulder. "I'll be right out here." He was so sweet with her. Sweet enough that, had they not just gone through a crisis that this team of Security hadn't seen in a very long time, his colleagues would be certain to tease him for. But they didn't dare. It had been a long, intense day for every single one of them.

Maddie nodded and tore her eyes from him, turning to the Doctor who kept a respectable distance. "Okay. Let's get this over with."

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded. And then, as Maddie moved inside, the group followed behind her; cautious as they did.

Having always been 'the spare', Harry had developed a keen eye for observation. He wasn't as far out in the spotlight as his brother had always been. He attended and watched, but his level of participation had always been less. So he developed an intense ability to see things around him. And that afternoon, as Maddie moved away from Arthur and into their home with the Doctor right behind her, not one single thing was lost one him.

Not the way she had clung to her Security Officer, not the way she had met his eyes with the smallest element of fear, not the way she clung desperately to this illusion that she was fine, not the way that every single one of the men surrounding her seemed to be afraid; afraid of this moment, of this day, of what this meant.

Harry caught all of it. He caught her flinches, her resistance to moving away from the man who had protected her, the way she blinked over and over again as she told him she was okay. He knew what the blinking meant. She wasn't okay. Nowhere near it.

Hell, he wasn't okay. There was not a single cell in his body that was okay. He had thought, while he had sat on those stairs waiting for her, that seeing her would cure him of this downward spiral. But he had been wrong. Seeing her...seeing the way her hair had pulled from the updo, seeing the way her clothes had been stretched, the way her lip was plump and red, the way her eyes seemed to shake as she looked around.
Seeing her had only plunged him further down. With a shake of his head, he turned to Arthur, extending his hand—extending his thanks. But he knew it would never be enough, even if Arthur insisted it wasn't necessary.

He sucked in his fears, reeled in his emotions and he followed her inside but, as his feet moved forward, his mind and his heart sank; pulled from his body. All he had wanted to do this entire day was to put himself between her and this. And he couldn't.

Unless he did. Unless he put himself between her and this.

He brought her into it, he could show her the way out of it.

And his spiral continued.

"How about here..." Dr. Parker's hands were warm and soft as he applied the smallest amount of pressure to her top lip. "Are you tender here?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "It's fine." The second she had stepped inside, she had begun to thaw. Her weariness, her lack of confidence began to melt away. Being home, in their home with him, had pushed away the chill she had felt for the majority of the day. She was coming back to herself, gaining her footing again. She felt like she was breathing normal, her heart easing up just a bit.

Her eyes glanced across the room to Harry. He sat off to the side, almost in the corner. And, as he watched the doctor poke at her, as he watched him inspect the faint bruises on her arm in the shape of fingers, as he watched him apply a medical solution to the slight cut in Maddie's lip—most likely from her own teeth—he sank deeper and deeper. As he watched this unfold before him, everything inside of him was boiling; steaming.

Finally, in frustration, he moved from his spot and slipped into the entryway. Moving to his previous home on the stairs, he pulled his phone from his pocket; hoping for distraction.

"Jesus Christ," he groaned through his hand as he scanned the long list of missed calls. Glancing back to Maddie and Dr. Parker, he took a deep breath and decided that while she was doing that, he could do this. He could take care of the phone calls.

He called her mother first.

Then his father.


He repeated the story over and over again.

He assured them over and over again.

He swallowed his guilt, his worry, his mounting anger over and over again.

Until finally he was done with the phone calls. Done with the thoughts from this day. Done with being the one who put her in this situation.
Despite the way it made his heart ache, despite the twist in his stomach, this was it for him. The final straw. The press had been one thing, the fans and the stories...but this. This was too much.

He was done.

Powering down his phone, he sat it on the step next to him and watched as Maddie closed the door to their home; offering a final wave to Dr. Parker before they were alone.

Finally. After this terrible day, she was back home with him. Exactly where he had wanted her to be all of this time.

Maddie leaned back against the door behind her and it all began to fold around her. The entirety of her day; all of the feelings, all of her longings. She was finally safe, finally free and loved and...she was with him. Just him. She could let it all out. And as she did, it hit him with an undeniable force.

There were no words spoken as she moved across the room to where he sat on the stairs. Though he looked up to her, he couldn't see her; his eyes were full of tears that he had spent hours trying to control and before he could blink, she was standing in front of him, pulling him to her. His arms moved of their own volition, tightening around her waist; pressing his face into her stomach. The time for propriety was over; the time for the royal face had passed. It was just them. Them and the emotions that had held them hostage all day long.

He loved her so much. So much. His throat was tight, his chest heavy as his mind processed for the one hundredth time that day all that had occurred, all that he had weathered; all that she had seen. The images of what happened, what could have happened, flashed into his mind as his senses took her in; her smell, her feel; the sound of her breathing.

He couldn't take it.

Harry's hands were firm on her hips as he pushed her away—pulling her body from his—as if they knew he would need physical distance for the words he was about to speak, for what he was about to do.

"Hey..." Maddie's voice was masked by the tears in her eyes, by a lump in her throat. Her hands moved to the sides of his head as he looked up at her. When she would look back on this moment, she would be able to pinpoint this moment as one she should have caught—the way his jaw was set, the cold sheen to his eyes. She should have caught it. But she was too wrapped up in the surreal-ness that had been her day, too happy to be home with him to see it.

Without a response, Harry moved from his spot on the stairs. He rose to his feet and moved past her, out of her grasp, out of her reach. Maddie watched as he began to walk, pace really, his shoulders tight and stressed.

"Harry?" She called out to him, expecting him to turn with a smile, with reassurance. She could not have been more wrong. She could hear the tick of the clock from the other room as she watched him. They were finally alone after this horrid day and yet there were feet between them and miles of confusion. His back was to her as he sat with his thoughts; his hand moving to rub at the back of his neck. "Harry?" She tried again.

"Those twenty minutes..." He paused to clear his throat, still looking away; avoiding her. "Those twenty minutes were the worst of my life." His words were like ice, his voice seemed almost foreign to her. She was frozen in her spot. "I...I buried my mother. When I was twelve. In front of
the entire world. But this...worrying about you, not knowing you were ok, waiting for you to...”
He shook his head, gulped at the mass in his throat and tried to control the onslaught of feelings that were washing over him. "Worst twenty minutes of my entire life."

"Hey..." Maddie moved to him then, her hand stretching out towards him. And then she saw it; a flinch, a step. Harry sensed her presence and moved away. Her forehead knotted as she watched him, her stomach only beginning to feel the unease that was in the room.

"All I've been thinking about since they called the code is..." Though he turned towards her, his eyes stared off in the distance, as if he were looking at another time, another reality. "All I've been thinking about is how I can keep you safe, how I can protect you, how I can make sure this never happens again and..."

"Harry." She cut him off, a reflexive warning in her voice; a feeling in her bones that made her unexplainably nervous. She wanted him to stop. She didn't know exactly why, but she felt it in every single part of her body. But he continued.

"And I always end up at the same place..."

"Harry." Her voice was more stern, the panic more present.

"You can't be here," it was almost a whisper. A deep, emotion-filled, final whisper. "You can't be a part of this." His hand was weak as he waved around him.

"Stop." She shook her head, her eyes welling frustratingly with tears.

"Maddie."

"Stop."

"The only way for me to take you out of this is for me to take you out of this."

"Stop!" She yelled at him, her vision blurring.

"Madeline..." He was pleading, desperation flooding his face.

"What are you doing?" She hated, hated, the way tears were falling from her eyes. She hated the way this was making her feel; powerless and small—the same way she had felt hours ago in that bookstore. And she hated the way it made her want to slap him. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying...I sat in this kitchen and told you that if my life was going to destroy yours, I would..." He shook his head, trying to shake off the chaos in his brain. He had made up his mind. "I told you that I would walk away. No matter what I wanted or how hard it would be, I would walk away from you before my life destroyed yours."

"Walk away?" She whispered; a nightmare unfolding before her.

"I promised I would..."

"And then you promised to spend the rest of your life standing next to me, loving me, making the sacrifices worth it." Maddie could feel her defenses rising, her anger and upset taking control from the tears, pulling her into fight mode. "On your knees Harry. With a ring and a promise and...you said that this was everything you ever wanted!"
"It is!" He yelled back before he could stop himself from yelling. He didn't want to yell at her. He didn't want to make her cry. He just wanted this feeling to leave him, he wanted her to be okay.

"Then why are you talking like this is the end? Why are you talking like you're telling me to go?"

"I am..." The sob that pushed through his lips made Maddie's knees weak, made her heart stop. "I am telling you that it would be safer for you to be away from this, away from me..." And her anger was suddenly flooded with heartache. Her eyes welled up—despite her best efforts.

"Do you hear yourself?" She whispered.

"Maddie..." He looked so scattered, so afraid. She knew it had been a long day for him, that he had been through a lot. She had expected a reaction; tears, yelling, guilt. But not this. Nothing like this. And Maddie didn't know if she could bring him back from the edge he was on and it made her entire body hurt.

"Away from you? But we're supposed to get married and..." Her voice was so soft, her eyes so vulnerable; Harry could feel the hurt pouring from her and it nearly took him down. "Is that what you're saying right now? That you don't want to marry me?"

"I..." His palm smudged at the tears that fell from his eyes, willing himself to be stronger. "It's not that I don't want to..."

"Then what is it? Explain it to me because I don't understand what's happening right now, Harry. I don't. I made a mistake today. A great big, terrible mistake but..."

"No," he shook his head. "No. Today wasn't your fault."

"It wasn't yours either." But he wasn't hearing; he wasn't listening.

"You can't..." He started but she cut in.

"Stop this Henry," her eyes grew hard, serious. Maybe she could order it out of him. "You stop this right now."

"I'm trying to," his head hung. "I'm trying to stop this from ever happening again. Maddie, don't you get it?! Being here is dangerous for you. Being with me is..."

"Stop!" She yelled again, desperation and panic sinking in. "This isn't...this isn't fair..."

"This isn't about fair," he shook his head. "This is about you being safe and..."

"And what?!" She yelled, her face turning pink with frustration. "And what Harry?! You want me to go away? Go where?! To Bendal?! You went there and brought me here! You...you talked me into leaving and moving here and...do you even remember what it took to make that happen? Do you remember the fights? The time apart? How hard it was on us?"

"Of course I..."

"I don't think you do! Because if you really did, it wouldn't be quite so fucking easy for you to throw it all away over something so insignificant!"
"Insignificant?!" Harry's face turned bright red as he spun on her; furious. "It was a kidnapping plot! Did you see the report?! He was going to take you!

"But he didn't!" Maddie screamed.

"He was going to take you to his apartment where he had..." He couldn't say the words without gagging. "He was going to take you Maddie! And for ten minutes I thought that he had! Goddamn it! Do you have any idea what it's like to sit and worry and wonder if I'm ever going to see you again and..."

"One hundred and sixteen!" She was seething, her breath coming in hot bursts.

"What?"

"That's how many days I sat in London worrying about you in Afghanistan! Don't lecture me like I'm a child! Like I wandered out of bounds and got lost in a department store!"

"I can't lose you Maddie," his head was shaking quickly, as though he had no control over it. That was the greater truth, the greater reality. He had been faced with not his own mortality, but hers. And he was choosing to look away, unable to face the idea.

"You do remember that it was long before London that I was shot." Her voice tempered; her heart shifting to sadness again. "You do remember that the only time you've come close to actually losing me was long before I was a part of this...don't you?"

"I..." He slumped; his heart sinking to his feet. Her words hit him so hard that she thought he just might crumble to the floor. Everything inside of him ached as those memories flooded his mind. It was too much, it was too heavy; his body couldn't take it. "I can't lose you."

"But you will," her voice went soft, her eyes pleading with his to see what she was saying. "Someday you're going to lose me. Rather it's to something like this or thirty years from now when..."

"No!" His hand slammed against the wall causing Maddie to flinch. "No."

"What are you going to do Harry?!" She struggled against her tears. "Marry somebody you can't stand so that it doesn't hurt when she's gone?"

"Maybe!"

"Harry..." Her heart was breaking; for him and for her. "You are so smart. You are such an intelligent, soulful, wonderful man...and right now, in this moment. You sound like an absolute fucking idiot."

"I'm just trying to..." He ran off, not totally sure what he was trying to do any longer. "All I'm trying to do is...and you're calling me an idiot."

"No. I called you a fucking idiot!" Her eyes got teary as the sadness washed over her, the reality sank in and she felt her heart just drift away to that place it went to protect itself. Her day had been long, exhausting and the relief she had felt coming home to him had faded when he had started down this road. She was exhausted. And he was stone set in what he was saying.

"Listen to me..."
"No! I can't! You...I can't. I can't do this. I..." She stumbled over her own feet as she moved from him then. He hated the way she looked at him, hated himself for putting that there. "You're being the worst kind of asshole right now. I love you Harry. You and your spoiled, entitled self...but I won't do this. I signed on for all of it; everything that came with this. But if you...if you can't sign on too. I can't...I can't fight with you to LET me stay!"

"Maddie..." Something deep down inside of him flickered to life, began to make a counterargument. But it was too late. He was stubborn and she was drained and it was like a train wreck that they were helpless to stop.

"I'm drawing the line Henry. Either you want this or..." Her heart cracked with her voice, tears spilling out of her eyes. "Either you want this, all of this, or you don't."

"I..." He summoned all of his willpower, all of his strength, every ounce of Windsor he had in him and pulled his eyes to meet hers. "I can't put you here. I can't take that kind of risk with something so important. I can't be responsible for..."

"You do or you don't," she pushed; knowing that it was dangerous to do so, knowing it could be fatal to do so. And just like a child pushed into a corner, faced with an ultimatum, he buckled.

"I don't." It fell from his lips before he ever had a chance to pull it back.

"Okay," the word tumbled from her mouth as if it were her last breath. "Okay."

And then, without another look, another touch, or another plea, Maddie turned and left for good. She was done fighting. Done pleading. She was simply done. She stepped away from him and never looked back.

Though he had expected her to slam the door on the way out, the way she closed it softly behind her left a much more ominous, tragic finality to what had just occurred.

She was gone.

He had spent all day struggling to get to her, to be near her; protect her.

And now. His insecurities. His guilt. His issues.

Just like that. Gone.
Harry stood, unable to move, and stared at where she had just been standing. When she left, it was
as though all life rushed out with her.

He stood, breathing heavy as everything slowly began to sink in. His chest felt heavy, his head
hurt, his eyes grew hazy with tears. He felt scattered, confused, angry, disgusted, upset, unsettled,
off-guard, and terrorized all at the same time.

What had just happened?

What had just happened?

Had he really just watched as Maddie walked out of their home, out of his life? Had he really just
told her it was over? That he didn't want to marry her? Had he really just let some asshole with a
kidnapping plot put those feelings in his heart, those words in his mouth?

Had he really just trashed Maddie and everything she had given to him, everything she had given
up for him? Had he really just trashed...everything?

He needed answers.

But what was the right answer? What was the right thing to do? Was her safety more important
than his own needs and desires? More important than the hearts he was breaking as he spoke, as
he ended things?

More importantly, maybe most importantly, was he a fool to think that he would ever really have
control over any of it?

He didn't know. He had no idea. But what he did know, what was becoming abundantly clear,
was that the best thing to ever cross his path had just walked out his door.

And he was still standing there. Why was he still standing there?

In that moment, Harry felt completely unable to even begin to get a handle on his emotions;
everything in him was amiss.

All he could deal with were the facts. And the fact was; Maddie had been the focus of a
kidnapping plot. That man had been sending letters to Buckingham Palace for months and he had
finally made good on his threats; on his promise. Maddie had been in unthinkable danger. And all
he had been able to focus on was how to keep her out of it. And in those moments of dire, he had
searched for and found the only plausible way to keep her out of anything like this in the future.
She had to leave.

And the fact was—she had left.

His heart sank. And he hadn't even realized that it was possible to sink further.
She had looked him right in the eyes and said good-bye; just as he had planned, just as he had wanted.

She had left; just as he had planned, just as he had wanted.

His eyes rose from their focal point on the floor and turned to scan the room, wondering thoughtlessly why he wasn't feeling the relief that usually accompanied getting what he wanted. As his head turned, taking in the living room, something happened.

When people go into shock—like when they faint while donating blood—their bodies go into crisis mode and all the blood in the body rushes to the core—protecting the vital organs at all costs. It's as though the entire body turns its focus to one single mission.

Survival.

And, when the crisis passes, when the shock wanes, the blood begins to slowly return to the limbs. It's the strangest sort of sensation—the way the senses come back; slowly and one by one. It's as if one is awakening to the world all over again—vision, smell, hearing.

And it can be overwhelming and confusing. It can cause a panic of its own accord.

When Harry's eyes passed over the living room, it was that jolt, the smelling salts that bring back a fainter. It was her—everywhere. That ridiculously soft blanket draped over the couch, the three pairs of heels under the coffee table that he threatened to throw out every night, the stacks of magazines that she had already read through multiple times—that she insisted were NOT clutter. He saw the running shoes he bought her as a joke—fresh and unused and sitting next to his by the door. He saw the painting of Bendal he had given her hanging on the wall. He saw the vases of marbles on the mantle.

He saw her.

And his senses began to return; slowly and one by one.

The crisis had passed and he was awakening to the world. And the confusion and panic that came with that almost brought him to his knees.

"Oh God..." Harry's hand reached out, grasping to steady himself; grasping for something. It was as if his whole world was falling apart. All of his reasoning; his entire belief system was crumbling. His eyes pressed shut, a coppery taste rising in his throat.

He was going to be sick. His senses were coming back. He was reliving the trauma.

What had just happened? What had he just said?

What had he done?

And where in the hell was Maddie?

His heart was pounding in his ears, his stomach knotted; his chest constricting.

He had made a mistake; an enormous, fatal mistake.

He had taken so many hits that day; from the moment the code was called, throughout the entire
time he was left to sit with the worst possible thoughts, right up to that moment, thirty seconds ago when the door shut on everything good in his life. His mind was scattered, confused; his normal thought processes failing him completely.

That was truly the only reason why he would move unthinkingly, with complete determination, towards the door—without a plan, without a clear mission, without his shoes.

He wasn't thinking clearly—he wasn't thinking at all. All he knew was that he had to find her, he had to find her. His left hand reached mindlessly for his keys that sat on the stand next to the door and his right moved to the handle, pulling the door open with unnecessary force.

The cold air hit him like a slap. The sight before him hit him like a train; knocking the air clean out of him. He stopped in his tracks—one barefoot out, one barefoot in.

"Maddie..." Came out of his mouth in a tortured gurgle as his eyes flooded. "You're still here." His hand clutched at his chest, hoping to control the wild pace of his heart; unbelievably thankful she was standing there.

"I was going to give you sixty seconds," she cried—unable to control the tears, unable to give a shit about her red face and puffy eyes. "Sixty seconds before I took you seriously, sixty seconds for you to get your head out of your ass..."

"How long did it take?"

"Thirty," she sniffed, shaking her head; shaking away the hope his presence brought with him.

"I made a mistake." As if that weren't the underestimation of the century.

"You forgot your shoes." Her eyes were bright with tears as she looked him over.

"I forgot a lot of things." Like my fucking mind, he added in his head.

"Harry..." She whispered, afraid of the way he was looking at her; afraid of the way it made her heart lift.

"Please..." He pleaded, his hands clasping together in front of him. "Please. Don't go. I know I have no right to ask you to...but I would give anything, everything, if we could just...take back the last five minutes and..."

"Harry..." She shook her head; trying to shake off the expectation that came with his words.

"Okay," he held his hand out, having no choice but to accept what he thought was a no. "Please Madeline. Don't leave. Just come in out of the cold and...I'll leave if you want me to but please come back inside. You shouldn't be out here like this. This is your home and..."

"But it's not," she cut in, her fingers wiping under her eyes; her red, puffy eyes that simply wanted to close and rest. "You said you didn't want me here. You said you wanted me to leave, that you wanted to marry somebody else and..."

"No," his words were choked; the force of hearing his own words from her mouth was going to break him. His shoulders started to shake. "I don't want any of those things."

"But why..."
"I was so scared Maddie. So scared. And all I could think was...I have to get her out of this, I have to make sure that this never happens again. I..."

"You can't just say things like that to me, Harry. You can't just say them and expect me to..."

"I don't," he shook his head again.

"I knew this would be hard," she wiped at her eyes with her sleeve. "I knew it in that bookstore, the second I realized who he was that you were going to..." She stopped speaking, her tears taking over.

"Maddie..." He wanted to hold her, to comfort her, to take her in his arms and...

"I just didn't expect you to tell me to go..." Her words wavered with her trembling lips.

"Please let me take this back, make it go away."

"I thought you would pull me close and..."

"I want to," his voice cracked as his hands flexed, stretching and retracting; trying to hold it together. "I love you, Madeline..."

"I don't know what to say..." She crossed her arms over her chest and took a deep breath. "I'm so tired and...my mind hurts and...I don't know what to do."

"Stay," his eyebrows lifted in hope, in the tiny bit of optimism his crazy heart held onto. "Stay with me. Come inside and give me the chance to fix this, to make this better."

"I don't know if my heart can handle any more roller coaster tonight. I..."

"I won't," he shook his head vigorously. "I promise. I'll leave you alone. I'll go stay at Will's if you want me to, I...I just want you to be here, be safe, tonight. Please."

Maddie took in a breath, pushed it out through her lips slowly and met his eyes. And if there had been any part of her that was still willing to put up a fight, it would have been dampened by what she saw there. It knocked her back a bit; the sadness, the emotion, the hope.

"Okay," she nodded; small and weak, like her voice. She wasn't sure what motivated her more, her inability to think clearly enough to formulate another viable option, or her overwhelming desire to be near him—even after all of this. Either way, she wasn't going anywhere that night. Hate him or not, he was her home. "Okay." She took a step forward then and Harry felt his knees jump in his chest.

There was no way in the world that he deserved this moment. There was no way he had done enough good in his life to warrant her walking back into their home after all that had happened. But as she moved back towards him, he stepped aside, letting her pass, and thanked God for whatever it was that had happened to have set her in his direction. His eyes shifted down, staring at his bare feet as she stepped past him.

"Harry?" She stopped in front of him.

"Hmm?" He lifted his head to look at her. She didn't move, didn't turn to look at him. But her
hand reached out and, taking his with the slightest of squeeze. "Please don't go to Will's. I want you to stay here...if that's okay."

"Okay. Of course it's okay," he nodded and, before he could crumble at her fingers, she dropped his hand and moved inside. Looking up at the stars, he took a long deep breath and, wiping at his eyes, he turned to follow her inside.

When Harry stepped inside, he expected a wide variety of things to happen. Half of him expected her to smack him and half of him expected her to show him quickly to the guest room. He locked the door behind them and turned to face her; ready for whatever it was she wanted to throw at him—even if it was a piece of fine crystal.

She turned to face him, her arms wrapping around her own body as she looked around; feeling slightly out of place. When her eyes flashed to meet his, he felt his breath hold in his lungs. This was most certainly one of the more awkward moments in his recent life; facing her with such trepidation; such uncertainty as to his standing. He was willing to take whatever penance she demanded; even silence.

"Maddie..." He began, wanting to take away the tensions in her shoulders.

"Can I just..." She cut him off, her eyes casting down to the floor; nervous. "Wow." She let out a low chuckle, blew a breath from her lips. She felt odd in the room, vulnerable as she stood before him. Her eyes lifted then, meeting his with a tremble as she spoke. "After Arthur pulled me into the car...all I wanted to do is..." She shook her head with a laugh, wiping away a stray tear with the back of her hand. "Would you..."

"Anything," he answered; his heart pounding in his ears.

"Ha!" She laughed, the tears increasing at the irony of the moment. "Would you hold me?" Her voice wavered as her eyes pleaded with him; scared of his answer to her request.

"Yes." His voice cracked; humbled and floored that she was asking, devastated that she seemed scared and unsure.

"It's just..." She hurried with her explanation, completely unnecessary. "The last person to have his hands on me was Arthur and before that it was..."

And then he moved to her, slightly hesitant as he stepped forward, arms extended and every single hope and wish riding on this moment. Maddie blinked at the tears in her eyes and, setting aside everything from earlier, she moved into him. His heart jumped in his chest; taking less than a fraction of a second before his arms were around her; folding her into his body, wrapping her up tightly.

Tears sprang to his eyes; realization sinking into him just as her body was sinking in his. He had almost lost this. He had almost pushed this away. Hell maybe he still had; maybe this was a fluke, a blip on the radar before she came to her senses and showed him the door. Either way, he was taking it; taking her in his arms, for as long as she would let him.

"Thank you," Maddie's voice was muffled against him; tired and weak.

"Shh," he whispered into her hair, struggling to keep from crying like a great big giant baby.
"Please..." Please what? Please let me hold you? Please let me offer my heart on a platter? Please let me take back everything I’ve said to you tonight? He didn't know what to say. So, instead of speaking, he just held her tighter.

Maddie nuzzled closer; her arms wrapping around his waist, her eyes closing in a sense of relief, a sense of home. She knew it was crazy, by almost all accounts, but she couldn't help it. Her day had been terrible. She had been so afraid in that bookstore; afraid of what that man might do, afraid of what the outcome might be, afraid she wouldn't have another chance to stand in Harry's arms and feel him around her. She had been so afraid; all day. And after Arthur had pulled her from safety, all she had wanted to do, all she had needed to do was to fold herself up in the arms of somebody who loved her and let it all wash away.

And right now, despite his earlier words and his seeming desire to retract them, she knew that Harry loved her. She could feel his arms, tight and protective, around her. She could feel his hands rubbing her back, his fingers clenching at her as they moved.

"I was so...stupid..." Her voice was shaky. "I should never have gone looking for that book without Arthur...I..." She took a shuddering breath. "I should have never let him take me to show me where...I was so stupid Harry. So stupid."

"No," he shook his head, trying to control his emotions so that he could be there for hers. "This wasn't your fault. This was...this was some crazy man who..." He dropped kisses to the top of her head as he hugged her closer. "This wasn't you love. This wasn't you..."

"I'm so sorry..." She shook slightly underneath his hands and he gulped at the lump in his throat. This is what should have happened before. This is what he should have done when they were finally alone, not the horrific scene he had created.

"No..." He shook his head; shaking off the sick feeling in his stomach. "Don't be sorry. Don't be..." He brought her close and closer still. And finally she just let the words die and let the anxiety and tension flow out of her as she stayed tucked in this cocoon he was offering.

Their moment was quiet, void of questions or talk. Afraid to put his voice into the mix, he never moved past the gentle cooing and shh's that came through his lips. Humbly, greedily, he held her to him; reveling in the way it felt to have her next to him again.

When she finally pulled back, calm and more at ease, she looked up at him with heavy eyes. And he saw the exact moment that she flashed back from this painful place of release she had just been. She looked him over, searching for signs of his feelings, her heart clenching as she worried.

"I'm sorry. I don't know..." She blinked a few times, bringing her sleeve up to wipe at the few silent tears that had fallen to her cheeks. "I didn't mean to..."

"Shh.." He shook his head, hurt that she would think she needed to apologize; knowing it was his fault that she did. His hands moved, slightly shaky and unsure to her face, framing it gently as his thumbs ran over her cheeks. "What can I do? What do you need from me? Are you hungry or..."

"I want to...I want to take a shower." She let out a sigh; relief beginning to return. "I want to just...wash it off, wash him off."

"Okay," he nodded, struggling with his emotions; struggling with the images from earlier, her bruised arm, her cut lip. "Okay. I'll just..."
"Will you come up?" She interrupted him with wide eyes. Her teeth bit into her lip, holding her hopes and her heart at bay; cautious about his reaction to her request. "You can just sit in our room. I just...I don't want to be alone and..."

"Absolutely." As if there were anything she could ask of him that he wouldn't do. "Absolutely."

Maddie's shower was long and hot, making her grateful that she was at the Palace with a seemingly endless supply of hot water. She stayed under that stream until the mirrors fogged up, until her skin was pink and hot to the touch. She let it run over her face, her shoulders, her back. She scrubbed at her skin, her hair; desperately wanting to be clean of that day.

And she was getting there. She was home. She was with him, however stunted and awkward that might be. She was there and he was there and her mind was starting to clear. When she turned off the water, she stepped from the shower and wrapped herself in the luxurious, fluffy towel, twisting another around her wet hair. She took a long, solid, deep breath and let it out. Rubbing at the mirror, she cleared a circle large enough to look at herself. Leaning closer, she poked at the small cut on her lip, remembering the way her teeth had gone into her during the struggle against him. She sighed and pulled back, turning her head to look at the marks on her arm; more defined as time wore on. The bruises were most definitely fingers, his fingers. She groaned inwardly as she rubbed her fingers over them, wishing they would disappear.

Turning away from the mirror, she reached for her lotion; taking her time, being mindful as she spread the warm, soft scent over her skin. It was silly, she knew, but it made her feel better; it made her feel relaxed. She let the towels fall to the floor, seeking warmth in her robe before she ran a comb through her damp hair. Finally, after brushing her teeth, she sighed.

She felt clean. She felt better; warm and soothed and slightly rejuvenated.

And now it was time to face him; to face Harry. She honestly didn't know what to expect on the other side of the door. He had been all over the map since she had come home from the bookstore and she wasn't entirely sure which side he was going to be on when she rejoined him in their room.

But there was no use in delaying it any longer. With a deep, steadying breath, Maddie turned the doorknob and stepped out into their room.

Harry's eyes instantly lifted to her. And she cracked a smile. He was still there, sitting in the exact same spot she had left him in. She was certain he hadn't moved, hadn't budged. And for whatever silly reason, that made her smile. He was still there; not budging.

"Hey..." She offered a tiny wave of her fingers. His lips turned up and his fingers lifted from his lap and her smile stretched a bit further; she breathed easier. Moving further into the room, Maddie slid onto the bed next to him, facing him as she sat down; her robe wrapped snugly around her. For a moment she debated her next move; unsure as to what should happen next. But it was Harry who led the way, Harry who spoke first.

"Please don't leave me." Heart on his sleeve, his eyes met hers; fragile, vulnerable, honest. Maddie gulped and blinked and, matching his honestly with her own, her fingers stretched to hook into his.

"Please don't tell me to go."
"Never." He shook his head; one fluid, solid motion. "Never again." His fingers drew her hand further into his.

"I'll go, Harry." Her heart ached as she said the words; meaning every single one of them. "Next time...I'll go. I won't wait for you." Her hand slipped into his grasp; firm and warm and steady.

"There won't be a next time." He assured her, his body turning to face hers, pulling her hand into both of his; pressing it to his chest as he swore. "Never. I'm here till the end."

"Even if the end is tomorrow or this weekend or..." She felt so much in that moment; everything seemed to be riding on this moment.

"I came too close to that today, Maddie." He pulled her hand to his lips, kissing it once, twice, and on the third time he began to cry. "I can't...I just...I promise. No more." His eyes pressed closed, his shoulders slumped and he moved; his body folding, his head finding home in her lap. "Please..." He kissed the tops of her knees; emotion flowing from him like a waterfall. Maddie's hands moved into his red hair as he sat himself at her mercy. She knew this was a rarity for him, knew it was outside of his character. "I'm so sorry. I am so sorry. I don't have any excuse for...Please." He kissed her thighs, her hands, his forehead settling on her lap; pressing against her as he took a few deep breaths. "I love you so much. Please don't leave me." He whispered against her skin.

It wasn't the biggest leap of faith she had taken, trusting him, but it was close. Her heart had hurt so much that day—more from his words than what had occurred in the bookstore. But she knew him enough to know where his moment of panic had come from; where his unshakable desire to protect her—at all costs—came from. She got it.

But she couldn't do it again. She couldn't hold onto them when he was trying to sever all ties; she couldn't hold them together again. She meant it.

But he was sorry. He had regrets and issues and she knew he meant that too.

"Harry..." Her hands moved from his, slipping around his face; pulling him from her lap, wanting him to look at her. "You broke my heart tonight."

"I know..." He nodded; his heart aching at the truth in her words. He moved then, pulling his head from her lap; inching closer to her. It was not lost on him that she didn't move away. "I know I did."

"If you ever..." She started.

"I won't." He interrupted. "I am so sorry. I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I let my own issues get the best of me. I'm sorry that I made this day infinitely worse for you. I'm sorry I made you cry. I'm sorry I made you..." His hands were on her thighs as he moved closer to her. "I'm sorry I made you believe for one minute that I didn't want you, that I didn't need you more than..." Her hand rose to his cheek then; bringing his entire being to a pause. He turned into her palm. "Please don't let this be the end of us, Madeline. I beg you. I'll do anything. I'll..."

"Shh..." Her thumb pressed to his lips; bringing him to silence, pulling him to attention. She shook her head; slowly, lazily. "I don't want to...Let's not do drama, Henry." Her eyes were warm and wet as she met his eyes. "Let's just..." She smiled as a tear blinked out. "I love you." He grinned at that, even as she held his heart, their future in her hands.
"I love you too," he felt her hand rub against his cheek as she looked him over; deciding—he guessed.

"Harry?"

"Yes?" His eyebrows lifted; his hopes sky high.

"Can I..." Her head tipped in thought; her voice wavered in nervousness. "Can I kiss you now?"

"You're asking for my permission?" Shock; nothing but shock registered across his stunned face.

"Yes," she nodded. "After a day like today, after all that's been...of course I'm asking for..." With one hand wrapping around the hand she had pressed to his cheek, Harry moved forward; his soft, warm lips silencing her.

Without a second thought, she sighed into him; her heart settling in her chest; settling home. His hand moved to her neck, fingers wrapping around to the back; holding her to him as his lips moved over hers.

He had committed kisses to memory before. Their first—when she moved full throttle ahead of him and took matters into her own hands. The one that followed that—slow and soft and lasting forever. He had mapped out her mouth with his tongue; he had tucked away the feel of her lips, the slide of her tongue. He had mentally recorded the way her breath sounded when it fell from her in ecstasy. He knew the difference between that and the growl that came when she was feeling aggressive and bossy and...

He had logged so many moments between them; sexy, erotic moments that he kept for himself, sweet and simple ones that tugged at his heart like nothing else.

But this; this moment of reunion. It was going straight to the top of the list of memories. When Maddie pulled, Harry went; no questions, no pauses. He was following her to the ends of the Earth, following her to their bed. He felt nervous as she laid back, stretching out underneath him. His hands were shaky as they ran over her, his pulse pounding through every corner of his body; full of all of the emotion that comes with narrowly avoiding disaster. His lips left hers only to pay reverence to the rest of her; her cheeks, her jaw, her neck.

"Harry..." She breathed his name; breathed life back into him.

"I'm sorry are you..." He pulled back from her; eyes looking her over, worried he had hurt her, concerned that she felt cornered or...

"I'm fine..." She smiled innocently, her lip pulling between her teeth as her hands moved to his shirt, sliding up underneath it to feel his skin.

"But you..." He relaxed; resting against her.

"Called your name?" She smiled as he settled between her legs; strong and familiar. "Yeah..." She ran her fingers into his hair; thumbs rubbing at his temples. "You make me do that sometimes." His eyes held hers for a moment before his head bowed; lips lingering on her chest, slightly exposed from the slack of her robe.

"I don't deserve this," he whispered into her; his head rocking back and forth as he shook it in
"I don't deserve you," his face turned to the side; pressing his cheek into her stomach as he wrapped his arms all the way around her body, holding her tight.

"Maybe..." Maddie sighed, knowing there was no way for her to shush away the emotions he was juggling. Her fingers moved into his hair, stroking at his scalp as she smiled down at him. "Maybe I deserve you."

"Hmmm...." He chuckled against her, moving to look up at her; his chin resting against her. "You're being punished?"

There was a pause; a turning point. She could laugh with him, ease the awkwardness and evade the emotion or she could dive right into it. Her finger traced over his forehead and she blinked.

"Make love to me Henry." She was diving. Before he could turn, before he could blink away his reaction, she saw it. His eyes welled up as he absorbed the blow from her words, from her intent. Turning his lips to her stomach, he kissed again; pressing his face into the fabric. And then, with a nod, a gulp to steel his nerves, he moved; rising to meet her lips with his. His hands slid along her body as he rose, along her arms as he pulled them up and over her head; his palms pressing into her palms, fingers intertwining, pressing her hands into the mattress below them.

Just like in Oslo, when she had asked to be fucked, just as he had followed her orders then, he was following her orders now. Though, this wasn't fucking. This was making love. This was holding on, with everything he had, in the wake of what could have been the end. One hand took both of hers overhead as the other moved, fingers trembling, to the tie on her robe. Pushing aside the light fabric, his hand slid inside; the memory of her curves, of her skin, nowhere near as perfect as the reality.

Maddie tugged at his shirt, needing him bare, needing him naked; needing the closeness that came with skin on skin. Clothing fell to the side, easily and without complications; his and hers tumbling to an easily forgotten pile along with all of the apprehension from before. He looked her over then, taking it in, giving thanks; honoring this moment of forgiveness, of moving on. And then, with her freed arms around his neck, her hands pressing into his shoulders encouragingly, he pressed his face into the soft confines of her neck and he pressed into her.

And the love making began; the redemption coming full circle.

"Ohhhh...." Maddie felt the word bubble from her toes as he moved. She felt him fill her up; completely. Her head rocked back against the pillow of his hands as he rocked against her.

He moved in long, languorous strokes; savoring every inch, every second, every sensation that came with this moment. He took his time, he took great care. And Maddie could feel him in every pore. She felt his breath shudder from his lungs. She felt every ounce of emotion that came with him, every single word he wasn't speaking. She felt his hot lips against her skin, she felt his nose trace against her as he kissed. She felt his eyelashes flutter.

And she swore, as he neared the end, as she called out his name and pressed nails to his back, she swore she felt a few, hot tears slip onto his cheeks—smudged out against her skin.

It was warm and intense. It was sweet and heavenly and overwhelming—in the greatest sense of
the word. It was everything she needed to feel; the longing, the want, the desire, the sweet, glorious relief. It was everything. *Everything.*

And when it was over, he stayed with her; wrapped around her, warm inside of her. He kissed promises into her mouth, he stroked love into the curves of her body. It pained him to pull away, to pull from her. He was quick to clean up, quicker to return. And that night, as they settled under the covers, against each other, he dared anyone—heaven or earth—to try to come between them again.

They had faced something that had shaken their bond, rattled their union. It had pushed Maddie to the limits of her resolve. It had torn at Harry's loyalties. It brought her to her breaking point and him to his knees. It forced them to face their fears and insecurities and their own mortalities; individually and as a couple. And in the end, it left them tired, worn, and closer than it had found them.

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When Maddie woke, it was morning. The sun peeked through the heavy cloud cover as though it was determined to shine light on her day. Her hand reached for him before her eyes did, both coming up empty. She sat up in their bed, glancing around the room for him and found nothing. Slipping from their bed, she pulled her robe around her body and padded out of the room; in search of him.

When she found him, she smiled and shook her head. There he was, half clothed, sitting on the very same step he had been on when things had begun to fall apart. She sighed and lowered herself next to him. Her shoulder nudged his as she sent him a smile.

"Whatcha doing?" She looked him over.

"I couldn't sleep," he confessed; his left arm moving around her shoulders as his right reached for her hand. "I was just...thinking..." He pulled her closer and pressed a kiss to the side of her head.

"Harry..." Her hand squeezed his reassuringly. "I'm fine. Everything's fine."

"It's not that." He kissed her hand, bringing it to his cheek as if to warm his skin. "It's not just that."

"What is it?" She stroked his stubbled chin. He smiled at her, his eyes meeting hers without a hint of struggle. He kissed her then, his soul wide open.

"I've been trying to figure out how I can possibly apologize for..."

"Stop..." She shook her head with a light groan.

"Maddie." He was so stubborn.

"You don't have to..." But he did. He had to. She knew that about him. She could forgive him, take him in her arms, take him into her bed, but he was who he was. And God help her, she loved him.

"You don't need to do this Harry..." Her hands moved into his hair; ruffled from a restless night. "Yesterday was..." She swallowed and shook her head. "We were both not in the best space and there is no need to..."

"I'm sorry," he looked up to her; wide, sad eyes. "I'm so sorry. I messed up in the biggest way and..."

"Shhh..." Her fingers fell over his lips. He kissed the tips lightly and pulled them back into his hand.

"I need you to forgive me."

"We've been over this. I have forgiven you." She ran her thumb along his jaw. "You think I would be able to make love to you last night like..." She blushed slightly at the memory. "You think I would be able to make love to you if I hadn't?"

"Maybe I need to forgive myself."

"Well that's on you Sunshine," she gave his cheek a light pinch and moved to step away from him. As she rose from the stair, he caught her hand; holding her there in the entryway.

"Will you come somewhere with me today?"

"Where do you want to go?" She smiled. "We can't go on vacation. We have rehearsals and renovations and..."

"No no." He shook his head. "Here. In town. Will you come somewhere with me?" He watched as she gave it thought.

"Okay," she sighed. "I just need to put on some clothes and..."

"Okay. I'll be right here."

"Can I make a suggestion?" She looked him over.

"Of course."

"You should probably put on some clothes. And shoes." She pointed to his feet. "You need to start wearing shoes."

"Yes." He looked down at himself, laughing as she moved around him to their room.

Less than an hour later, they were on their way to the car. Dressed warmly for the crisp, cool day, Maddie's cheeks were pink as she smiled at their security team standing at the ready; knowing that there would be no chance she would be spending any time alone for quite a while.

"Care to tell me where we're going?" She asked as they strolled, casually, hand in hand. She watched as his face grew serious for a moment; coming to a stop next to the car.

"The bookstore," he answered.

"What?" Her heart thudded to a standstill.
"You..." He looked down at the ground, searching for his courage before meeting her eyes. "I want you to know that I'm serious. I'm not going to be shaken by this..." He sighed. "You were looking for a specific book that day and...and I want to go back there and find it. You don't have to go in if you don't want to. If you want to wait in the car while I do, you can. If you want to take all three agents with you while we shop, that's fine. I just...I don't want this to be what..."

With a tug to his hand in hers, Maddie pulled his lips to hers; silencing him.

The flowers would come; followed by chocolates and jewelry and a mini holiday to France to cuddle with Isaiah and view the city from the Eiffel Tower—when Harry went into apology mode, he went.

But this, this moment where he faced his greatest fear, the fear that almost took them down, this was the defining moment for Maddie.

Sure, she took both agents and, sure, her hand was tight in Harry's grasp the entire time but stepping into that store, buying that book—was exactly what she needed.

And the trip to France didn't hurt too much either.

Chapter End Notes

***I have an Alternate Ending to this storyline in which Harry does not go after Maddie and their relationship ends. If you want to see how THAT goes, check out The Alternate Journey under "My Works". Check it out if you're curious.
"Good Evening Captain Wales," just as Maddie had expected, her call had gone directly to Harry's voicemail. He had reported to base for Captain's Training with the Army earlier that week. But before he had left, he had made provisions. "I wanted to report successful delivery of your...tenth bouquet of flowers since you left five days ago. If we keep up at this rate for another five days..." She sighed and placed the flowers onto his vacant desk. "They are beautiful Harry; all of them. The delphinium was a nice touch. Was it from Highgrove? Probably not. Too cold..." She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and chuckled at the way she was having a conversation with his voicemail. "But it's been weeks since the bookstore and I'm running out of places to put them and maybe the flowers can stop? Who am I kidding? You're probably only going to increase it because it drives me nuts." She sighed. "They're beautiful Harry; particularly the purple ones that came today. I love them. I love you. See you soon."

Ending the phone call, Maddie took a look around the bottom floor of their place. There were flowers everywhere. Even before he had left, he had brought home a fresh bunch nightly. She had run out of vases long ago and, after Bernard caught her using a delicate crystal pitcher one afternoon, Harry's deliveries began to arrive with their own containers.

With a quick glance to the clock, she scooted the vase towards the center of Harry's desk and smiled. These would be there to greet him when he returned. Ella was on her way over for some quality girl time, something both ladies desperately needed, and there was still a bottle of wine to open.

Maddie had just enough time to uncork one of Ella's favorites and put pasta on the stove to reheat while she chopped up veggies for the salad. When the doorbell rang out, she was ready for her best friend.

"Ella!" She exclaimed, pulling the door open.

"Hi my darling," Ella stepped through the door and into Maddie's open arms; hugging tight.

"How are you?" Maddie spoke into her hair.

"Great," she smiled as she pulled back. "Though I have to tell you, getting in was significantly more difficult tonight than it was the last time I was here."

"Ah yes," Maddie nodded, leading her friend towards the kitchen. "You have one run in with a psychopath at a bookstore and it ruins the fun for everyone else." Ella paused for the slightest of moments, letting the reality of that statement settle before she chuckled and Maddie sighed with relief.

"Well," Ella sighed, shrugging her coat off and laying it on the back of a couch. "I'll let Peters feel me up any time he wants if it means you're safe."

"Thanks love," Maddie giggled. "Way to take one for the team."

"Okay but seriously Maddie," Ella looked around the house as they continued their journey; taking in vase after vase, bouquet after bouquet. "What in the hell is with all the flowers? You opening a greenhouse?"
"Yeah," Maddie smiled, her eyes shifting around the room, a pink flush to her cheeks. "It's Harry he..." She laughed, deciding Ella's option was the easiest to explain. "Yes. A greenhouse."

"Your back up plan?" Ella's smile grew smug; knowing it was something much more sappy and romantic than that.

"Yes. You know...in case the Duchess thing doesn't work out."

"Smart. Wise."

"You just never know," Maddie moved to stir the pasta. "Can I pour you some wine?" She called over her shoulder.

"Already on it," Ella typically made herself at home when she was there. "Do we still have your dress fitting tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yes. You still able to make it?"

"Are you kidding?" Ella rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't miss it for the world." She took a sip and perched on a stool. "Listen. Maddie. There is something I need to tell you."

"Okay..." Maddie nodded, still focused on the food. "Shoot."

"Nope." Ella shook her head. "This is a turn around, drink wine, and forget dinner kind of conversation."

"Oh. Oh?" Maddie turned on her feet, her eyes immediately scanning her friend for a hint. "Okay. Well..." She wiped at her hands and reached for a glass of wine. "What's up?"

"Okay." Ella took a sip. "First. I need to talk to you about something and you're going to want to...fix it."

"Oh-kay..." Maddie smiled slightly.

"But I need you to not go into therapist mode and I need you to be my friend and...not try to fix it."

"Okay. Sure..." Maddie shrugged, moving to one of the high stools. "Go ahead."

"Go ahead?" Ella's face twisted into a smirk. "Really? Just like that? You can do that?"

"Yes. When you tell me ahead of time, I can do that."

"Okay." Ella took a long, slow drink from her glass, draining it before she sat it down and took a breath. "I'm thinking of breaking up with Bishop."

"What?!" Maddie nearly fell out of her chair. "I..."

"Shh!" Ella held up a finger with a warning glare. "You said you would be my friend and..."

"But Bishop..."

"You were my friend first." Maddie bit her lips between her teeth and looked down at her hands;
"Why?" Her voice was soft, eyes sympathetic. "I thought things were going well. I thought he was a great guy?"

"He is," Ella nodded, her eyes growing a bit teary. "Bishop is a great guy. And things are going well."

"Then..."

"It's me," Ella huffed into a laugh; eyes downcast. "I'm not sure I deserve to be with somebody like him."

"Ella..." Maddie's heart hurt.

"This is when your therapist mouth wants to run rampant," Ella cut her off with a friendly grin. "I know what you're going to tell me. I know that...vooodoo you're going to try on me." She snapped her fingers and pointed at Maddie with narrowed eyes. "And you're right. I need to think...oh God...I need to think more highly of myself and I need to be able to accept that people love me and I need to..." Her smile faded as her voice grew shaky. "I need to let go of all of the shit with my father so that I can make room for something wonderful, someone wonderful. For somebody like Bishop."

Maddie blinked at the teariness that sprang to her own eyes and remained silent, letting Ella sort it out.

"I need to do all of those things." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm just not sure I can do them when I'm with Bishop...when I'm with anyone really."

"But you could..."

"Really lose him?" Ella finished the sentence, allowing a few tears to slip from her eyes before wiping at them and nodding. "I know." Maddie's hand reached out to squeeze Ella's. She took another breath and blew it out, forcing a smile. "Anyway. I don't know what I'm going to do, I just didn't want you to be...in the dark. I'm going to see somebody tomorrow."

"Somebody?"

"A therapist," Ella grinned. "One of you." They shared a light laugh. "I'll see how it goes. I just...I don't want to keep him hanging onto this mess..."

"You're not a mess, Ella."

"I don't want to keep him hanging onto this mess," Ella continued. "If I'm never going to be able to be the person he deserves."

"Ella..." Maddie began, wanting to tell her that all of this talk about deserving was ridiculous, that people could work through things together as a couple, that she was an amazing, wonderful, fantastic woman and that any man, Bishop included, would be lucky to have her. But Ella stopped her.

"Please Maddie," her eyes grew sad. "I don't want to argue with you about this. I didn't tell you this so that you would build me up. I just...I'm asking you for what I need and right now that's a
lack of judgment, that's a supportive friend, that's...loving me in spite of my bad decisions, that's...a hug and more wine and..."

Maddie rose from her chair and wrapped her arms around Ella; squeezing tight. Both women edged towards tears, towards total breakdown and both edged back; sniffing and laughing. Maddie waited till Ella pulled back and then she leaned in, kissed her cheek and took a breath.

"More wine?" Ella's eyes met hers and they shared a look of undying friendship and love.

"More wine." Ella nodded.

"Good Morning Captain Wales," Maddie's voice was low and rough as she spoke into the phone. Having woken only minutes before to accept the delivery, she had crawled right back into bed. "The Pincushion Hakea Plant was an inspired choice." She yawned and snuggled back into his pillow. "I'm having lunch with Kate today. Joan called to verify our time for tomorrow night and I have to say...Rehearsal at ten at night? Because you had officer training? That's some kind of pull you have there Captain. Anyway..." She frowned. "I miss you Harry. I can't wait to see you. Tomorrow. Thank you—for the flowers. They're beautiful and I know you're sending them now just to get at me...but the joke's on you. I love them and I have every intention of putting a significant dent in your fortune filling up our home with fresh flowers. Well played Wales. I love you." Maddie ended the call and tossed the phone to her side of the bed. With a sigh and a bit of a grumble, she sank down under the covers. She still had a few hours before she had to meet Kate and his pillow smelled faintly of him.

"This is the first time we've gotten together since your...attempted kidnapping..." Kate's voice lowered as she popped a cherry tomato into her mouth. They were having lunch at Will and Kate's Kensington apartment. With great warmth she had hugged Maddie close and invited her in. Now they were seated at her dining room table eating an amazing salad, one of the few things the baby, growing and moving, approved of. Kate had been showing for a little while now and her sickness was finally starting to fade; leaving behind glowing cheeks and happy parents-to-be.

"Ugh." Maddie groaned into her iced tea. "Are we really calling it that?"

"That's what they all call it," Kate waved her hand and Maddie wasn't sure if she meant the world or the family. "Seriously though." Kate wiped her hands on the napkin, dainty and proper, before her eyes settled on Maddie. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," Maddie smiled; her eyes blinking as she responded.

"Really?" Kate's eyes narrowed; nothing but love and concern.

"Yes. I promise. I went and saw an old boss of mine, Dr. Colvin. We talked a few times...I'm okay." This was the answer she gave to only very close friends and family.

"And how's Harry?"

"Harry is..." Maddie smiled softly and Kate knew. Maddie knew that she knew. Kate understood better than anyone. She had known the moment she had learned the details of the Code Black that had brought security descending around her as well. These brothers were protective, fiercely so.
Kate had guessed Harry would circle the wagons; she knew Will would had it been her. Maddie took a breath and nodded. "Harry is doing better."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. He was pretty fazed that day but...he's come around. He's doing better."

"He lets you go to the loo on your own again?"

"Oh no," Maddie shook her head with a wink. "But he's never let me do that."

"Ha!" Kate chuckled at the irony of that statement; imagining it was closer to the truth than other people might think.

"But enough about me and my..."

"Attempted kidnapping," Kate offered with a smirk.

"Yes," Maddie rolled her eyes and looked Kate over; her smile warming. "Tell me. How is my little baby doing?"

"Fabulous," Kate's hand drifted to her rounding stomach. "Though Will says you have to stop calling it your baby."

"What? Why?"

"The tabloids, the press. You know...the whole thing." Kate rolled her eyes.

"He really thinks somebody is going to run with 'the baby is Maddie's'?"

"He's...strange."

"I guess." Maddie laughed. "Fine. That's fine. But honestly. If I have to stop calling the baby mine, Harry should have to stop too."

"Oh don't worry," Kate laughed. "Will's already on that one."

"Is it really so bad if we think of the little one as ours? It takes a village you know..." Maddie shrugged.

"I know," Kate smiled. And she did. It had been that way since the announcement; all of them taking ownership of the baby, creating a protective, nurturing bubble around the mommy-to-be and the little one. "And he knows. I think he's just...you know these boys. He's protective. He wants to be the only one to lay claim to the little guy..."

"Yeah. I suppose that..." Maddie's eyes grew wide, snapping up to meet Kate's. "Wait. Did you just say little..." Maddie's hand flew to her mouth as Kate's face registered shock.

"I..." Kate tried to walk it back but she was too late and Maddie was too quick.

"You did!" Maddie pointed at her. "Oh my God! Are you having a..."

"Shhh!" Kate waved her hand, slightly rattled. "Don't say it! Don't..." She took a breath. "I cannot
"Oh Kate," Maddie's eyes glosed over, her hands pressing into her chest as she looked over her friend, her sister. "Are you?"

"Yes," her voice was smile, but her excitement exuded from every pore of her body. Maddie clapped her hands with an enormous grin. "We just found out this week. You cannot tell a soul. Not a soul. Not even Harry. Will wants to tell Harry."

"I promise the words will not leave my lips!" Maddie vowed and Kate trusted. "Oh my..."

"I know," Kate sighed, feeling slightly relieved that the secret was out; that somebody she trusted finally knew.

"Are you...happy? Are you okay? Are you..." Maddie trailed off.

"Yes," Kate nodded, certain. "I am...unbelievably happy."

"Good. Great." Maddie sighed into her seat. "Good."

"How are wedding plans?" Kate shifted the attention away from herself, something Maddie wished the world could see about her. "Rehearsals start this week?"

"Yes," Maddie grinned. "Just the two of us and Joan at the cathedral tomorrow night. We'll add in others as it gets closer, but tomorrow we're getting acquainted with the building." She laughed at the wording Joan had used.

"Excited?"

"In all honesty..." Maddie sipped from her glass and met Kate's eyes. "I'm just really ready to be married to him. You know?"

"Hmm," Kate smiled. "I know exactly how you feel."

Maddie giggled slightly as she settled the next in the long line of bouquets on the stand in their entry way. With a smile, she reached for her phone and dialed. "Captain Wales..." She sighed into the phone, smoothing her hands down over her skirt. "I'm dressed and waiting. We have a date in an hour and..."

Her ears perked up and she turned towards the door just as it swung open. "Never mind," she grinned. "You're here." And as she ended the call, Harry stepped into the entryway looking tired and rough for the wear, but delighted to see her.

"Hey there beautiful," he smiled wide; eyes running over her as he dropped his bag to the floor, laying his coat over it and reaching for her.

"Captain," her smile matched his as she moved into his arms; her hands moving up and around his neck, her nose nuzzling in to take in his scent. "You're later than I thought you would be."

"Yes, well," he kicked the door closed and adjusted her tighter to him. "I had to clear my voicemail inbox..." His eyes gleamed. "It took me forever."
"Strange..." She sighed, her eyes settling on his lips. "Hi."

"Hello," he whispered; putting lips to hers.

"You're still in camo," she muttered between kisses.

"Want to take it off of me?" His nose nuzzled into her neck.

"We only have an hour before we have to be at the Cathedral...you have to shower and..."

"Shower with me?" His hands clung to her then; convincingly.

"But my hair is..." She stopped short, laughing at herself. "My hair? She shook her head at herself,

"Yeah?" He smiled wide.

"I'll race you."

"Race me?" He laughed at her. "Please. I just came back from military training. I run every day

"Go." And she was out of his arms and half way up the stairs before Harry had snapped back to

"See..." Harry smiled at Maddie as they hurried down the stairs. "Plenty of time."

"Hmmm..." Maddie shrugged; even she couldn't argue that rushing around to re-dress and fix her

"And you thought we would be late," he checked the mirror as he pulled his jacket on over his

"No," she laughed, holding onto his waist for steadiness as she slipped on her heels. "I said that

"Thank you love," he turned around to face her as she pulled her jacket on over her dress and

"No, no," she moved to him, sliding her hands up his chest, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Thank

"Mmm..." He grinned against the lips he bent to kiss. "Are you ready?"

"I am," she nodded, stepping regretfully away from him and sliding into the coat he held out for
her. "I just need..." She hurried into their living room, lifting a paper plate and ribbon creation
from the bookcase and hurrying back to him.

"What on Earth is that?" Harry eyed it.
"It's..." She chuckled. "Ella made it for me one night when she was here. Women...at the rehearsal, women use it to replicate the bouquet they'll be holding. You know..." She held it in front of her as she would were she walking that moment. "You know?"

"I do know," he nodded and, with that wicked Windsor smile of his, he leaned over to where his bag was still resting. When he rose, he pulled with him a small, beautiful bouquet in deep purple. "I just thought you could use this instead."

"Oh..." Maddie gasped, her eyes welling up. "Look at you."

"You said you liked the purple ones the best."

"I did," she sighed. "Good God, Harry. When you're on, you're on."

"Hmmm..." He held it to her. "You don't think Ella would mind, do you?"

"No," Maddie shook her head as she sat the paper version to the side and took his simple creation. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he accepted her kiss with humility and offered his arm. "Come on. Let's go get...fake married."

"Let's." Maddie grinned and slid her arm through his.

It was really quite something, mind blowing even; having St. Paul's Cathedral to themselves, in the middle of the night. Maddie couldn't help but giggle as she looked around.

It was massive, elegant; and it was all theirs. Truly the only people inside were she and Harry, Joan, and their security officers—who wisely chose to station themselves at checkpoints throughout the sanctuary; going for zone coverage instead of man to man.

"I have to say," Joan looked around the vast opulence. "I've never been in here with quite so few people."

"No?" Maddie's voice was low, reverent.

"We usually do rehearsals in the afternoon," Joan smiled warmly at Maddie and Harry as everyone relaxed and said their hellos.

"Yes well, lover boy over here had Captain's training..." Maddie winked at him; high spirited and happy.

"I hope it wasn't too much trouble," Harry smiled at Joan, his hand resting on Maddie's back.

"No, not at all," Joan shook her head. "We really don't need anyone else tonight anyway. We're simply here to run through things for the first time, allow the two of you some time to be here and become more comfortable with how things are going to work." She wanted them to feel at home in the space. "Are we ready?"

"Yes," they agreed.
"Okay. Your Royal Highness..."

"Harry," he interrupted her. "Please. It's going to be a very long night if you insist on titles."

"Harry," she smiled. "I need you to go up to the altar and wait for us to join you. I want to go over positioning and where you'll be. But, I am going to give Madeline the chance to walk the aisle at the appropriate pace as much as we possibly can."

"Absolutely," he nodded; feeling agreeable. With a squeeze to Maddie's hand, he left the two women and made his way in that direction. Maddie couldn't help the way her eyes swept over him appreciatively as he moved.

"Okay," Joan turned her smile to Maddie and moved to a box she had sitting on a pew. "Now. Let's get you dressed."

"Dressed?" Maddie's eyebrows shot up, tearing her eyes from Harry's ass.

"Yes," she nodded, reaching into the box and pulling out a large, folded sheet. "I spoke with your designer, Ms. Ellis, and she sent over a mock train."

"A mock train?" Maddie laughed lightly as Joan began unfolding it.

"This is the same length as your train," she moved about Maddie, draping it to the ground and moving the ties around her waist. "It will help you judge the weight you will be carrying that day."

"Oh wow..." Maddie couldn't help but feel silly as she looked down and behind her.

"And this..." Joan had slipped away to the box. When she turned around this time, Maddie's breath sucked in. The Strathmore replica. "This is for your head."

"Yes," Maddie whispered. "I've seen that before."

"May I?" Joan nodded to the top of her head.

"Of course," Maddie lowered slightly; allowing her to place it on her head.

"Does that feel secure enough for walking?"

"Yes," Maddie's fingers rose to adjust it slightly.

"Okay dear. Here is your bouquet," she handed her the purple flowers Harry had given her.

"These are beautiful."

"Thank you."

"Now," Joan stood before her; hands clasped together. "You're going to be walking with your mother. I know we'll have her here for our big rehearsal as we get closer to the day."

"Yes we will," Maddie great more excited at the thought of her family coming; soon.

"Okay, now just hold your bouquet out in front of you like..." Joan adjusted Maddie's arm in front

As they moved, Joan spoke to Maddie; giving her details of the venue, pointing out where people might be seated, slowing her down when needed, reminding her not to hold her breath. And Maddie was thankful for all of it. Her mind was a bit of a swarm as she took it in; the fake tiara, the mock train. She suddenly felt incredibly thankful they would be doing this multiple times before their wedding day. As she neared the altar, she found herself searching for Harry—much like she knew she would that day. His smile widened when he saw them; his eyes scanning over her ensemble.

"Wow..." He shook his head, biting at his bottom lip. "I thought I wasn't supposed to see you in the dress before the wedding!" He called out to her.

"Ha, ha."

"It's beautiful," he grinned. "But maybe you could have toned it down just a bit." Defiantly Maddie flipped him off, to which he retorted, "That's lovely! Really regal. Do that on the actual day."

"Now..." Joan smiled, bemused, and continued on with her instruction. "Madeline, you will stand here." She pointed and Maddie moved. "Harry, you'll be right here." She pointed and he moved. "Harry, your brother will be right here, just to your right."

"I saw a broom over in that corner," Harry nodded off to the side. "Would you like me to grab it as a stand in?" Maddie's head shook as she snickered at him.

"He's funny," Joan spoke to Maddie.

"Isn't he though," Maddie agreed.

"Your mother will be standing next to you here. Music will be playing. She'll raise your veil. Ms. Marshall will fluff your train and take your bouquet." Joan reached out and took the purple flowers from Maddie. "The music will come to a close and we'll begin." She stood before them, in place of the Archbishop and clapped her hands together. "There will be a lengthy greeting. He'll charge you and the congregation. He'll ask you if you will and you'll say yes." She eyed them both, knowing them well enough that a warning didn't seem entirely out of place. "Do remember that nobody finds it amusing for jokes at this point."

"Of course," Maddie smiled.

"Yes Ma'am," Harry nodded.

"He'll ask who gives you away, your mother will hand over your right hand to the Archbishop who will then give it to Harry."

"Quite a transaction," Maddie smiled as Joan moved her right hand into Harry's.

"What did she say about jokes, Madeline," Harry eyed her playfully.

Joan grinned at the two of them as she continued on with the details; finding that even as she tried to keep to point, she was too amused by the couple, too captivated by their chemistry and obvious fondness for each other to be too upset at their jokes and quips.
After about twenty minutes of explanation and direction, Joan turned to the two of them and clapped her hands together.

"Okay, Madeline. Take your bouquet and head back down the aisle. We're going to go through it all one more time."

"What?" Maddie's eyes flashed wide. "I'm sorry. I..."

"I'm going to show Harry where he'll be going when he arrives at the church and, like I said, we're going to have you walking that aisle many, many times before the day arrives."

"We are?"

"It's a big moment. The more you do it now, the easier it will be that day, when the world is watching." Joan explained simply. "Tonight is all about making it second nature so that when the cameras are here, you're not quite as nervous. Now, if you'll please..."

"But..." Maddie sighed and smiled, knowing she was being difficult. "It's so far, I think I might need a snack. You know, some form of sustenance."

"A snack?" Joan hid the surprise behind a smile.

"Here," Harry stepped forward, reaching into the pocket of his jacket. "I'm not sure if this counts as sustenance but it's all I have..." Maddie looked to his palm and laughed.

"You brought my candy..." She grinned up at him; moved.

"Of course," he eyed her and nodded towards the aisle. "Now. Get down there so that you can get back up here."

"Oh Captain, my Captain," she whispered.

"Easy," he shook his head, biting back his gut response.

Upon Maddie's second arrival at the altar, Joan had already shown Harry the route he would be taking and they were waiting for her; stagnation beginning to set in. This time when Maddie took her spot next to Harry, Joan turned to her with a strange new request.

"I'm sorry?" Maddie laughed.

"Say his name," Joan repeated her request.

"Harry."

"Not that name," Joan shook her head with a small smile. "His full name. The name you'll use that day."

"Henry Charles Albert David," Maddie recited.

"That a girl," Harry winked.

"Again."
"Henry Charles Albert David."

"Again."

"Henry Charles Albert David."

"Again."

"Henry...I'm sorry but why are we..."

"You need to feel comfortable saying it. We need you to not forget it or jumble it or..."

"We can thank my mother for that one," Harry smiled, remembering her with fondness.

"And..." Joan continued without missing a beat. "He needs to feel comfortable hearing it. We want him to smile when you say it, not cringe as though he's in a whole world of trouble," she tossed a smile in Harry's direction. "Again."

"Henry Charles Albert David."

"Again."

"Henry...Charles...Albert...David..." Maddie's voice slowed.

"Okay." Joan smiled, stifling a yawn. "Now. Let's start over from the top. Madeline. If you would..." She nodded her head towards the front of the Cathedral.

"You're joking."

"Not in the slightest." She met the young woman's gaze and held it until Maddie relented and, with a slightly dramatic, deep breath, she turned towards the beginning of the aisle.

"I love you!" Harry called out to her, sympathy mixed with amusement.

"You had better," Maddie grumbled as she moved; calling out. "Henry Charles Albert David!"

Maddie was about half way down the aisle on her way back to them when she groaned and sighed and, feeling like a diva princess for the first time in her entire life, sank to the floor. Maybe this late time, after a long week, was too much for her. Her legs felt relief, her feet the same. She giggled as she relaxed on the cool marble and looked up at the domed ceiling. What good was it to have St. Paul's to themselves if she wasn't going to take advantage of the moment and revel in her moment of luxury.

"Madeline?" Harry's voice called out to her; echoing through the air, no longer seeing her in the distance.

"I'm done!" She called out from her space on the floor; smile wide, body relaxed. "I am at ease in the space and I quit!"

At the altar, Harry flashed a charming smile to Joan who shook her head with a small chuckle. "You can't quit love! Come on!"
"Harry..." She moaned with a deep breath. "I'm stuck!"

"Stuck?" He laughed and started down the steps. "I'm coming for you! Stay put!"

"No problem," she mumbled and leaned back against a pew to wait.

"Marco!" He called out as he came down the aisle towards her.

"Polo!" She giggled at his memory as he stepped up to her.

"You're on the floor?" He raised his eyebrows; arms crossing his chest amused.

"I am," she smiled sweetly. "I'm tired. I'm hungry. It's...almost midnight. I've walked this aisle like...twenty times..."

"Twenty?" He snickered.

"And before that my future husband made my body do things that..."

"Shhh..." His eyes narrowed, despite his smug grin. "We are in church. Now, look..." He tugged at his pants, lowering himself to the floor next to her. "I know you're tired. I'm guessing your feet hurt."

"You're guessing right."

"But we have to do this. We have to finish what she asks us to do and then..." He sighed. "I'll take you home; make you pizza, rub your feet."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely." He held out his hand. "Now come on. You ready to get up off the floor and finish this?"

"I don't know," she sighed with a smile. "This is a pretty excellent view."

"It is," Harry nodded, following her gaze to the top of the dome. "But Joan is bound to come looking for us sooner or later and I'm not sure we want to make her mad."

"Point taken," Maddie laughed. "Okay Wales. Help me up?"

"Yes ma'am," he rose first, pulling her to her feet after him. "Ready?"

"I have a sheet tied around my waist."

"Yes. It's a sexy sheet. You bringing it home for later?"

"You should have to wear the sheet."

"Hand it over." He held out his hand.

"Stop." She slapped at it.

"Anything for you, you know that."
"Now you're just making fun."

"I am." He nodded and kissed the top of her hand before releasing it. "I'll head back up there. You keep your pace. I'll see you soon."

"Soon?" Maddie laughed. "It takes me a good five minutes to walk this."

"But at the end of the rainbow..." He waved a hand over himself as he walked backwards towards the altar.

"My very own pot of gold."

"Just look out for the grumpy, bald leprechaun. He'll get you."

"We're talking about Will?"

"Yep."

"You're hilarious," she took a step forward, following behind him at her own, slower pace. "I should tell you though...you make me laugh that day, I'll finish the rest of the ceremony in my fake British accent."

"You have a fake British accent?" He called back; eyebrows lifted.

"I do," she drawled, trying her best. "And if you make me lose it in front of your family and those cameras, the papers will be writing about it for days."

"Is that it?" He nodded to her, a healthy smirk on his face. "Your British accent?"

"Yes."

"Sounds more...Australian..." He cocked an eyebrow. "But I hear your threat either way."

"Good." She laughed. "Now go. I'll see you soon."

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It was considerably colder when Harry and Maddie stepped out of St. Paul's that night. It was just after midnight and they were saying good-byes and offering up unnecessary apologies to Joan—who smiled and waved them off. After seeing that she was secure in her car on her way home, they began towards their own.

"I guess we passed her test," Harry joked as he pulled his phone from his pocket, powering it up.

"Does that mean she'll let us get married?" Maddie giggled as she did the same.

"I think so..." Harry stalled as they walked. "Hold on."

"Everything okay?" Maddie turned to look at him; slowing to a stop.

"I..." He shook his head slowly as he pressed a few buttons. "Bishop called me like...seventeen times. Hold on, I'm going to listen to a message..." He pressed the phone to his ear and Maddie's
heart jumped into her throat. She looked down at her own phone. One text message from Ella.

*It's over. I know you're rehearsing. Call when you can.*

"Oh my God." Harry's voice registered surprise as he turned wide eyes to her. "They broke up."

"I..." Maddie shook her head. Even though she had been given a warning of some sort, she still felt blindsided. "I just got the same in a text from Ella."

"He wants me to..." Harry had apologetic eyes as he hiked his thumb towards the city.

"Go." Maddie smiled weakly; understanding. "You go to him. I'm going to call her..."

"Okay," Harry nodded and stuffed his phone in his pocket. "You take the car. I'll grab a cab."

"Okay." Maddie agreed, her fingers holding tight to the lapels of his coat as though her body really didn't want to let him leave.

"Don't wait up for me," he leaned in to kiss her cheek; his hand on her elbow as his lips whispered against her skin.

"Give Bishop my love," she smiled and watched as he nodded and took three steps away from her. Then he stopped and, remembering what they were doing, what they were there for, he turned and took the three steps back up. Wordlessly, he pulled her back to him; lips crushing against lips, his hands at her waist.

"I love you," he met her eyes with a smile.

"Mmmm..." She sighed; grateful. "I love you too."

And then he was gone; off to nurse his friend's broken heart. As Maddie slid into the car, now down three people, she pressed her own phone to her ear.

The sun was just a few hours from coming up when Maddie stirred, feeling Harry slip into bed next to her. She rolled over, her body moving instinctually towards him and her hands reached out for him.

"Hi baby," she muttered, moving closer.

"Sorry love," he responded; slightly slurred. "I was hoping not to wake you." He smelled faintly of alcohol and smoke.

"No, no," she shook her head as it moved to rest on his chest; his t-shirt soft under her cheek. "You didn't."

"Mmmm..." His arms wrapped around her as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "When did you get home?"

"A few hours ago," she sighed snaking her arm around his waist, the tips of her fingers tucking into the waistband of his shorts. "We had a few bottles of wine, cried, and then she wanted to be alone."
"How is she?" He asked.

"She's..." Maddie sighed and opened her eyes for the first time. "She's scared and upset and...worried you'll never let her see me again."

"Aw come on," he groaned, rubbing at his eyes with his free hand. "I'm not going to...Shit happens. I know shit happens. I'm not going to..." He took a deep breath. "Look. Ella's your best friend. Bishop is my Ella and tonight...your Ella tore out my Ella's heart."

"I know," Maddie frowned. "Is he okay?"

"No," Harry shook his head, squeezing her close. "He's not. He will be. But he's not tonight."

"Okay," Maddie felt bad for him. She felt bad for her. This wasn't easy for anyone. "You could have brought him home with you."

"I thought about it," Harry sighed, relaxing a bit. "But then he ran into this woman we went to school with and..." Harry chuckled softly.

"He took a woman home?!" Maddie was shocked; her eyes opening wide.

"Don't do that," Harry's hand moved to her hair; massaging at her scalp. "Don't judge. Women want to drink wine and be alone. Men drink whiskey and want to..."

"Not be alone?" Maddie offered, trying hard not to sound angry; trying not to be angry. Bishop was heartbroken and acting accordingly. She had gone there in her own life; trying anything to forget. She understood.

"Yes," Harry laughed into a sigh into a yawn. "Anyway. If you see pictures tomorrow...it was Bishop who went home with the brunette from school." He turned to her then, pulling her tight to him and kissing her soundly; alcohol on his lips. "I came home to my blonde." Maddie's giggles were muffled by his lips, her arms wrapping snuggly around him as she welcomed him home for the second time that night.
Officially, the approval of Maddie's Citizen Application and subsequent Ceremonial attendance was not a big deal. Officially, Clarence House would release a statement that beat reporters would print and that would be that. Maddie wasn't a member of the Royal Family and it was, in no way, an official engagement. Officially.

Unofficially, however, this was the first time Maddie would be out in public with Harry in any sort of formal capacity. Unofficially, it was the publics' first chance to mingle with this woman who would be their "Princess"; for the fashion plate stalkers to assess her style at what would be considered a proper event. Unofficially, it was a slightly bigger deal.

Though none of those things concerned Maddie in the slightest when she finally received her letter of approval. It was a Wednesday and, after finishing up her morning eggs and toast, her phone buzzed in her pocket. It was Thomas at the office. The attorney had called up with some official documents for her and would like to know a good time to meet her at the office, unless of course she would prefer they come to her home.

Maddie grinned; she would be coming in. Harry had left her half-cocked and frustrated when he teased her as he dressed for the office that morning. She knew he was there; signing documents, reading reports—not a meeting on the register. She would be coming in.

In under an hour she was dressed and smiling her hellos as she made her way through the offices towards where she would be meeting Thomas. He was there to greet her, pulling her into the conference room as she followed with ease. She had to bite back laughter as she moved around the space. Her comfort level had certainly increased during the months of their engagement; she felt more at home than she probably should. Slipping into the chair that was clearly hers, she noted mentally that Harry wasn't in the meeting. They were bringing her in alone; perhaps they were more comfortable with her now too.

The attorney quickly produced the letter she had received from the UK Border Agency, already opened and marked, and informed her that her application had been approved. Though they had sent her three possible dates to attend the ceremony where she would take the oath, they had also sent along information regarding private ceremonies. The attorney had no opinion either way, though Thomas seemed to lean more towards the private ceremony. Though he made it very clear, it was Maddie's decision, he was quick to point out the benefits of a private ceremony; no muss, no fuss. Over and done. Maddie, thrilled to see yet another item on her list moving forward, told them both she would give it some thought, discuss it with Harry, and notify them in the morning of her decision.

And that was exactly her intentions as she moved towards Harry's office, after having Thomas phone ahead to his secretary that she would be coming.

"Good Morning Anya," Maddie had always taken great pains in memorizing names of the staff that surrounded her and Harry—a skill that would bode well for her in the future, a knack that would gain her favors with the staff.

"Good Morning Dr. Forrester," the young lady paused her work to offer a smile.

"Can I go in?" Maddie paused, pointing her finger at the closed door to his office.
"Of course, Ma'am," she offered a quick, curt nod and went back to the filing she had been doing when Maddie approached.

With a soft tap of her fingers to the door, Maddie pushed through.

"Yes?" Harry called up, his eyes and his mind glued to what he was reading.

"Your Royal Highness, there's somebody here to see you," Maddie pulled out her British accent as the door shut behind her. Harry's eyes flew from the pages in his hand, bright and alive and snapping right to her.

"Your accent is improving," the papers slid from his fingers to his desk as he rose to his feet. "Have you been practicing?"

"Quite a bit actually," Maddie grinned as he came around the desk to kiss her hello. "Thank you for noticing."

"So...to what do I owe this visit? Or was it just to show me your linguistic improvements?"

"Ha. Very funny." Maddie released her hold on him and waved to his chairs. "Do you have a minute? Can I sit?"

"Of course, of course, do you want me to have Anya bring you something to drink or..."

"No, no," Maddie shook her head and moved to a large, cushy chair. "My application for citizenship was approved."

"Really?" Harry clapped his hands together. "That is fantastic! I mean...I've been catching a fair amount of grief about marrying a foreigner..."

"Likewise," Maddie sighed as they both settled into laughter. And then, as Harry leaned back against his desk, Maddie brought him in on the details of her earlier meeting. She couldn't quite tell if he had actually already had the details before she had arrived but it didn't matter, he was just as excited as she that things were moving forward. He, like the two men before him, deferred the decision regarding the ceremony to her. It made zero difference to him. Hell, he teased, he could probably perform the ceremony himself. Though Maddie had laughed at that idea, she admitted she was a bit partial to the standard ceremony with other people who were doing the same thing as she. There was something about the communal aspect of it; the joining of a group, to the country. She liked the way it felt. Harry suggested they run it by his father, but was happy to go to battle for what she wanted.

In the end, there was no battle. Charles was in favor of the community ceremony if for no other reason than it was an easy concession to make for the large payoff of Maddie getting what she asked for. So, the next day over breakfast, she and Harry selected from the three dates and Thomas and the attorney were notified.

In three weeks, Maddie would become a citizen of the United Kingdom.

And in ten she would become a Duchess.

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Maddie took great care getting dressed and prepared the day of the ceremony. She had chosen a
color scheme close to those flown in the Union Jack. She had coordinated with Harry; suggesting he wear his navy suit. She had been selective in designers and fabric. Because even though this was not an official function and even though she was not acting in any official capacity, Maddie wasn't naïve.

This was a moment.

"Are you nervous?" Harry asked her, his fingers stretching across the backseat of the car as he reached for her hand.

"Not at all," she shook her head.

"You ready for the oath?"

"Absolutely," she nodded. She had looked the words up online, had done her research.

"And the National Anthem," his eyes flickered. "You okay with that one?" Maddie struggled with herself, wanting to laugh with him but desperately not wanting to laugh with him.

"You're really going to bring that up now?"

"I walked in on you with your...ear buds in your ears, singing God Save the Queen at the top of your lungs..."

"I wanted to make sure I had it right."

"You sounded wonderful," his lips twitched. "Maybe you could sing for me later."

"You should be so lucky," she rolled her eyes and looked out the window. They were close. Her fingers tightened on his; enough that he caught it and grew serious, pulling her hand to his lips.

"In all seriousness..." His voice was low, drawing her attention to him in curiosity. "Madeline...you're about to sign away your rights and responsibilities as a US citizen."

"I am." She agreed; voice soft and solemn.

"You really want to do that? Ready to give it all up?" He ran his finger over hers, tracing the small, delicate lines there. "All for some guy?"

"Hey..." She smiled, tugging at his hand. "That's not some guy. That's my future husband, the father of my children..."

"Hmmm..." His eyes met hers across the car. "You're certain?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay then."

"Okay." She took a deep breath as the car rolled to a stop. "Let's do this."

"Let's." He nodded though, before he released her hand, he pulled her in for a kiss. "This means a lot, you know?"
"I know," she nudged his chin with her knuckle. "Maybe afterwards I'll let you buy me an ice cream."

"We have lunch at Clarence afterwards." Their doors were opened, their hands fell apart. Charles and Camilla were hosting a luncheon with the immediate family to celebrate Maddie's conversion.

"That's true," Maddie smiled as she stepped from the car, nodding a thank you. "Maybe something else then?"

"Like what?" He waited for her to join him on the other side of the vehicle, hand extended and ready.

"I don't know. Maybe a drink at the party tonight?" Harry's friends, their friends, had organized a celebration at Leo's for that evening; welcoming her to the country in their own official way.

"Ha! I'll buy you a whole bottle of champagne at the party tonight." They reached the door and Harry held it open, standing aside, deferring to her.

"Perfect," she grinned up at him as she walked past.

It took them very little time to sign in. Maddie presented her paperwork, her ID, and was certain to thank the staff for making adjustments to allow for the Security personnel that were with them. And, after the wide-eyed, slightly in awe staff cleared and okayed everyone, Maddie and her posse made their way to the large community room for the Citizenship Ceremony.

With a quick kiss to the cheek and a supportive squeeze of her hand, Harry and Maddie were separated for the ceremony. Harry moved to sit among other invited guests, their security detail moving with him; all except for Sampson who followed behind Maddie as she made her way to join the other new UK Citizens in a designated area. Sampson gave her a nod when he reached the place where he would watch, inconspicuously, as the ceremony went forward. With a deep breath and a glance back at Harry, Maddie moved to her aisle seat and, collecting the Program for the event from her chair, she made herself comfortable and settled in.

It didn't take too long for the murmur to start; for the news to make its way around that Prince Harry was there—Yes. That Prince Harry. And it wasn't too much longer before scanning eyes located her.

And the whispers began.

Is that her? Is that really her?

She's taller than I thought.

She's prettier in person.

Is she here alone? Is he here with her?

OMG! He's here with her!

I love that she's here and not at some sort of stuffy, private ceremony.
I cannot believe she's here and not just taking care of this privately.

Though Maddie sensed the murmur, could hear some of the whispering, could see the slight nods, the slightly hidden pointing, she kept a smile on her face, ease in her shoulders. And when a gentleman old enough to be her grandfather appeared at her row, she rose to her feet to let him in.

"Thank you Dear," he smiled at her as he stepped in, taking a seat just next to her.

"Of course," she nodded and returned to her seat.

"Is this your first time here?" He had a bit of grin to his lips as he spoke to Maddie and the slightest of accent that she knew wasn't British but was having a hard time placing.

"Yes," she smiled. "You?"

"Mmm," he nodded. "I've heard the drinks are amazing, but stay away from the Salmon." He offered a joke and a wink and Maddie's smile stretched.

"Great tip, thank you."

"You're welcome," he was kind, sweet even, as he turned his attention towards the Superintendent Registrar who was entering the room.

It was time to begin.

The ceremony was nice; it was meant to be a big deal, to highlight the gravity of the decision people were making, to showcase the importance of it. There was a sweet speech, welcoming them all to the ceremony, to London, to the United Kingdom. There was a charge, calling on them to fulfill their duties as a new citizen and then they moved on to the oath.

As a group, they rose to their feet and, at the direction of the Superintendent; everyone began their oath by speaking their name. When it came round to Maddie, with a clear, loud voice, she recited,

"I, Madeline Jae Forrester..."

And the gentleman to her left.

"I, James Bartholomew Norton..."

And it continued on until everyone had spoken. And then, as a group, they spoke.

"...swear by Almighty God that, on becoming a British citizen, I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Her Heirs and Successors according to law. I will give my loyalty to the United Kingdom and respect its rights and freedoms. I will uphold its democratic values. I will observe its laws faithfully and fulfill my duties and obligations as a British citizen."

Maddie only had a blink of an eye to find humor with the allegiance she had just sworn to her soon-to-be husband's family, to her husband; a point she was certain Harry would use against her in the future.

"On behalf of The Queen, the Government, Parliament and people, I welcome you all to the United Kingdom."
And applause broke out. Instead of turning to Harry, most assuredly a move that would bring her to laughter, Maddie offered a smile to Mr. Norton, the jolly old man who had just become a citizen with her.

"Congratulations," he nodded to her.

"Thank you," she smiled wider. "You as well."

"Thank you," he smiled back. They were all encouraged to take their seats as they called individuals up to collect their Naturalization Certificates, a token gift and a handshake from the Superintendent. As people began to walk up, there was a smattering of applause, a few flashes from the guests and one professional photographer documenting the moment. "So..." Mr. Norton turned his attention to Maddie. "What brings you here today?"

"Well," Maddie sighed happily at his question; feeling quite confident he hadn't recognized her at all, thankful for that fact. "I'm marrying a man who lives here in London."

"Ohhhhh..." His head tilted, his smile stretched; finding amusement and a bit of sweetness in her response. "Well I suppose that's as good a reason as any."

"I suppose. How about you?"

"My family is here. I married a French woman fifty years ago and we made our home there. My daughter found an English lad and came back to the motherland. You know how that goes..." He ribbed her gently. "When my wife passed four years ago, my daughter insisted I join her in England." He rubbed his hands together; large, weathered hands that still looked soft to the touch. "I suppose they finally won out."

"Yes," Maddie was gentle. "I'm sorry about your wife."

"Thank you," he nodded, biting back memories. "Are you here with your groom to be?"

"I am," Maddie grew warm as she thought of him. "Are you here with your daughter?"

"My granddaughter," he nodded. "My daughter and her husband had to work. My granddaughter is home from University and she brought me today."

"Oh that's lovely," Maddie smiled.

"Doctor Madeline Forrester," The Superintendent called out and, with squared shoulders, Maddie rose to her feet. She made her way up the aisle to shake the Superintendent's hand, to collect her certificate and her gift and smile for the cameras.

There were many pictures taken of this moment in Maddie's life. It wasn't just the professional photographer there to document the moment. It wasn't just Harry with his cell phone. It was a myriad of other guests, people who had finally figured out what was happening, that they were accidental witnesses to this moment in history, this moment that would be talked about and discussed; this moment that Prince Harry was documenting on his phone with a hint of tears in his eyes and mile wide smile.

It was really quite something.
And then, as she passed James Bartholomew Norton on his way up to the front, it was over. Maddie returned to her seat to watch the rest of the group pass to the front and back to their seats. As soon as everyone was back to where they started, they all rose to sing the National Anthem.

"I'm sorry..." Mr. Norton spoke quietly to Maddie as he turned the program over and over in his hand. "I can't seem to find the words and..."

"Oh," Maddie moved his program from his hand and turned over the other sheet of paper he was holding. "There you go. Right there."

"Thank you so much dear."

"You're welcome."

And then, as her cheeks hurt from the smile on her face thinking of the look she knew was on Harry's, Maddie sang her new National Anthem; loud and proud.

Applause rang out and people began to move towards the light reception that followed. As Maddie glanced to Sampson who stood with eyes on her, she thought of the gentleman next to her.

"Sir?" She turned back to him. "Can I help you find your granddaughter? There's quite the crowd and..."

"You're afraid I would get lost?" He snickered. "Or fall down?" He laughed and shook his head. "That would be lovely. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Maddie smiled at Sampson and offered her arm to Mr. Norton. As the two of them stepped out into the mess of it all, people were beginning to find their guests, hugs and laughter surrounded them. Harry was the first to find them.

"Madeline," he oozed with pride as he stepped up to them. Maddie turned a bright smile to him. "I see that I've been replaced," he was quick with the charm when he wanted to be.

"Very funny," Maddie began her introductions but was interrupted by a young lady in her early twenties who approached them with the slightest bit of trepidation.

"Pappy?" She called out.

"Ah yes," Mr. Norton patted Maddie's arm. "There she is. You are relieved of your duties."

"It was a pleasure," she patted his hand in return.

"Amelia. Come meet my new friend." He waved her over to them. While Maddie was certain that Mr. Norton had not yet put it together who she and Harry were, Maddie was also certain that Amelia had. She seemed a bit nervous, a bit embarrassed and quite a bit shy as she smiled at Maddie and then Harry.

"I'm Madeline Forrester," Maddie made the first move, wanting to ease the oddity among them. Her hand stretched out. "I sat next to your grandfather during the ceremony."

"Nice to meet you," Amelia shook her hand. "Thank you for looking after him."
"Of course," Maddie smiled.

"We were just looking for you when this young man came to challenge me to a duel." All three of them laughed then, though none quite as loud as Harry.

"Pappy..." Amelia blushed slightly as she spoke to her grandfather, moving to his side and offering her arm. "This young man is...Prince Harry." Her voice was low.

"What?" His eyes scrunched up as he turned to look at Harry. "While I'll be...He's much taller than I thought."

"Yes," Amelia shook her head at the young couple. "I'm so sorry."

"No, no," Harry shook his head and stepped up, extending his hand. "It's good to meet you. I'm Harry and you are..."

"Jim Norton."

"Mr. Norton," Harry shook his hand; warm and firm. "It's great to meet you."

"Good to meet you too," he nodded his head. "You're here with this lovely young lady?"

"Yes sir," Harry nodded, offering a wink to Maddie. "We're going to be married in a little under two months."

"Well, well, well." He raised his eyebrows and let out a low whistle, leaning into speak to Harry as men do. "Well caught Your Highness."

"Thank you," Harry laughed as Amelia sank further into herself; disbelieving her grandfather's words even as he spoke them. "I couldn't agree with you more."

Maddie was quick to move the conversation away from she and Harry; quick to introduce Amelia to Harry and suggest that the four of them make their way to the refreshments. Mr. Norton thanked Maddie again for her assistance and released her to Harry, who was more than happy, beyond proud, to stand next to her as they followed along to the punch and cookies.

"I see you've made a new, lifelong friend," he joked; voice low, hand at her back.

"I can't help it," Maddie shrugged. "People like me."

"Yes," Harry agreed. "Yes they do."

And for some, crazy reason, Harry suddenly felt emotional; slightly choked up as he watched her. She was good at this. No. She was great at this. She had to have known, as he did, that they had been caught; people had recognized her. She had to have known that probably at that very moment, hazy cell phone pictures of her becoming a UK citizen were being posted to twitter and tumblr. She had to have known that they were being watched and that there would most likely be more people waiting for them when they exited than were there when they had entered.

But she seemed completely unfazed; not at all deterred. She kept her head high, her smile wide and she seemed so totally at ease.

Could it be? Could he really have found somebody who would flow seamlessly into the madness
that was his royal life? Could he really have found somebody who would take to the people as easily as he seemed to? Who would feel as 'at home' with them as he did?

He had always known Maddie was the best match for him. He had always known that she would do well in her future role, that she would have great success there. She had a great work ethic and a big heart. He had always known that she was above and beyond anything he had ever hoped for in a partner. And he had hoped she would transition well, with as few bumps as possible.

But as he watched her move through the crowd—with him but not solely reliant upon him—he knew.

He had absolutely struck gold. And he got to take her home with him?

The pride and adoration he had for her was overwhelming, made him speechless. So he swallowed the lump in his throat, kept his smile in place and followed along—a role he just knew he was going to need to grow accustomed to.

They only stayed for a short amount of time; enough for a cup of punch, a cookie, and a few humorous stories from Mr. Norton. Maddie and Harry were happy to pose for a picture with Mr. Norton and Amelia. They smiled and nodded and spoke to a few other people before they made their quiet, and gracious, exit.

Harry had been right. There were people waiting for them outside of the building; a handful of people and even a beat reporter. Hand in hand, Maddie and Harry walked to their car, offering smiles and waves as they slid in and sped away. In less than an hour, the world would know what their friends and families already did.

Dr. Madeline Forrester was a Brit.

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"I don't know why I can't stop yawning," Maddie spoke into the back her hand as they drove to Leo's club later that night.

"You've had quite a day, love," Harry's fingers ran delicately down her arm as he watched her.

He was right. It had been quite a day. While en route to Clarence immediately following the ceremony, Maddie had phoned her mother, sharing a laugh over the fact that she had just left the US behind. They verified her upcoming travel plans and sighed over the fact that they would be seeing each other soon.

Lunch with Harry's family, soon to be hers, was wonderful; as it usually was. Camilla and Charles were gracious hosts. Will and Kate were quick with the congratulations. Dinner was tasty and dessert, a wide assortment of cakes, was topped off with Maddie's favorite champagne. Charles had made a toast that was slightly sentimental, hinting of the ones to come with the wedding that was just on the horizon. It had been a day full of delight and excitement. And now they were on their way out.

"I guess you're right," Maddie sighed, allowing her eyes to close for just a moment.

"Are you going to make it?" His fingers found her hand, pulling it into his grasp. "You want me to call it off?" He raised his eyebrows. "I can call Bishop and have him send everyone home. You and I can go to bed early."
"Hmm..." She smiled, eyes looking him over. "That's tempting. But...we haven't seen everyone in a while. It might be nice to have a drink or two."

"Okay. You say the word and we're out. Okay?"

"Okay." Maddie nodded, eyes shifting outside as they neared Leo's restaurant. "It was very sweet of Bishop to invite Ella."

"Well Bishop is a sweet guy. He doesn't hate her, you know."

"I know," Maddie nodded; muffling a yawn as she shook her head. "Wow...what was that?" She laughed.

"Your body telling you to go home with me," he joked; his eyes watching her in that soft way that spoke of smitten and beguiled.

"Maybe," she caught him watching her and blushed slightly. "But we should do this first."

"Fine," he sighed deeply, dramatically as the car pulled to a stop. "As you wish."

The club was alive with excitement; people laughing and enjoying each other; groups playing darts and billiards, people dancing. The atmosphere was exactly what Maddie needed to pull her from her one foot into slumber state of being. By the time they made it through restaurant to the private room in the back, Maddie's tired eyes were perked. The moment they stepped into the room, their friends erupted with a smattering of applause, hoots and hollers; all rising to hug the two of them. Maddie watched as Harry hugged Ella, pressing a kiss to her cheek. She watched as Bishop smiled sweetly as she moved past him to Maddie. She hugged her best friend who was breathing relief as she moved back to her seat next to Penelope; who appeared to have taken Ella under her wing for the night. Something for which Maddie would be eternally grateful. Maddie and Harry were drawn further into the room as everyone settled. And then, completely within his character, Bishop rose to offer a toast.

"First," he grinned. "I feel compelled to thank the United States of America." Maddie couldn't help the giggle that pushed through her lips. "I would like to offer a great big, proper, British cheers to the US for giving up what I consider to be their most valuable asset..." He winked to Maddie as the snickers ran through the group.

"Thank you Bishop," she grinned.

"And...without really much of a fight." Maddie's head tossed back with laughter.

"Listen. I know that this isn't The Big Day. I know you have much bigger days coming ahead of you..." He grew soft for a moment. "But...on behalf of this moderately twisted group of individuals Harry lowers himself to call his friends...who are so presumptive as to call themselves your friends..." Maddie's cheeks grew warm at his sentiments. "We welcome you to the United Kingdom, to England, to our motley little family. Congratulations love and...Good Luck." He shifted his eyes to the group and lifted his glass even higher. "To Maddie!"

"To Maddie!" The group, Harry included, lifted their glasses and drank to her.

"And..." Bishop grew cheeky. "Harry...we sent you out on behalf of the Queen, to find us a lass
worthy of your heart..."

"Here we go," Harry groaned with a roll of his eyes.

"And you brought us back a real gem. We couldn't be more pleased with your efforts in the name of the crown." Bishop nodded as laughter reverberated around the room. "To Harry, The Conqueror."

"To Harry The Conqueror!" Maddie joined in on the moment, on the laughter; raising her glass to Harry before tipping it to her lips.

And the revelry began.

Harry was quick to order Maddie that bottle of champagne he promised, even quicker to pop the cork and pour her a glass; he just might be taking home a drunk Brit that night.

It was about an hour in when Ella had to leave. There was a flu bug going around the hospital, they were short staffed, and she was on call. She smiled her regrets to Maddie as they held onto each other. She blinked back tears as Harry hugged her close and told her goodnight. And then, with a wave to the chorus of good-byes, she slipped out.

It was two hours in when a new face joined the group. Out of the corner of her eye, Maddie caught it. She was small, petite; beautiful. She seemed a bit shy as she stepped up to the door to the room, offering a bit of a wave. Maddie's eyes turned inside and watched as Bishop rose from his chair and moved to greet her. Kissing her cheeks, he took her hand and pulled her into the room, into the group. Maddie felt her muscles tense, even though she desperately did not want them too.

"Is that her?" Maddie whispered to Harry.

"Is that who?" Harry, still half way in a conversation with Leo and Sean, raised his eyebrows and glanced around.

"The brunette Bishop took home."

"Ah." He breathed, his eyes finding the two of them quickly. "No. That's not her."

"That's...I'm sorry. That's a different brunette than the..." Maddie shook her head. No, she told herself. You are not going to get drawn into this. This is none of your business.

"That is a different brunette," Harry nodded, reaching for his drink as Bishop and his friend stepped up to the seats across the table from them. "Hi." Harry's smile widened as he looked to the two of them.

"Hi," Bishop grinned and turned towards the new addition. "This is my very best friend in the world, Harry and his bride to be, Maddie. Guys, this is Savannah."

"Nice to meet you Savannah," Harry stretched his hand across the table; rising from his seat as he did.

"Oh! You too," she smiled sweetly. "And please. Call me Savy."
"Savy?" Maddie's voice perked as she extended her hand to the woman.

"Yes," she shook Maddie's hand; firm. "Please. It's nice to meet you."

"You too," Maddie moved a smile to her lips as Savy turned to Bishop.

"Would you be able to point me to the loo?"

"Of course," he nodded and turned to point to the hallway.

"Thank you," she turned her smile to the group. "If you'll excuse me. I'll just be a moment." And then, as she rose to her feet, Harry and Bishop rose to theirs.

"I'm going to the bar for another drink," Bishop spoke to her as she moved away. "Would you like me to order you something?"

"Yes, please." She thought for a moment. "A Fuzzy Nipple."

"Coming right up," Bishop responded and then, the two of them stepped away from the table; Harry returning to his seat with a smirk on his face—he knew just what was coming.

"Savy." Maddie repeated, pulling her glass to her lips for a sip. "This is the first time you've met Savy?"

"It is," Harry nodded.

"Where did he meet her?"

"I don't know," he shook his head, grin spreading. "I bet he'll tell you if you ask."

"Sure," Maddie sighed and sat her drink back on the table. "A Fuzzy Nipple?"

"Are we really going to do this?" Harry chuckled.

"It's just...what is that? A drink or a medical condition?"

"Madeline..." He reached for her hand, pulling it into both of his.

"You're right," she sighed, embarrassed at herself. "I just..."

"They broke up."

"I know."

"To be completely accurate, she broke up with him."

"I know."

"She wanted this. If she hadn't wanted this, Bishop would be buying her a Fuzzy Nipple now instead of..."

"Ella would never drink a fuzzy nipple," Maddie cut in, catching the catty in her voice
immediately. "Oh God. What am I doing?"

"I don't know," Harry laughed, moving his arm around the back of her chair. "But you should relax. You know...he didn't bring her around when Ella was here. He's a gentleman. He waited until she left. He's not throwing it in her face."

"That's true. Why do I feel like he's throwing it in mine?"

"Ha! I don't know. But it's a good thing you have a consolation prize to take you home."

"I sound like a jealous crazy person, don't I?"

"You kind of do," he nodded, kissing her hand. He was right. Even in his good-natured ribbing, he was right.

"Okay," Maddie took a deep breath and let it out. "I'm done. I'll be done." She smiled at Harry then. "I'm done."

"Okay," he laughed. "Can I order you another bottle of champagne?"

"Will you promise to take advantage of me later on tonight?"

"Absolutely."

"Then yes please."

"Done." He met her eyes, watched as she did just as she had said she would; let it go. "Come here." He tugged her to him then, bringing his lips home to hers.

And the party continued. Kiki came over to sit with Maddie, going back and forth about wedding plans; what Maddie still had left to do, what Kiki wished she would have done. It had been a while since the two had sat down together and Maddie was enjoying catching up. And when Bishop and Savy returned, Maddie tried her best to move past it, tried her best not to think of her best friend, and just let it go. It was her night of jubilee, after all. Nothing else should be bringing her down.

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"Your Royal Highness," a slightly tipsy Bishop moved between Harry and Maddie's chairs; crouching down to look between the two of them, his eyes settling on Maddie. Harry was already snickering. It was later, they had all been over-served, and Bishop had just left Savy talking to Anna in order to break into Harry and Maddie and Sean's discussion about honeymoon locales.

"I'm not a Royal anything," Maddie shook her head and pointed to Harry who grinned into his beer bottle. "He must be talking to you."

"Harry..." Bishop's head swung around to look at his best friend. "Would you allow me to borrow your lovely bride for a quick 'round the dance floor?"

"Borrow?" Maddie laughed, eyes meeting Harry's. "Go ahead Wales, lend me to Bishop. Let's see how this goes."

"Ha," Harry nodded back to her. "You're going to have to ask her, but you have my blessing."
"Madeline?" Bishop held out his hand. It surprised Maddie a bit that when his eyes looked up into hers, they seemed steadier, more serious than she had expected.

"Sure," she nodded, curious. "Why not." Setting her glass on the table, she let Bishop lead her from her chair, her hand lingering on Harry's shoulder as she passed.

"Hurry back," he caught her fingers and delivered a kiss before she stepped completely out of his reach.

Maddie followed behind Bishop and, when he stopped, she moved into his arms; one moved around her waist, the other took her hand at his shoulder. And they began to sway.

"Do me a favor?" Bishop's breath was warm against her ear as he moved them around the dance floor slowly.

"What's that?" She kept the smile to her face.

"Stop with the glares to Savannah?"

"What?" Maddie's head turned to look at him, throwing a hiccup into their movement. "I'm not."

"You are."

"I..." Maddie tried to pull up the last hour or so, tried to check herself. "I didn't mean to."

"I imagined that was the case," he shrugged, tugging her back into the dance. He wasn't mad, simply issuing a request. "I would appreciate you stopping all the same."

"I'm sorry." She meant it; felt embarrassed, ashamed. That wasn't her, to make somebody not feel welcome.

"I know you don't like her."

"It's not that I don't like her. I don't know her. I just..."

"You like Ella more."

"I really do." Maddie couldn't help her honesty.

"So do I." He whispered and Maddie felt her heart squeeze in her chest. Without missing a beat as they moved, he took a deep, shaky breath. "I loved Ella. I love Ella. You think I don't love Ella? I...God Maddie, I would do anything for her. Anything. The first time we tried this, she left me. She dated Matt who, let's be honest, couldn't hold a conversation for his life. Dull. Dull. Dull. And when you two came back from that earthquake and she called me..." Bishop's hands tightened around Maddie, needing to hold somebody, anybody, closer to him as he spoke of this heartache. "Tell me, Madeline. You love Harry?"

"What?" She laughed; slightly thrown by the change in conversation. "Of course."

"Would do anything for him, no?"

"I..."
"You just signed away your country, your citizenship. In two months you're signing away your privacy, a good chunk of your life, your holidays..." Bishop waved his hand to indicate the infinite amount of etcetera's he could add.

"Yes." Maddie nodded with a slight lump in her throat. "Yes. I love him."

"Nothing you wouldn't do to make him happy?"

"Nothing I can think of."

"Walk through hell?"

"I suppose I would but..."

"Tell me this," he cut her off. "How many times would it take of Harry showing you to the door, telling you to leave, forcing you out, before you actually went?"

Maddie stopped cold on the dance floor.

He was right.

Her arms tightened around him this time, her eyes filled with water and her heart sank in her chest.

"I'm..." She opened her mouth to apologize.

"You like Ella better than Savy?" He continued with a hoarse voice. "I do too. But she doesn't want me."

"Bishop, she..." Maddie wanted to make it all go away for him.

"I know," he shook his head. "I know all of the things you're about to tell me; all of the things she told you. She told me them too. And you know what? I want her to get better. I want her to feel better and be better and I want her to know in her gut that she deserves..." He ran off, needing a moment to collect himself. After a few deep breaths, Maddie could feel him ease a bit under her hands, his own growing softer with his hold on her. Pressing the side of his face to hers, he sighed. "I want everything for her. I really do. But right now, she doesn't want me. She's made it very clear that she does not want me." He shrugged; a bit resigned, a bit moving on. "And Savy does."

"I'm so...I don't know what I was thinking," she pulled back to meet his eyes, wanting him to see the authenticity there, the love she had for him. She pulled his face between her hands. "I'm so sorry Bishop."

"Don't be sorry," he shook his head and pulled her hands from him, back into the dance. "Just be my friend."

"Okay," she nodded, leaning into his shoulder.

"You know..." Bishop continued. "If the situations were reversed and Harry pushed you from his life...after I finished kicking his ass for making the biggest mistake of his life..." They both grinned at that. "I wouldn't begrudge you happiness with somebody else. Even if it was just for a night or two."
"That's very sweet of you Bishop," Maddie met his eyes for a moment of seriousness and then, with a shrug and a smirk, Bishop moved them past it.

"Of course then I would hit on you like there was no tomorrow." As Maddie tossed her head back in laughter, she made a resolution.

As soon as she was done dancing with Bishop, she was buying Savy a fuzzy nipple; maybe even one for herself.

"You know I love you Bishop."

"I do," he nodded. "But who doesn't?"

"I am so..." Maddie stretched out a yawn as she dropped to their bed with a satisfied oomph. "Tired...and a little drunk."

"Just close your eyes love," Harry chuckled at her as he pulled at his tie. "You'll be asleep in seconds."

"I can't go to sleep," she shook her head with a giggle. "You were going to welcome me to the country...if you know what I mean."

"Ha!" He laughed, tossing his shirt to the floor. "That was two bottles of champagne and two..."

"Three!" She held up her fingers with another giggle.

"Three fuzzy nipples ago." He moved onto the bed then; dress pants, white undershirt, and an adoring smile. "I don't know if you would even be able to enjoy my...welcome committee."

"There's a whole committee?" She lifted her eyebrows as he laid next to her; his head on her shoulder, face nuzzled into her neck as his arm wrapped around her waist.

"There is," he nodded, pressing a kiss to her collar bone. "But they can stop by another time..."

"No..." Maddie shook her head, a bit of an over-exaggerated pout on her lips.

"No?" He laughed at her. "It's not now or never, Madeline. We'll have time and..."

"But I had an outfit and everything," she sighed in defeat.

"I'm sorry," he pulled away slightly; moving to rest on his elbow, looking down at her. "Did you just say you had an outfit?"

"I did," she grinned wickedly, her hand reaching out to run along his chest. "I do. I have an outfit. It's small and slinky and it makes my boobs push up and it skims my ass and..."

"Why are you describing it woman?!" He nudged her with his arm. "Go. Go get it now. Let's put that thing on and take it off again."

"No way," she shook her head. "You cancelled the committee, I cancel the outfit."
"Oh yeah?" He sat up then. "You think I can't find it in here..." He moved to leave the bed, but Maddie was quicker than he thought and she caught his arm in both her hands.

"Stop!" She yelled, pulling him back to her as she laughed. "Don't do it."

"Go get it." He commanded; twinkle in his eye.

"No way." She defied; stubbornness in hers.

"I'll find it myself Madeline." He warned.

"Stay in bed with me!" She wrapped her arms all the way around him; holding him snug. Laughter was all around them as he looked down into her eyes.

"Make me." He challenged.

And she did. With warm, soft lips; with strong, firm arms; and a breathy sigh, she kept him right there with her. The outfit was quickly forgotten, as were all of the reasons Harry thought she might just need, and want, to pass out.

Sex between them was always something to be revered. Sometimes it was the hot, sweaty, fuck me variety that left them both spent, and sore. Sometimes it was the slow, sensuous, love oozing variety that left them both speechless and teary.

And sometimes...sometimes...it was just fun; giggles and laughter and the slight bit of hilarious fumbling. Maddie would trade not one of those moments for anything. Because sex between them was always sex between them. And they, together, were so much more than they, separate.

It had been a long day; full of first steps and new beginnings—full of meaning. As the two of them moved into the last few weeks before their wedding, their union could not have been more solid. Maddie had come home to him; in more ways than one. She had left behind so much for him, that it humbled him to his knees. And Harry had opened up to her his entire life, his entire world; watching with pride as she walked freely in it.

And now, all they had left was to stand before their families, their friends, and the television viewing audience and take those vows that would cement them together.
Chapter 99

There were three weeks left before the wedding when Maddie's family began to arrive. First it was Kyle and Amy. They had the most time off from work and Kyle had things he wanted to do, sites he wanted to see that he wanted to include Maddie in. So, they arranged their vacation to extend before the wedding.

The day they arrived, Maddie picked them up at the airport with a mile wide grin on her face and a lump in her throat. She hadn't expected to be nearly as emotional as she was when she saw them and she knew...this didn't speak well for the expected reaction to the rest of them. They drove to the place that the Middletons were lending them for their stay and met with Kate's father, Michael. He was warm and friendly and, after pointing out the nuances of the place, he handed over a few sets of keys. He kissed Maddie on the cheek and wished her luck and left her with her family.

They had a few days before the others began to arrive and they made great use of the time. While Harry went to work, finishing up a few military responsibilities, a few royal duties, Maddie explored around with Kyle and Amy. They went on an Architectural Tour of London. They went hiking in Wales. They visited the coast in Sussex and Amy, drunk on the local brews, giggled for under an hour about Maddie being the "Duchess of THIS."

Next it was Hannah along with Gary and Jenna. They flew out two weeks before the big day and Jenna couldn't give over how much Hannah seemed like a seasoned world-traveler. She knew details of the trip, various travel tips. It was adorable how on top of things she was. Of course all if it fell to the floor when Mother was reunited with Daughter. At least they made it to the car before the tears came; followed by an immense laughter.

It was a celebratory time after all.

Though Maddie and Harry had insisted Hannah stay with them at Kensington, she had been adamant about staying at the home they were so graciously loaned during their stay. She wanted to give them space, wanted to have her own space. Being as this was not her first trip to London, she wanted to have free time to roam. Though Maddie reminded her she had obligations, that didn't stop her from scheduling her own events; a shopping trip with Amy and Jenna, lunch with Carole Middleton to thank her for her hospitality and to likely gather some Mother-In-Law information about the big day. Maddie spent much time at the large home with her family; reminiscing, laughing, allowing a few tears. She and Harry had them all over for dinner at Kensington.

They asked about the wedding, they asked about the new place, they asked about the kidnapping attempt. Maddie noticed the way Harry hardened when she recounted the incident for them. She watched as Kyle began to pace, watched as Jenna bit at her nails. She even watched as her mom tried to deep-breathe it away, moving out of the room to process it; Harry right behind her.

Nobody understood the fear of losing Maddie like he did.

When they came back they were both smiling. Maddie learned later that Hannah had eased up only when Harry assured her that Arthur would have very easily, and with no regret, put a bullet in the man's head before he put his hands on Maddie again.

Though Maddie had shuddered at the image, she knew he was right. And she knew that after that particular hallway conference, Hannah broke all kinds of rules the next time she saw Arthur;
hugging him close and offering to cook him dinner. Though he politely declined, Maddie knew that the gratitude wasn't over for her mother.

At one week out, Maddie's family had all descended upon London; leading the way for an onslaught of media and royal watchers.

"You know..." Dena lowered her voice as Derek took their children up to the rooms they would be staying in. "The media is estimating that there will be more people watching this one than his brother's."

"Oh?" Maddie smiled; humored.

"It's true," Jenna jumped in. "By like...fifty percent."

"That's insane!" Dena's eyes were wide. "Can you even imagine that many people watching while you..." Meeting Maddie's smile, she stopped. "Sorry."

"No, no," Maddie shook her head, shrugging. "I mean. I'm not nervous enough as it is. Let's talk about all the crazies that are going to get up at four in the morning to watch this."

"Oh!" Jenna perked up, her hands clapping rapidly in front of her. "I brought you something."

"Oh?" Maddie shifted from nervous as Jenna moved to her luggage, ruffling through before she pulled out what appeared to be a red t-shirt. With a wide smile, she handed it over to Maddie.

"Let me see..." Holding it by the shoulders, Maddie let the t-shirt unfold. She started to laugh. "Keep Calm and Marry Harry? Are you kidding me with this?" As the rest of the room fell into laughter, Maddie turned the shirt around so they could all see it.

"Jenna!" Dena smacked her arm.

"Listen..." Jenna began her defense. "I know it's..."

"Weird?" Dena laughed.

"No, no," Jenna shook her head. "Listen. This week is going to be just...nuts..."

"That's true," Dena nodded. "And I'm just speaking of the wedding part. Forget the royalty spin on things."

"Exactly," Jenna pointed. "And I just thought...you know...it's kind of cute. You can look at it and remember to be calm and remember the whole point of all of the craziness..."

"Marrying Harry..." Maddie's smile turned to mush. "That's actually pretty sweet. Just...Okay. Be honest. How long have you had this? Have you had it since Will and Kate's wedding when they printed them?"

"What? No!" Jenna laughed. "I bought it on ebay like a month ago. I thought it would be funny. I had no idea you would all be so uptight and..." She reached for the shirt. "I'll take it."

"No!" Maddie pulled it out of her reach. "This is my shirt. I'm the one marrying Harry." Maddie heard her own words and suddenly felt choked up; tears springing to her eyes. She looked up at the two women. "I'm marrying Harry...This weekend. I'm marrying Harry this weekend."
"You are," Jenna grinned warmly.

"Okay," Maddie took a deep breath, steadying her emotions. "Okay. I can't do this right now. We need to get you settled and get ready for the party tonight." She wiped at her eyes. As the entire family was now in town, they were hosting an informal party at the house. All of Maddie's family would be there along with Harry and Maddie. Maddie took a breath and pulled off her cropped jacket. Shedding her blouse, she pulled her new t-shirt over her camisole and pulled her jacket back on. "There. How's that?"

"Actually...that looks pretty good." Dena looked her over and Maddie laughed. "I'm sure Harry will love it."

"Ha!" Maddie clapped her hands together. "I guess we're going to find out. Now come on. I want to show you around the place before the caterers get here."

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"Six days!" Maddie called out to Harry as she moved around their room, tossing items onto the bed to be packed for her trip.

"Six days," he leaned back against a dresser; arms crossed, lips pulled up in a grin as he watched her move.

"And tonight..." She sighed happily. "I'm going to Paris."

"Yes."

"With my girls."

"Yes." He chuckled; sensing correctly that the champagne had already been flowing.

"And in six days..." She moved to him then, her hands resting on his crossed arms as she tipped up to kiss him. "I'm marrying the man of my dreams."

"Oh-kay," he laughed with a shake of his head. "When are you leaving?"

"In about thirty minutes," she moved back to her packing. "I'm going to pick up Ella first and then we're heading to pick up mom, Jenna, Dena and Amy. Anna, Penelope, Kiki, Bea, Zara, and Eugenie are meeting us at the airport where we are taking Bishop's Father's plane to Paris...And we're picking up Khenda when we get there."

"Kate's not going?"

"No," Maddie frowned. "She hasn't been feeling well and she figured I would have a better chance at incognito without her. We'll go out after the baby is born; tie one on."

"Sure," Harry nodded, pushing away from the desk with a serious expression on his face. "Listen. If you get into any trouble..."

"Trouble?" She looked up from her bag. "It's a Hen Night. What kind of trouble are we talking?"

"I don't know," he shrugged with a small smile. "Anything. If you get arrested, caught with
drugs...if you flash somebody and the paps get a shot..."

"Flash somebody?" Maddie laughed out loud. "I don't think we need to worry about that. Or the drugs for that matter. Seriously, what kind of party do you think Ella's hosting?"

"I'm not judging," he held up his hands, palm out. "All I am saying is...if you get into any trouble while you're out tonight, any trouble at all, call my father."

"Your father?" Maddie zipped up her bag and sat down on the bed. "If I get so drunk that I flash somebody and a pap ends up with a picture, you want me to...at three o'clock in the morning...call your father, The Prince of Wales."

"Yes."

"You can't be serious."

"I am one hundred percent serious," he moved to stand in front of her then. "Listen to me Maddie. I know you're going to have a crazy night. I want you to have a crazy night—the kind of fun that's going to make you blush tomorrow."

"Oh?" She cocked her head to the side, finding this equal opportunity debauchery side of him fascinating.

"Do it up, love. But. If anything happens, anything. You call my father. He'll know how to help you. And...he knows we're both headed out tonight so I'm sure he's sitting at the ready all night anyway." Harry was heading out with the men later that evening for his own party.

"Nice," she reached out to him then, looping her fingers into his pockets and pulling him towards her with a bit of a wicked smile on her face. "I suppose I can do that."

"Promise?" He waited for answer before he would crack.

"I promise," she sighed, her hands moving around to run over his ass. "I promise if I get into any trouble with the police, drugs, photos..."

"Hookers," Harry offered.

"Hookers," she giggled. "I promise if I get into any trouble, I will call your father."

"Okay," he nodded, his hands finally moving to her, running up her neck to tilt her face to him. His lips moved to hers feeling slightly territorial, slightly protective. "And don't lose your Protection Officers."

"I won't," Maddie shook her head, pulling him back to her for another kiss.

"Speaking of—who drew the short straw for this trip?" He was curious.

"Sampson and Williams," Maddie smiled against his cheek. "I'm sure they're both going to love the wild lady's night Ella has planned."

"Oh!" Harry clapped his hands together and moved away from her. "Before I forget..." He went to the top drawer and pulled out an envelope; moving to put it in her overnight bag.
"What's that?" She watched as he moved.

"Euros," calm and casual as he zipped her bag closed. "Small bills."

"A whole envelope of them?" Her forehead knotted. "Harry..."

"Madeline..."

"Do you know what we're doing tonight?" She rose to her feet, stalking closer to him.

"I do," he nodded; arms opening to her as she moved into him. "I know some."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"No way." He shook his head and kissed the tip of her upturned nose. "Just...throw it all out there. Have a great time. And come home to me in one piece."

"You got it."

"And if you run into any problems..."

"I know. I know." She rolled her eyes; hands slipping around him to meet his belt buckle; dimples flashing in her cheeks. "Now...How do you feel about a little pre-party action?"

As Harry watched Maddie slip into the car that afternoon, slightly rumpled from their go at it, he couldn't help but smirk. He was dying to be there when her night unfolded; wishing he could see the look on her face when she realized what the ladies had planned for her. With a chuckle and a shake of his head, he watched as she drove out of sight and turned back towards the house. He still had hours before he needed to be anywhere.

The truth was, Harry knew exactly what was lined up for Maddie that night. It had been a little over a month earlier when Ella had called him up, asking to meet him to speak about Maddie's Hen Party. Curious, he agreed; meeting her one evening for a drink.

"Thank you for meeting me," Ella seemed somewhat businesslike as they settled into a booth.

"Of course," he smiled and ordered them both drinks from the waitress.

"So..." Ella leaned forward. "Can I talk to you about something?"

"Shoot," Harry nodded.

"You know I'm throwing Maddie's Hen Party."

"I do," Harry's smile morphed into a bit of a smirk. With every wedding-related event they checked off their list, he was one step closer to just being married to her. "You need my help with that?"

"Ha! No." Ella laughed; adjusting in her seat. "This is actually really awkward for me to ask."

"Okay..." He chuckled at how uncomfortable she seemed. "Just ask."
"Hmmm..." She smiled and let out a big breath. "I want to get her a stripper."

"Oh." His eyes flickered.

"If she were marrying anyone else, I would just hire one, get a ton of bills and nobody would be the wiser. I certainly wouldn't be going to her future husband..." She waved her hand with a laugh. Harry stayed silent, waiting for her to finish. "But. She's marrying you. And I really don't want to do anything that will get her into trouble, you know? I don't want her...or you...to catch flack for any of this so..." She let off and huffed out a breath.

"I'm sorry," he leaned in closer and lowered his voice. "Are you asking me if you can hire a stripper for Maddie?"

"No," she shook her head. "I'm asking you how. Or...who I should go through..."

"Because you think I've hired a lot of male strippers in my life," he was messing with her and, though it annoyed her a bit, she was also thankful for it; thankful things weren't too altered between the two of them.

"I think you've hired more than your fair share," she volleyed back, her own smirk in place.

"Nice."

"Come on. You know I just don't want somebody to call the press and tell them that the future Duchess was given a lap dance by a man named Hot Chocolate Charlie."

"Hot Chocolate Charlie," Harry's eyes narrowed as he smiled into his beer. Taking a long pull, he sat the bottle onto the table and sighed. "Talk to Kiki. She'll be able to...Jesus, I can't believe I'm helping you find a...Talk to Kiki. We've hired...people...before and she'll know how to find somebody who can be...discreet."

"Thank you!" Ella clapped her hands together. "You're the best."

"I swear to God, Ella, if I hear about Hot Chocolate Charlie coming anywhere near..."

"Nanananananana!" Ella pressed her hands to her ears and mumbled; blocking him out until his lips stopped moving. And then she slowly moved her hands and smiled. "I did not come to you for permission or warnings or...any of that territorial bullshit you do."

"I..."

"No!" She waved her hand. "I only came to you because I didn't want to cause any problems with the press. That's it. Keeping my girl out of trouble."

"Fine."

"I don't want any other thoughts or opinions on the matter."

"Fine." Harry shrugged; surrendering.

"As if you won't be watching women disrobe..." Ella shook her head as she took a sip from her drink.
"I won't," his eyes flashed wide.

"I know better than that." She laughed. "You forget I know Bishop."

"Yeah," Harry laughed along with her for a moment as both of their minds drifted to him.

"How is he by the way?" Her fingers fidgeted with her glass as she suddenly shifted into shy and nervous. Harry's laughter quickly faded; leaving only a hint of a smile at his lips. He looked down at his bottle, debating his response. His eyes swung up to meet hers.

"He's...He's okay."

"Yeah?" Her voice tipped up; hopeful.

"Yeah. Listen...I don't like to get involved..."

"I'm sorry," Ella looked down; embarrassed. "I should never have..."

"But," Harry's hand reached across the table to halt her. "But. Bishop has sent Maddie back to me more than once and..." He took a deep breath. "What's going on Ella?"

"I miss him," her voice came out shaky; with tears. "Every day, I miss him." Harry tried to hide his surprise at her confession, at the emotions that came with it.

"Tell him." It seemed obvious to him; glaringly so. "Ella...you have to tell him..."

"I can't," she shook her head, wiping at her eyes.

"Why not?" Harry's eyebrows shot up. "He misses you. Every day."

"It's hard to tell with all the pictures of..."

"No, no." Harry waved his finger in her sudden defensiveness. "No. That's not fair. Tell him you miss him or..."

"I know," she sighed. "I'm sorry. You're right."

"Ella..." Harry hated to see the both of them in such pain for the other, especially when, in his eyes, the answer was simple.

"I know," she nodded; sniffing and taking a breath. "I know." Shaking her head, she pulled a smile to her face. "Anyway. Thank you for your help with the stripper."

"Ha!" Harry laughed. "No problem. Show her a good time."

"I will."

"Take very good care of her."

"I always do."

"I know," he agreed; she always had. "You're a good friend, Ella."
"Not so bad yourself," she met his eyes.

The Hen Party was an unmitigated success. An entire night of raucous debauchery and not one photo was taken by anybody but Ella. Even the Protection Officers were pleasantly surprised by how smooth the night had gone; not one single incident and an entire group of women who were agreeable and not trying to lose them.

There were drinks. Good Lord, there were drinks. Maddie had started the night collecting the corks from every champagne bottle opened but, when her clutch was struggling to close and her pockets were bulging, she gave up on the count.

There was a cake. A beautiful creation that rivaled some priceless artwork Maddie had seen—with a great big, giant phallus protruding offensively up from the middle.

"Oh my." Maddie's eyes flashed wide when it was presented to her not long after they all arrived in Paris and made home in their top floor penthouse apartment they had rented for the night.

"Yeah..." Ella sighed. "I did not know at the time that your mother was going to come along. Otherwise..."

"Oh my." Hannah giggled, slightly tipsy, as she caught eye of the cake. "That's..."

"Big." Jenna offered.

"Is it?" Amy's eyes narrowed. "It doesn't seem that big to me..." She trailed off as the eyes in the room swung around to her.

"Well look who's the lucky lady..." Penelope spoke through the side of her mouth as the rest of the room lit up in laughter; Amy blushing profusely

"I didn't mean..."

"Riiigght." Zara giggled.

"Hold on." Hannah pointed to the chocolate shavings near the base of the protrusion. "Are these supposed to be...pubes?"

And now the room was rolling.

"Mother, please don't say that again," Maddie shook her head, her cheeks flushed.

"I'm sorry but..." Hannah shrugged. "Shouldn't they be...red or something?"

"Oh my God." Maddie hid behind her fingers as the room roared around her.

"I think it's just supposed to be somebody's penis," Ella explained. "Not necessarily Harry's penis."

"Fair enough," Hannah shrugged again; accepting that answer.
"Plus..." Kiki spoke up. "I'm pretty sure Harry's not circumcised. Maddie? Can you confirm that for us?"

"No no." Eugenie held up her hand; face twisted as the others fell over themselves in laughter. "Can we please stop talking about Harry's...penis."

"I think I'm going to die." Maddie groaned.

"Don't die yet," Khenda wiped at the tears in her eyes. "The party is waaay to young. And you are waaaay too sober."

"I think I need a drink," Maddie laughed as her mother hugged her close and kissed the side of her head.

"I'm on it!" Dena called out as she returned to the room, champagne in hand.

And the party continued.

There were favors. Maddie had no idea that so many things came in the shape of a penis; suckers, confetti, hats, shot glasses.

"I don't understand," Maddie studied the penis champagne flute in her hand as they listened to music and got ready for a night out. "Is it really necessary for everything to be in the shape of a penis?"

"Ha. Maddie needs more champagne!" Ella called out into the apartment. In seconds, Bea was around the corner with a bottle; remedy.

They ate, they drank, they presented Maddie with the obligatory ridiculous, raunchy, and unbelievably sexy lingerie. As the champagne flowed, Maddie grew completely at ease with the night; giggly and happy and ready for whatever the night brought to them.

And, of course, there were strippers.

"Women strippers?" Anna seemed only slightly confused as she looked up from her spot on the couch next to Dena.

"They aren't here for a show..." Ella grinned as three beautiful women followed her into the room. "They are here to teach."

"Okay ladies," one of the women smiled at the group. "Everyone find a chair. Tonight...we're teaching you how to give a lap dance."

Laughter, squeals and straight up cheering could be heard throughout as the women scattered, pulling chairs from other rooms and getting ready for an education.

"Now." The same woman spoke. "Which one of you lovely ladies is the bride to be?"

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"Okay." Amy sighed as she slumped onto the couch along with Kiki, Zara, and Ella; all with wide smiles and drunken giggles. "That was a workout."
"I know!" Maddie exclaimed, adjusting the ridiculous tiara she had on her head; part of her designated get up.

"You were amazing," Ella winked at her best friend. "A natural."

"Thanks!" Maddie laughed with a role of her eyes.

"Tell me...have you done this before?"

"Ha!" Maddie clapped her hands together, falling back in her chair. "Never."

"Well..." Khenda sighed as she returned to the room with more champagne. "I'm sure His Highness will appreciate the efforts." Leaning to kiss Maddie's cheek, the others let out catcalls.

And the night of debauchery continued.

They went out on the town; dancing and drinking and, when Maddie spotted a Stag Party at the same club, they bought the men a round of drinks and danced a few songs before Maddie over-applied Khenda's bright red lipstick and added her kiss to the collection he had going on his white t-shirt.

"Wait..." He did a double take as she pulled away from him. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"No," Maddie shook her head with a giggle as Zara linked her arm in hers and pulled her away. "Congratulations!"

"You too!" He called after her, the sense of déjà vu setting over him—positive he recognized her face.

They took a group photo in front of the Eiffel Tower. They danced across the lawn. They drank shot after shot and then, finally, they went back to their apartment.

Where they were greeted by a group of four men; two police officers, a doctor and...

"I'm sorry. Are you in the RAF?" Maddie giggled as she looked them over. "Your hat is just...familiar."

"I'm so confused right now," Jenna shook her head with a laugh.

And then the music started.

And the girls began to scream.

And clothes began to drop.

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"Okay..." Maddie sighed, dropping to the oversized chair with a satisfied, exhausted smile. "The mattresses were a genius idea." She nodded to her best friend as everyone began to settle. Ella had, in great foresight, ordered mattresses and bedding to be delivered to the apartment and, as they spoke, the massive living room was peppered with these amazingly comfortable sleep areas. They had all decided to stay together, allowing Hannah and the Protection Officers to take the actual bedrooms. As they all came down from their night, they were slipping into pajamas,
washing faces, finding bottles of water; hoping to curb off a hangover.

"I'm happy you approve," Ella smiled across the space to Maddie. "Did you have a good night?"

"You have no idea." And she really didn't. Never in her life had Maddie felt so...content. Her night out had been amazing and now, she looked forward to nothing more than going home to Harry.

"Is there anything else you want to do?" Amy grinned mischievously. "We can go out, find you one last fling..."

"Ha!" Maddie clapped her hands together as everyone began to relax, to settle; as sleep crept closer. "No, no. Harry is my last fling. I just get to keep him...forever."

"Awww..." Chorused throughout; amidst wide smiles and few eye rolls.

"Can you believe you're getting married in...like five days?" Jenna asked.

"To...Harry..." Eugenie grinned.

"Hmmm..." Maddie took a deep breath and let it out. "I...actually...I really can. I just. It's funny how we got here..." Her eyes flittered around the room, landing on Khenda who was watching with a warm, content look on her face. "Did you know?" Maddie nodded in her direction.

"About?"

"Harry and I. When you brought him to Bendal for the opening...did you know that all of this would happen?" Khenda held Maddie's eyes as she formulated a response.

"I hoped." Her voice was quiet but strong.

"You hoped we would meet on accident and fall in love?"

"No," she shook her head. "I hoped you would."

"Just me?" Maddie laughed.

"I knew he would."

"Khenda..." Maddie suddenly felt emotional but Khenda continued.

"I just...I knew he would adore you. I knew he would." She shrugged and leaned in a bit. "But I hoped that, when you met him, you would see past the Prince thing, the playboy thing and see what I had known for a very long time."

"What's that?" Dena asked; curious.

"What a great man he is," Khenda smiled. "And you did. You saw that, just as I hoped you would."

"And look at what you've done..." Zara was warm and open as she winked at Khenda.

"Thank you," Maddie was serious as she spoke to Khenda. "Seriously. Thank you. For bringing
him there, for pushing me towards him, for refusing to let me consider coming back to Bendal when Harry wanted me in London, for..." Maddie blinked, looking down at her hands in effort to squelch the tears in her eyes.

"You're welcome," Khenda grinned wide. "You're so, so welcome."

"And look at what you've done," Maddie laughed, repeating Zara's words. "I'm going to marry him. In five days."

"Yes you are."

"I'm going to...wow..." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to marry Harry. In five days."

"Yes," Kiki laughed. "You are."

"I just...I want to yell it. At the top of my lungs but..."

"But nothing love," Ella cut in, pointing to the balcony just beyond the doors. "Nobody knows you here. Nobody who does know you knows that you're here. Go for it."

Maddie's eyes travelled to the doors and then, with a mile wide grin on her face, she was out of her chair, running to the balcony; a group of friends behind her.

"I'm getting married!!" She yelled out into the night; pressing her hand to her lips as she giggled—still incredibly tipsy. "I'm getting married in five days! Do you hear me Paris?! I'm going to be somebody's wife!"

"There you go," Penelope smiled her encouragement.

"Wow..." Maddie turned to face them then, exhilaration in her eyes. "That felt good."

"Good." Ella grinned.

"So..." Zara crossed her arms. "In five days you're going to marry Harry, a Prince. You're going to be a wife and a Duchess and a public figure..."

"Yes." Maddie gulped; the smile not fading a millimeter. "Yes I am. In five days."

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"Madeline..." Harry's voice was low, trying for soft, as he gently nudged her awake. After the flight home from Paris, she had gone straight up to their room where she showered, crawled into bed, and had been sleeping until late into the evening when Harry returned and found her just as she was that moment; snuggled up under the covers as he grinned down at her. "Madeline..."

She groaned as she rolled towards his voice. "You're home..." She breathed; rested and smiling up at him through half opened eyes.

"I am." He sat next to her on the bed.

"Did you have a good time?" Her arms slipped out from under the covers, reaching for his hand.

"I did," he nodded, bringing her hand to his lips. "You?"
"Mmm..." She nodded and pulled back the blanket. "Join me?"

"Definitely." Harry climbed right in next to her, pulling her to him; kissing her hello. "So...about last night."

"I thought we weren't going to talk about last night. I didn't get in any trouble or have to call your father or..." She nuzzled into his chest.

"I'm talking about the messages you left me..." Her eyes flew wide open.

"The messages?"

"All four of them."

"Four?!" She moved to sit up, looking down at him in surprise.

"Pretty drunk, huh?"

"Oh my God. I don't even remember..." She trailed for a moment, her hands running through her hair. "I mean. I barely remember having my phone and..." Harry was smiling in great amusement. "I thought Ella took my phone. But maybe..."

"There's this one in particular where you detail all of the things you're going to do to me the next time you see me..." He brought his hands back behind his head; cocky and entertained.

"Oh God." She groaned.

"Did you want to hear it?" He pulled his phone from his pocket. "So you can have the details of, what I am guessing, is going to be a very...lovely...evening."

"Oh Jesus." She smiled helplessly at him. "I honestly don't even remember calling you. I didn't mean to be that lady. I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," he shrugged. "Also. Just so you know. You sent me a few pictures."

"Okay. I know I didn't take any photos and..."

"Or maybe Ella sent them since you're in all of them," he scrolled through his phone and stopped. "And I gotta tell you...there's one that has me a little disturbed."

"Listen..." Maddie began her defense.

"You're sitting on the lap of what I can only assume is a stripper..." He turned the phone around to her as his face grew serious.

"He was just a stripper. Just..." Maddie took a deep breath and tried for calm. "And I didn't touch him. I mean...I kind of touched him but..."

"I'm not talking about the stripper," he shrugged. "I don't care about the stripper."

"But..."
"The hat." His eyes narrowed. "It had to be an RAF hat? Really? Couldn't have been...I don't know...Army or..."

"You're razzing me about the hat." Maddie's voice went flat; faced deadpanned. "You're joking."

"I'm not!" He exclaimed. "You're going to be my wife. I'm in the Army."

"Yes. But he wasn't."

"Was he in the RAF?" Harry's eyebrows lifted.

"No!" Maddie laughed, pushing at his chest. "He was a stripper Harry. He wasn't in the RAF or the Army. Just like the one who wasn't a doctor who wanted to 'take my temperature' or..."

"Whoa." He interrupted. "Too much information about the strippers."

"You wanted to talk about the strippers!"

"I wanted to talk about the hat you're wearing in this picture."

"Relax. He wasn't in the Army. He wasn't in the RAF." She sighed and leaned back. "Just like I'm sure that flight attendant from last night wasn't really a flight attendant, if you know what I mean."

"There was no flight attendant." Harry's eyes sparkled as his lips pulled into a grin.

"French Maid?" Maddie offered.

"We agreed not to talk about last night," Harry avoided the question.


"Not a word." Harry shook his head; teeth biting into his smile. They both relaxed into the laughter, into each other. "Did you have a good time baby?"

"I did," Maddie nodded; a fond smile spreading over her face as she leaned into him. "You?"

"Mmm." He nodded; turning to kiss her forehead. He had enjoyed himself the night before; that was certain. And he knew that his friends enjoyed showing him a wild night. But if he were being completely honest, this was exactly where he had wanted to be the entire time. In his bed, with her. That really was the point, wasn't it? In getting married? Wanting to return to this every night.

"You know..." Maddie turned in his arms; eyes flashing brightly. "There is something I wanted to share with you from last night."

"Oh?" His eyebrows arched.

"Mmm..." She nodded, her smile growing slightly wicked as she moved from the bed. "Something I learned from somebody named Hot Chocolate Charlie who said I was a natural."

"Hold on." Harry's voice shifted; eyes narrowing. "Did Ella tell you to say that?"

"Ella?" Maddie shook her head, pulling him towards the edge of the bed. "No. Why do you ask..."
"Because..." He watched as she moved away from him then, curious. "While I am completely in support of whatever it was you did last night...I do not want to know what some man who is wearing an RAF hat taught you."

"Shhh..." Maddie's fingers moved to his lips and leaned in to whisper in his ear. "Who said Hot Chocolate Charlie was a man?"

"Oh?" Harry's surprise quickly faded to something else entirely as he watched her move to their stereo, shuffling through her playlist for the perfect song. And, as it played loudly out into the room, he watched her walk—strut—back over to him. "Ohhhh..."
As the wedding day grew steadily closer, the nation and to some extent the world, began preparing for the big day. News outlets descended on London, guests began to take up residence, and the Union Jack was flying everywhere. Maddie was being recognized left and right—of course it didn't hurt that her face was all over everything; mugs, shirts, commemorative cards.

Everything was coming together. Her wedding dress was finished and, having had her final fitting with her mother, Maddie was more than pleased. Her reception dress was finished; the perfect juxtaposition to the simple elegance of the ceremony dress. The guest list had long ago been finalized and secured. Everything was ready to go.

And the days began to tick by.

Four Days Before the Wedding

Maddie had always been, by nature, a planner. Her entire adult life she had only had herself to take care of and she had done just that; made sure everything ran smoothly, made sure everything was in order. With the wedding, the marriage, all of these new transitions, she had surrendered bits and pieces of her control; handing it over to planners, attorneys, staff members. And it made sense to do so. There was no way she had any kind of scope as to what went into planning a Royal Wedding. So she had happily turned everything into the hands of those more experienced and more capable than she.

But, as the day grew closer and closer, her default tendencies began to surface. Her nerves required her to worry about something—so that meant she began to worry about everything. Throughout the day she would suddenly remember some small, mostly insignificant, detail that she wanted to be sure was taken care of. The card she had found that went perfect with the gift she had purchased for Ella, the negligée she had been saving for the honeymoon; that sort of thing. She would pull out a sticky note or a small scrap of paper and quickly jot down one word reminders—which Harry would usually find stuck in some strange place.

"Maddie?!") He called out to her from the bathroom one night as he brushed his teeth; yellow note stuck to his fingers. "You left hanky stuck to my mouthwash!"

"So that I remember to give my mother a handkerchief...you know...for the crying."

"Ah." Harry would laugh and shake his head as she rushed into the bathroom, snatching the note from him and adding it to her collection.

And on Day Four of the countdown, those tendencies made their way into her night. With a startle and a rush of air, she sat up in bed. Reaching for a notebook she kept stationed on her nightstand, she would write down a word or two and return to her pillow. On the third time, Harry opened his eyes and let out a sigh.

"Madeline...You do realize that every time you do that, you jump and gasp and..."

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry."
"I just don't want to forget anything," she tried to explain quickly as she returned to her pillow.

"Nobody is going to let you forget anything. I promise." He reached out to rub her shoulder. "Do you have any idea how many people are working this production?"

"But still..."

"What did you write down this time?"

"Cenotaph."

"Sorry?" He chuckled; used to her one word answers.

"I need to take my mom on the route to the church, show her the Cenotaph, tell her when to bow her head...that kind of thing."

"Ah." He nodded. "Why don't you call Joan in the morning? I'm sure she can sneak the two of you into one of the dry runs."

"Dry runs?"

"Yeah...you know...they practice this route over and over again with stand-ins."

"What?" Now she was intrigued.

"Some low ranking staffer who sits in the car with a card around his neck that says Dr. Forrester and another one with Mrs. Forrester." Harry shrugged and settled further into his pillow. "My guess is they can let you play your own roles at least once."

"Wow. I had no idea..." She thought about it for a moment and then moved for her notebook.

"Now what did you write down?" He grinned.

"Stand in. I want to meet my stand-in."

"Of course."

**Three Days Before the Wedding**

"Harry..." Maddie's voice was low but urgent as she shook his arm lightly. "Harry. Wake up."

"Mmmm..." Harry moaned as he rustled awake.

"Harry..."

"Maddie?" He peered at her through one half-opened eye. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Then what on Earth is..."

"I have a question." She had pulled her notebook and pen into her lap as she sat up in their bed.
"A question." His voice was flat. "A question about what?"

"Protocol."

"Protocol?" He craned his neck to look at the clock. "At...two in the morning. Madeline, what the hell..."

"Harry..." Her eyes seemed just a tad frantic, the look on her face just a tad frazzled. So he took a deep breath and held his tongue. She continued. "I know that after the wedding...protocol changes for me."

"Yes." He rubbed his face and sat up; he was in it now.

"So..." She turned to face him. "At the reception, I'll meet Queens and Kings and the like."

"Yes." He nodded; a yawn pushing from his mouth.

"And clearly I curtsy to them. But...what about like...The Crown Princess of Denmark? Do I curtsy to her?" He wanted to laugh. No. What he really wanted to do was poke fun at the notion that she woke him up in the middle of the night to ask him if she was supposed to curtsy to the Crown Princess of Denmark. And then he wanted to laugh. But he met her eyes, saw that she was serious, and took a breath.

"No," he shook his head. "You don't curtsy to the Crown Princess of Denmark."

"No?!" Her face twisted up. "Are you sure?"

"I am," he answered. "The only rank that is higher than yours will be the Sovereign. And even then it is more of a courtesy than a requirement."

"But...she's in line to the throne, to be the Consort."

"Maddie...love..." He took a deep breath and met her eyes. "Starting on Saturday...you will be too."

Two Days Before the Wedding

It was two days before the wedding when Harry awoke in the middle of the night to an empty bed. His eyes travelled first to the clock, noting the early morning hour, and then to Maddie's nightstand, noting the absence of her notebook. Harry groaned slightly as he moved from his pillow; tossing the blankets aside and stepping from the bed.

It didn't take him long to find her. As soon as he made his way down the stairs, the light from the kitchen drew him in. Rubbing at the back of his neck, he squinted as he stepped into the brightly lit room. Maddie looked up to him from where she sat on the counter across the room. She looked tired; sad and tired.

"What are you eating?" He moved across the room to her.

"Nutella." Her voice was tired too.

"With a spoon?" He smiled down at her, his hands moving to the counter on either side of her.
"Mmmm..." Maddie nodded, licking the spoon and holding it out to him; her legs moving a bit wider so he could step between them. "Would you like some?"

"No. Thank you," he shook his head; dipping in to kiss her.

"Suit yourself," she shrugged.

"Maddie..." His hands moved to her legs. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," she shook her head.

"Madeline..."

"I woke up, wanted a snack and..."

"Maddie..." He warned; her eyes met his and she groaned.

"I had a dream." She confessed.

"Of the Martin Luther King variety or..."

"No." She allowed a small smile.

"Tell me."

"I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"It will make you mad."

"Mad?" Harry chuckled. "I doubt that."

"It's not a big deal Harry. I feel stupid even bringing it up." She let out a deep breath and ran her hands up his arms. "Can we please just drop it?"

"Yeah..." He took a deep breath and met her eyes. "I'm not sure we can."

"Harry..."

"Listen," he dropped a kiss to her shoulder. "You haven't slept in days. You've been walking around with notebooks and sticky notes and now you're down here, eating chocolate from a jar and telling me you're having dreams that you won't tell me about but you think will make me mad and..." He ran a hand through his hair and tried to calm his suddenly nervous feeling. "I'm worried."

"Worried?" Her head fell slightly to the side. "Worried about what?"

"That you might not show up on Saturday."

"What?" Maddie snapped out of her funk quickly. Her lips twisted up, heading to a smile but, when she met his eyes, it faded fast. "You're serious."
"I am serious." He nodded.

"Hey..." Her hands moved to his face. "Why would you think that?"

"What was the dream about?" He held her eyes, pulling her hand into his.

"Harry..."

"You're pulling back from me. Right now. If you need time and space to process something, you would tell me. But you're not. You're just...you're pulling away from me and you're not talking to me about it and we're getting married in two days and you're going through...something...and you won't tell me and..."

"You had a girlfriend." She cut in.

"What?" He was sufficiently surprised by that.

"In the dream," Maddie took a deep breath, her shoulders slumping as she exhaled. "We were married and I found out that you had a girlfriend on the side..."

"Oh Maddie..." He groaned.

"I told you that you would be mad."

"I'm not mad," he shook his head. "I'm...a girlfriend? Really? That's what's keeping you up right now?"

"No," she shook her head. "It wasn't so much the girlfriend. It was...it was that when I found out..." She rolled her eyes at the absurdity of it all. "When I found out, you expected me to expect you to have somebody on the side. And I felt foolish and ignorant and naïve and..."

"I don't have a girlfriend."

"I know." She really, truly did.

"I'm not going to have a girlfriend." She groaned into herself.

"See. This is what I wanted to avoid. This ridiculous discussion where you feel you have to defend something that...Dream Harry did."

"I don't feel like I have to defend..." Harry took a deep breath. "Maddie. I know that there is this...history...of men in my family having somebody on the side."

"You don't have to do this," she felt terrible; tears in her eyes, lump in her throat. "It was just a dream."

"A dream that's keeping you up at night and..." He took a deep breath and let it settle his lungs, his shoulders. "Listen to me. I have waited much too long, I have fought much too hard for this..." He ran his hand between them. "To ever jeopardize us for somebody on the side."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded. "Me too."

"If I wanted to continue fucking around, Maddie, I would have. I wouldn't be marrying you. I
wouldn't be. I would stay single and just..." He waved his hand off dismissively. "I have no expectation that you should expect me to have somebody on the side."

"I know," she wiped at her eyes. "I know all of these things. I just...I don't know what's happening to me. It was just a dream. Just a dream. And...maybe all of that drinking in Paris jarred something loose in my brain."

"Ha!" Harry's lips curled up in a smile as his arms moved around her, pulling her closer to him. "Maybe the wedding is just getting closer and it's making your mind wander a bit. Maybe all the craziness around us is making you face some greater, more hidden insecurities. Maybe this is your mind protecting itself, making sure you've looked at everything..."

"Maybe you're disturbingly insightful at three in the morning," Maddie's eyes narrowed as she looked him over; allowing relief to wash over her. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He shook his head, tightening his hold on her.

"I didn't mean for you to feel like I was accusing you of..."

"I didn't." He cut her off. "I don't. Besides..." He shrugged with a smirk. "I often reap the benefits of Dream Harry's escapades, I suppose it's only fair I have to answer for him occasionally."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, leaning her forehead onto his shoulder. "What's happening to me?"

"Nothing," he kissed the side of her head, happy to have her connected to him again; physically and emotionally. "It's been a long week, we're going into this big weekend, and the pressure can be a lot sometimes."

"I don't doubt your loyalties to me," she pressed a kiss to his shoulder.

"I know that," he ran his hands over her back. "I promise you I know that." Her arms moved around him then, squeezing him tight; holding onto him as she anchored herself. There was a long, comforting pause in the kitchen as he held her close, as her breathing eased.

"Harry?" Her voice was soft, quiet, as she lifted up to look at him. "What if I mess up?"

"Mess up?" His eyebrows lifted. He was confused.

"On Saturday, what if you make me laugh?" He smiled; this was about the wedding. This whole week had been about the wedding.

"I won't," he shook his head. "I promise. I don't want to risk bringing out that British accent of yours."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, feeling better with every admission. "What if...what if I cry?" Her eyes welled up as she bit her lip.

"Hey..."

"I mean it. What if I break down and cry?"

"Then...then you cry." He kissed her then. "It's okay if you cry." Maddie nodded, her emotions getting the best of her as a few tears escaped her eyes.
"What if I..." She wiped at her eyes. "What if after all of that practice, I switch your names around?"

"Well..." He sighed, running his thumbs over her cheeks with a soft smile. "Then I suppose you'll be married to some other lucky bastard."

They both broke into laughter then; Maddie's shoulders shaking as she let go of the rest of her tension. Taking a deep breath, she moved her hands around his neck, pulling his lips to hers.

"I love you," she spoke calm and clear. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," he echoed without blinking, without hesitation.

"I would never, ever, ever not show up on Saturday." And it was his turn to glance away, his turn to swallow the lump in his throat. "Harry..." Her head tilted to follow his eyes. "No sleep, crazy dreams, crying, laughing, whatever...I'm marrying you. In two days."

"Good," he breathed, leaning to kiss her again. "Because if you think I wouldn't send out a search party looking for you..."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back in laughter. "Okay."

"Okay." His hands patted her firmly. "Come on. Come back to bed with me."

"Okay." She nodded. "Oh. Wait." She reached for the jar of Nutella, scooping out one last spoonful. "You sure you don't want some?" Her spoon lifted to her mouth, savoring the last bite.

"I'm sure..." He grinned, watching with amusement as she licked the spoon clean, tossing it into the sink with a clank. "Come here," he nodded his head. With a wide grin and the tiniest bit of spread on her lips, she kissed him; happy and at ease. Harry took the jar from her hands, twisted the lid back on and, setting it to the side, he pulled her closer; arms snaking around her waist. "Come on baby..." His voice dropped low. "Come back to bed with me. Tomorrow's another long day and..." Maddie's lips silenced his pitch; warm, soft, and tasting slightly of the hazelnut spread.

"Let's go," she sighed happily and, with a small shove to his chest, she jumped to her feet, took his hand, and led him from the room. Amazed, yet not at all surprised, that talking to him about the craziness had made it seem just a bit less crazy.

**One Day Before the Wedding**

"Good Morning..." Harry pulled her close; the morning sun peeking in through the draperies. Maddie wrapped her arms around him, tucking her feet under his legs and snuggling close. Neither of them wanted to get out of bed.

"Morning..." Maddie kissed the t-shirt that hugged around his ribs.

"Feeling better?" His eyes fought to focus on her as he woke up.

"I am," she nodded. "I am really sorry about last night. I think my crazy, planner's brain was just grasping for anything to worry about and it went straight to the most absurd..."

"Don't apologize," his fingers reached out to trace the profile of her nose. "Are you still worried?"
"No," she shook her head, a wide smile spreading across her face. "I think last night was the turning point."

"Good. Good." He tapped her nose and took a breath. "So..." His hand moved lazily over her arm; up and down, elbow to shoulder. "It's your last day as a single woman, your last moments of freedom..." Maddie laughed into his chest. "Anything you want to do?"

"Well," Maddie's smile lazed across her lips. "There is this guy..." Her fingers walked their way down his chest.

"Yeah?" He smiled.

"Cocky, swagger of a man."

"Oh?" His lips pulled wider.

"Bright red hair, ego the size of The Kingdom." Her lips pulled wide.

"Sure..." Harry laughed.

"I've been dying to have a go at him," Maddie sighed, her fingers moving suggestively to the waist of his shorts.

"Yeah?" He turned his head to her, his hand reaching up into her hair.

"Yeah." She nodded; smug grin on her face as her fingers dipped lower.

"Well maybe you should..." He shifted in the bed, his lips zeroing in on hers. "You know...go at him."

"Yeah?" Maddie gasped as Harry moved then; pulling her underneath him. Without another word, his lips were on her, closing over her mouth and pulling a groan from deep, deep inside of her. She giggled as his face moved to the dip in her neck and sighed as he pressed his body against hers. After all of the craziness that week, this was exactly what she needed before she faced it all—a morning of unadulterated, groan-inducing, loving from the man she was going to marry.

And thankfully, Harry had no problem delivering.

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The rehearsals went off without a hitch.

She and Harry, refreshed and revived from the moment of catharsis the night before and the moment of bliss that morning, arrived on time and well-coordinated. Maddie took her spot with her mother and Ella at the back of the church, fresh pink bouquet from Harry in hand, and waited while Joan directed everyone to their starting positions. Maddie was beyond impressed at the way Joan commanded them around the Cathedral; telling Charles where to stand, making suggestions to the Archbishop.

It was quite the thing to witness.

After three complete run-throughs, Joan and the Archbishop were satisfied and, with a few last
minute reminders, dismissed the group to dinner. Maddie was happy to see her family mixing with his. Though there were some stunted moments, they moved past them. When Jenna first laid eyes on the Queen, she stalled, her feet simply ceasing movement. Thankfully, Ella recognized the moment and swooped in to help her regain her senses.

The dinner was lovely—exactly what one might expect and only a taste of what the next day held for them. Glorious food, plenty of champagne and a heartfelt Thank You toast from the bride and groom to be. After they handed out meticulously selected and beautifully wrapped gifts, thanking everyone in the room for their help and support, they spent time mingling among this newly blended family they were creating. Following the trip to Paris, most of the ladies knew each other well. But Maddie's cousins, uncle and grandmother had little difficulty finding home among Harry's. Kyle became great friends with Mike, Derek spent hours talking to Andrew about military life and Maddie's grandmother seemed to feel right at home talking to Harry's grandparents. Dena was found talking babies with Kate while Amy and Zara picked up right where they had left off in Paris.

Maddie made sure to spend a moment with Charles, thanking him for everything he had done during this transition. And Harry had made sure to take Hannah outside to smoke a cigar with her—it was Friday after all. Despite her lack of surprise at his gesture, it brought tears to her eyes all the same. And finally, following another round of champagne, Harry took Maddie's hand and walked her, slowly and lazily, out to the car that was waiting to take her, Ella, and her mother back to Kensington where she would be spending her last night as a single woman. He would be staying with his father and brother at Clarence House.

Harry would remember with great detail how hard it was for him to watch her step away from him that night. The rehearsal, the church, the dinner, the drinks, the crazy week they had had; it all made him more of an emotional bundle than he was used to. The significance of it all was weighing heavily, beautifully, on his heart. The next time he would see her would be at Saint Paul's Cathedral. He would be standing at the altar with the Archbishop and his brother, watching as Maddie entered the church, ready to become his wife.

When they stepped up to the car, his fingers held onto hers tightly, not wanting to let her go. He nodded a smile to the ladies who were waiting inside the car and, with little care as to formalities, pulled her flush to him. The sun was barely beginning to set; making her eyes sparkle in this amazing color, making his hair a deeper red.

"Are you going to be able to sleep tonight?" He pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"Yes," she sighed. "I'm going to have a nice, long bath. I'm going to drink some champagne and then I'm going to relax with mom and Ella. Why? You wanna come tire me out first?"

"Don't tempt me," he shook his head at the wicked look in her eyes. "Listen. If you wake up in the middle of the night and you need me...you call me. Okay?"

"You're sweet."

"And serious. Anything." His hands were gentle as they ran over her. "If you need me to write something on a sticky note or make up for something Dream Harry has done..."

"Shhh..." Maddie kissed him then. "I'm going to be okay. I promise."

"You'll be there tomorrow?" He lifted his eyebrows, not the least bit worried as to her response.
"With a tiara on..." She joked; her stomach fluttering at the very real image that flashed into her head.

"Okay," he nodded; his eyes glazing over just a bit. "Okay." And then, reluctantly, he took a step back from her, one hand releasing his hold on her as he reached for the door. "Good night love."

"Good night," she hated the way her fingers betrayed her as they ran down the lapel of his coat and pulled away from his body. She looked him over, from head to toe, wanting to memorize the way he looked so she could dream about him later.

"Maddie..." His voice was barely above a whisper. She met his eyes and her breath hitched.

"Harry?" She smiled.

"You're going to be my wife tomorrow." The corner of his lips curled up as he spoke.

"I am." She responded with teary eyes and then with a deep breath, she kissed his cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too," he kissed her back. With one final squeeze, one final brush of the lips, Maddie turned away from him and stepped into the door he had pulled open.

Sighing, he shut the door behind her and then, with a hazy sort of blissful look on his face, he stood in that exact spot; watching as the car took her away from him.

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"Knock, knock," Ella's voice called out into the bathroom where Maddie laid, soaking in a bubble filled tub. "I have your champagne!"

"Well get on in here," Maddie called back without even opening her eyes.

"Here you go..." Ella moved into the room, putting the flute into Maddie's outstretched hand before she took a seat on the comfy chair in the corner.

"You're the best," Maddie smiled, bringing the glass to her lips. "Where's mom?"

"She's on the phone with your grandmother then she'll be up."

"Perfect..." Maddie sighed and a contented silence settled over the room.

"How are you?"

"I'm actually really, really well." Maddie opened her eyes and met Ella's. "I was having a...weird week. But I'm good. I'm ready."

"Good," Ella beamed. "I can't believe that tomorrow you're going to marry a Duke."

"Don't call him that," Maddie laughed, taking another drink.

"But he is a Duke. Or he will be tomorrow. The Duke of Sussex."

"I know. Just...you're supposed to be helping me relax."
"Sorry." Ella giggled. "It's just...a long way from Bendal, you know?"

"Hmm...I do know." She took another sip and settled back again. "What do you think he's doing right now?" Her smile twisted as she thought of Harry.

"Probably the same thing you are," Ella joked.

"Ha! Soaking in a bubble bath and talking to William?" They both laughed at that.

"Maybe not William. Probably Bishop."

"That's even better." Maddie's cheeks pulled tighter. "I'm never going to be able to get that image out of my head."

"You're welcome," Ella winked at her friend.

"Ha!" Maddie sighed; happy at how at ease she seemed lately, how at peace with herself. "Are you nervous?"

"About what?"

"Tomorrow. The wedding, the balcony, all of it."

"Not in the least." Ella shook her head quickly. "I was born for this."

"Nice." Maddie chuckled. "What about Bishop?"

"What about him?" Ella seemed happy, light, as she thought of him.

"Nervous about seeing him?"

"No," she smiled and shook her head. "I'm actually in a really great place about Bishop right now."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. We may even dance together..." Ella shrugged, serene as she swallowed her last bit of champagne. "And it looks like we're out of champagne. Want more?"

"Please." Maddie nodded and closed her eyes as Ella slipped out of the room again. She sighed; sinking deeper into the bubbles. All of her stress, her anxiety was just lifting away. She and Harry had addressed the end of it and now...she was just luxuriating in these precious hours the night before her wedding day.

"I figured out what Harry's doing." Ella bounced back into the room, champagne bottle in hand.

"What?" Maddie's eyes flashed open. "How?"

"He's on TV."

"What?!" She sat up completely; water sloshing around her.
"Yep." Ella nodded. "He and William are outside Clarence House shaking hands and receiving well wishes. They did it before William's wedding too..." Ella's eyes went wide as Maddie reached for her towel, stepping out of the tub. "What are you doing?"

"I want to see..." She dried off quickly and, wrapping the towel around her, hurried from the room.

"You're insane," Ella laughed as she followed behind. Maddie turned on the TV and flipped through the channels; stopping when she found him. Her entire face grew soft as she watched.

"Look at him. He's so...handsome." He was smiling wide, shaking hands; thanking the throngs of people that were standing outside, lining the streets.

"He is." Ella agreed.

"He looks happy." Maddie's heart swelled in her chest.

"He does."

"I'm marrying him tomorrow." The pride in her voice, in her gaze, was undeniable.

"You are." The warmth in Ella's was unmistakable.


"Has a nice ring to it, no?"

"It really does."

Harry laughed when her number flashed up on his phone. "Excuse me," he smiled to his father and brother as he rose to his feet; abandoning the drinks and conversation they were already deep into. He shook his head at his brother who paused his glass of bourbon in order to make a cracking whip sound as he passed.

"Madeline..." Harry's voice dropped low as he stepped into another room. "Is this a sticky note phone call or a Dream Harry phone call?"

"Hmm..." She smiled. "It's something else entirely. I saw you on TV."

"Oh?" She could hear the grin over the phone. "Keeping an eye on me?"

"Maybe." She sighed; laying back onto their bed, into his pillow. Ella and her mother were down in the kitchen making hot tea while they readied for bed. "Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Come and stay with me?" Her voice sounded young and sweet and he had to take a deep breath to steel himself against it.

"Maddie," his tone had warning. "You know that I can't."
"Please Harry. I miss you. I want you next to me." He couldn't help the muffled chuckle on his end of the phone.

"Tomorrow." He promised.

"But I want to kiss you and hold you..." Her voice lowered, her lips puckering in a slight pout, regardless of the fact that he couldn't see her.

"Tomorrow." He grinned, holding his ground.

"Come on!" Her fist hit against the mattress in her best rendition of a fit.

"Do you have any idea how many people are outside of my father's place right now?"

"Be a prince!" She laughed, despite herself. "Push through the crowd, storm the castle wall, come and claim your woman."

"I will. I promise." His voice grew low. "Tomorrow Madeline."

"Fine, fine," she sighed; surrendering. "Have it your way."

"Maddie?"

"Yes?"

"You're really going to marry me?"

"Tomorrow..." She responded with teary eyes and a deep breath.

"Tomorrow then."
From the moment Maddie's eyes fluttered open, there was a smile with a permanent home on her lips. Despite the nervousness, despite the lack of sleep, despite the light rain that had fallen overnight; nothing was going to faze her.

"Madeline... Madeline darling..." It was Hannah at the door with a knock. Her voice was softly, syrupy, her fingers delivering another tap as she pushed further into the room. "It's time to wake up."

"Mmmm..." Stretching her arms up over her head, Maddie nestled further back into Harry's pillow. "Come in..." She yawned, patting the bed next to her.

"There are people downstairs," Hannah's voice was low as she moved to the bed; climbing in next to her daughter.

"What kind of people?" Maddie smiled, moving to her mother's side as the older Forrester wrapped an arm around the younger one.

"People cooking breakfast," Hannah sighed. "It smells wonderful."

"Bernard is amazing," Maddie nodded.

"Mr. Smith is in Harry's office. He said that the dress is en route with Ms. Ellis and Ms. Schuler and your hairstylist..."

"Tara," Maddie interjected.

"Tara is coming through the gates now with a team of people and the photographer."

"Whoa..." Maddie took a deep breath and let it out. "It really is time to get up."

"Yes," Hannah patted her daughter's hand. "I've taken a shower. I suggest you get in there. I'll go wake up Ella and we'll see you soon."

"Perfect," Maddie grinned; happy it was her mother ordering her around for the last few moments before everyone else arrived to do just that. Hannah kissed Maddie's forehead and slipped from the room; shutting the door behind her. She pulled herself from the warm, comfort of her bed and took a step forward; a step towards the bathroom, towards the day, towards him.

When Maddie stepped from the shower, the calm peaceful morning had given way to a happy hustle flowing all around her. Clad in yoga pants and Harry's soft, blue button-down shirt she made her way towards the center of the action; Ella's room. The large, elegant space had been converted to hair and makeup central. The mood was lively and animated and Maddie instantly felt that bubble of excitement in her stomach. The photographer was already snapping pictures while Ella sat in one chair and Hannah in another; teasing and curling and spraying galore. Glancing around the room, Maddie couldn't help but giggle. There was more makeup than Maddie had ever seen outside of a department store, hot hair instruments and sprays lined the dressers. There was a table set up with tea and cakes and, from the stand by the bed, the stereo
was playing the ridiculously peppy and happy "Pre-Wedding Playlist" Ella had put together. It was joyful and cheery and exactly where Maddie was at mentally and emotionally; excited and ready.

"Doctor Forrester," Joan breezed into the room, her bright, chipper voice drawing the rooms' attention to Maddie. "Good Morning."

"Good morning," Maddie smiled warmly at her mother and Ella, who was already bursting at the seams, before turning to Joan. "Good Morning Joan. Busy day?"

"Hmm," Joan's lips pressed together in a smile with a quick nod. "I am ready to give you the rundown of where we're at. Would you like some tea and a scone first?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "Why don't you tell me where we're at first."

And, with a deep breath, Joan went into planner mode. Hair and makeup people were there. They had started on Hannah and Ella and were ready to begin hair on Maddie. Photographer was there and would be with them through the remainder of the day. The florist was on her way with the flowers. After greeting everyone with a warm smile and hellos, Maddie sighed into the seat in front of Tara who took a deep breath and immediately went to work wrapping Maddie's hair around extremely large rollers.

"Also." Joan flipped open her notebook. "There is a gentleman downstairs a...Mr. Ian Bishop."

"Bishop?" Maddie smiled, looking up in surprise; fighting the urge to look to Ella for answers. "Why is Bishop here?"

"He said that he has a delivery," Joan tried to fight the grin. "From His Royal Highness."

"His Royal..." And it dawned on her. "You mean Harry."

"I do."

"Can you send him up for me?"

"Yes ma'am." And with a quick nod, Joan handed Maddie a cup of tea and disappeared.

"He sent you a gift?" Ella clapped her hands excitedly.

"Apparently," Maddie smiled wide, taking a sip from her cup.

"Of course he sent you a gift," Ella sighed; unbelievably happy for her best friend and just the slightest bit jealous. "So...How are you doing?" Ella looked her over, assessing her mood.

"I'm great actually."

"Scared?"

"No." She shook her head.

"Nervous?"

"Not at all." Maddie sighed; leaning back in her chair and smiling. "Is that weird?"
"Little bit," Ella joked with a wide grin. "Hey, do you want to turn on the TV and see how many people are already lined up outside?"

"Oh God no." Maddie shook her head quickly. "That will most certainly send me over the edge."

"No, no, no," Bishop's voice called out as he stepped into the room; his voice booming and his eyes smiling with the kind of excitement that was usually reserved for the couple. But it was Bishop and he was celebrating too. "No going over the edge. It's a happy day."

"Bishop!" Maddie rose from her chair to greet him.

"Madeline, my love..." Bishop moved into the room, his arms wrapping around her as he hugged her tight and kissed her cheeks.

"Harry sent you?" She grinned up at him as he began to dance her around the space to the beat of the music. The excitement, the frivolity in the room was contagious. There were no sad, dead-man-marching undertones. Not on this day. Not for this group.

"He most certainly did," Bishop nodded, spinning her out and turning her around; before catching her in his arms again.

"Did he send you to dance with me?" She laughed.

"He most certainly did not," Bishop winked before kissing her cheek again and releasing her.

"But I do have a purpose." But before he moved onto that, he turned to the other two ladies. "Mrs. Forrester," he reached for her hand, pressing a kiss to the top. "Lovely to see you again."

"Good morning Bishop," she shook her head with a smirk. His particular brand of harmless flirtation amused the mother in her and his obvious friendship and loyalty to her daughter and Harry pleased her. She squeezed his hand as he stepped away from her.

"And Ella," he moved towards his own love, his own heart and, with a guarded smile, he leaned to kiss her cheek. "Good Morning."

"Good Morning Bishop," Ella smiled up at him; her heart pattering nervously as she kissed his cheek. Though they held each other's eyes for a beat, Bishop's attention quickly snapped back to the duty at hand.

"Madeline my darling...how can I be of service to you?"

"Well Bishop, unless you can speed up time and get me married, I'm not sure you can be of service."

"Excited are we?" He raised his eyebrows, reaching outside the doorway for a large duffle bag that he moved to the bed; unzipping and fumbling around.

"You have no idea," she returned to her seat and Tara went straight to work. "Have you seen him today?"

"Maybe," he shrugged; playing coy.

"Come on Bishop," Maddie groaned slightly. "Have you seen him today?"
"I have." He nodded; smug.

"And?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"And what?" He shrugged; trying for nonchalant. "He was just getting out of the shower. He told me to get out and tossed a towel at my head..." Bishop met her eyes and winked. "He's ready to see you. He's been ready to see you for hours."

"Yeah?" Maddie felt tears prick at her eyes; quickly taking a deep breath. It was much too early to lose it. There were far too many emotional moments ahead of her that, if she started in now, she would never make it through the day.

"Absolutely," he nodded. Harry had been up and ready for hours—impatient, excited; eager.

"Okay. Are you ready?"

"Are you going to take me to him?" She went for the brass ring.

"No," Bishop laughed. "But I do have some gifts for you. Do you want them?"

"Let's do it." She clapped her hands together.

"First..." Bishop pulled a bouquet from his bag. "We have these."

"Delphinium..." Maddie whispered, her eyes growing soft as she took the flowers from Bishop.

"It's important to note that this particular bouquet of flowers was sent on request from Charles. Every flower was picked from Highgrove this morning."

"Wow..." Maddie breathed, looking them over; impressed. Her eyes flashed to her mother and she could already see the memory of her father sneaking into the room in her mother's warm, nostalgic smile.

"Those are beautiful," Hannah's voice was soft as her eyes met her daughter's.

"Joan?" Maddie glanced around the room.

"Yes Ma'am?"

"Would you please ask the florist, when she gets here, if there would be any way she could incorporate just the smallest sprig of this into my bouquet?" Maddie took a breath. "And into my mother's corsage?"

"Yes Ma'am," Joan nodded, taking the bouquet from Maddie.

"Even just the tiniest bit would be wonderful. The rest can go in a vase downstairs."

"Yes Ma'am."

"Thank you so much," Maddie smiled as Ms. Schuler stepped from the room.

"Second..." Bishop returned to the bag. "William wanted to be sure you had a bit of liquid courage." With a chuckle, he pulled out a bottle of Maddie's favorite champagne. Pulling four
champagne flutes from the bag, he sat them on the table and popped the cork.

"Liquid courage?" Maddie laughed as he handed her a glass.

"I think it's a royal mandate," Bishop nodded.

"I don't see harm in one glass," Hannah offered, shaking her head in laughter at Bishop who handed glasses to the rest of them.

"And..." Bishop hurried back to the bag. "This." Laduree Macaroons. Maddie's smile stretched further.

"Champagne and Macaroons for breakfast..." She sighed into her seat. "What kind of life is this?"

"The life of a Duchess," Ella winked, sipping from her glass; a light laughter travelled around the room.

"And finally..." Bishop pulled the final gift from the bag; a beautifully wrapped box with a card on top. "This is the last one. From Harry."

"Ohhh..." Maddie sat her glass to the side, swallowed a bite and took the box from Bishop. As Hannah and Ella selected a macaroon from themselves, Maddie pulled the card from the envelope. On the front was a Dr. Seuss drawing and a quote attributed to him "You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams." Taking a deep breath, she tried to steady the emotions she felt were just at bay and she opened the card. Reading to herself, You've made my reality leaps and bounds better than any of my dreams. Swallowing back the lump that was threatening in her throat, she tore at the paper.

"What is it?" Ella's neck stretched to look at what was revealed.

"It's a picture," Maddie's tears faded fast as a smile stretched across her face. "Of me and my Stand-In. You remember..." She glanced to her mother. "The guy from the church." She turned the frame around to show them the picture of herself and a young man with "Dr. Forrester" around his neck.

"What's the note say?" Hannah pointed to the folded note taped to the frame. Maddie pulled it from the glass and opened it up. The tears returned with a slight gasp. "It says...I cannot wait to see you—the you on the left—at the altar. Hurry up. I'm waiting. Your..." Maddie felt a sob bubble up; her fingers moving to her lips in effort to hold it in. "Your Husband."

"That's very sweet," Hannah commented as Ella wiped at her eyes.

"What an asshole."

"Ella!" Maddie turned to her friend.

"Sorry!" She hurried to apologize. "I'm sorry. I just...he's not even here. The wedding hasn't even started and already I'm a blubbery mess." She wiped at her eyes. "I'm sorry. He's not an asshole. He's...he's perfect."

"Okay, okay," Bishop cut in with a roll of his eyes. "Let's save the adoration until after I leave."

"Thank you for bringing me all of this," Maddie sat her photo on the stand next to her and took a
sip from her glass as Tara finished wrapping the last strands of hair around the rollers.

"You're welcome love," he leaned to kiss her. "You're going to be absolutely stunning," he grinned, offered a wink. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Maddie grinned in return as Bishop moved away from her.

"Mrs. Forrester," he bowed his head and spun on his heels. "Ella darling."

"Bishop," she smiled a nod and then as he turned away from them, heading towards the door, she caught herself. "Hey Bishop?"

"Yes?" He spun back around.

"Would you..." Ella sucked in a breath, a bit shuddery, a bit nervous. "Save me a dance tonight?" Maddie's eyes swung from Ella's face to Bishop's, just in time to catch the deep breath he took.

"Absolutely," he nodded; biting back more. "Ladies. I bid you adieu. I will see you all very soon."

And, to a chorus of good-byes and a wide-eyed stare from the bride, Bishop slipped back out the door through which he came. As the room settled back to normal, Maddie's eyes remained trained on her best friend.

"I can feel you staring at me," Ella commented, reaching for another macaroon.

"Oh?" Maddie's voice was sarcastic. "You're going to dance with Bishop tonight?"

"He is an excellent dancer," Ella avoided Maddie's eyes.

"Ella..."

"Oh shush," Ella nudged her friend, finally bringing a slightly nervous gaze to hers. "It's a dance. One dance. Our best friends are getting married and...we're going to dance. You just focus on the wedding we're going to and relax." Maddie giggled into her drink. "Besides. It's not like I invited him into my bed."

"Okay ladies," Tara spoke up from behind Maddie. "While your hair sets, it's make up time. If you need to use the bathroom or..."

"Actually," Hannah spoke up. "If it's okay, I would really like to have a moment alone with my daughter..." She looked to Maddie with emotional eyes. "And I think maybe before makeup would be best..."

"Absolutely," Tara nodded and, with a quick look to the other two stylists, they laid down their tools and stepped quietly from the room; Ella following behind. As the door closed softly, Maddie took a deep breath and met her mother's eyes.

"We're going to talk about him now. Aren't we?" Hannah took a deep breath and moved from her chair; wanting to be closer to Maddie. She sank into a seat next to her and looked up; tears in her eyes.

"Yes." She nodded.
"Okay." Maddie let out a breath and let it come. There was no need, no point really, in fighting the tears. "Okay."

"I promise this will be the only time," Hannah reached for her hand and took another deep breath. "I want this to be a wonderful day full of celebration and happy tears but..."

"It's okay," Maddie squeezed her mother's hand. "We can talk about him."

"It's not so much a talk. I just wanted you to know that he would be..." Hannah's lips twitched and her eyes shimmered. "I know I'm supposed to tell you how proud he would be of you today but..." She shook her head with a smile. "But he was so proud of you anyway; proud of the girl you were, the woman you became. He was so proud when you graduated...from everything..." They shared a laugh. "When you talked about Doctors Without Borders. He was always proud of you. And today...today would be no different." She looked around the room. "He would be proud that you waited for a man like Harry, for a man who would love you like Harry does. He would have completely supported the vows you're about to take and..." Hannah paused, her throat catching, tears spilling. "He would have loved to have been able to walk you down the aisle."

"Mom..." Maddie's eyes ran over as she squeezed her hand tighter.

"It's okay," Hannah shook her head. "I just want to say, before we get too far into this day, that he loved you. He loved you so much and he would have loved Harry and loved what you were starting here today." Hannah wiped at her tears before reaching to wipe at Maddie's; a wide smile in place. Maddie moved quickly from her chair and directly into her mother's arms; allowing for a small moment of peace, a moment of quiet reflection on the man who taught her how men were supposed to be. A small moment of calm before the day whisked them away.

"Okay..." Tara's voice was low, breathy, as she took a step back from Maddie; her eyes working over her very carefully. "I think we're done. Let me just make sure..." She was meticulous as she moved, as she scanned. Maddie's eyes glanced over to where her mother and Ella stood, both completely dressed and made up, and when she saw their faces, she felt her heart jump in her chest.

After Maddie's short and emotion packed conversation with her mother, they let the ladies back in and went into full on work mode. Make-up and hair had been finished and, while Hannah and Ella left to put on their dresses for the day, Tara and the other three stylists had secured into place, the actual Strathmore Rose Tiara—which had arrived with security that morning. Though Tara's hands had trembled just so as she lifted it from the box, she was a professional and, with a deep breath, she had pulled through—putting the historic and priceless piece of art onto Maddie's well-coifed head.

Now, as Ella and Hannah stood to the side, the three stylists were perched over Maddie, taking great care as they pinned her veil into place; wanting absolute certainty that it would stay put. And, after Tara gave the final nod, the three of them stepped away.

And Ella gasped.

"Don't do that," Maddie's voice wavered as she shot a warning glance to Ella. "Not yet."

"Okay," Ella nodded, turning her eyes from her best friend.
"How does it feel?" Tara stayed in business-mode, trying not to get drawn into the weepy, fangirl place she wanted to be.

"Good," Maddie nodded, moving around a bit.

"Secure?"

"Yes."

"Okay," Tara and the others let the veil drop to the floor, arranging it around her. "Your dress is hanging down in your room with Ms. Ellis. Let's walk down there together and we'll watch how this all flows. You let me know if anything feels like it's moving."

"Okay," Maddie took a breath and looked to her mother. "You ready for this?"

"Yes," she grinned wide, even though her head shook a slight no.

As a group, they moved down the hall to Maddie and Harry's room. Tara watched intently as Maddie walked; still in yoga pants and Harry's shirt with a tiara and veil on her head. She could feel the nervous excitement beginning to creep into her veins.

"How does it feel?" Tara asked as they reached Maddie's room.

"Perfect," Maddie sighed; pushing the door open. "Good Morning Ms. Ellis." She breathed into a smile as they all stepped into the room.

"Good Morning Ma'am," the young woman rose to her feet, eyes taking in Maddie's look for the first time. "You look amazing."

"Thank you," Maddie nodded. "I think it's time for the dress."

"Yes Ma'am," she moved then, nodding to her assistant as they walked towards the dress.

It was quite the production, getting Maddie into her dress. While Tara and her team took great care of the veil, Ms. Ellis and her assistant handled the dress and Ella and Hannah provided support and steadiness for Maddie as she stepped into the gown. Maddie couldn't help but giggle as the team of people moved around her, all under this half tent of tulle over her head. Thankfully she could hear the photographer snapping away. This would certainly be a shot for the books.

Maddie caught Ella's eyes as she held onto her hand and she smiled; a warm, heavy, emotion filled smile. "Can you believe all of this?" Maddie was quiet as she lifted her eyebrows.

"No," Ella shook her head, pressing her lips together in effort to keep from crying. "But it's happening."

"It is," Maddie nodded; swallowing back a sob. She could feel hands around her; under the dress, over the dress, above her head. They were buttoning and zipping and fluffing and arranging.

Taking a deep breath in, she blew it out slowly.

"You look beautiful," Ella whispered.

"Thank you," Maddie whispered back. "So do you."
"Okay, Madeline," Ms. Ellis called up from below. "I'm going to slip your shoes on your feet."

"Thank you," Maddie called out with a bit of a giggle as the young woman lifted her feet into her shoes.

"Okay..." She came out from underneath. "Everyone step out and away." With a squeeze to Maddie's hand, Ella followed orders; along with everyone else. And Maddie stood alone as they all took her in.

"You look..." Hannah couldn't finish her sentence but the look on her face said it all. As the team of stylists and hair and makeup professionals moved around Maddie, getting everything into place, she let her eyes close.

Deep breath in. Let it out slowly.

Again.

One more time.

"Okay." Tara's voice called into her thoughts. "I'm done."

Maddie opened her eyes.

"Aannnd..." Ms. Ellis ran her hand over the back of the gown one more time before she stepped back and into Maddie's view. "I'm done."

"Are you ready to see?" Hannah asked.

"No," Maddie shook her head, feeling slightly teary, slightly shaky.

"Come on," Ella held out her hand. "I'll help you." Maddie blinked and nodded and took her best friend's hand. Turning together they faced the giant, floor-length mirror.

And Maddie breathed.

"Oh my God..." She wavered; looking over her reflection. Despite all of her modesty, all of her humility, she knew; she looked amazing. She felt tears come to her eyes as the impact of her own image washed over her. She felt so much in that moment; content, happy, bright, cheery, relaxed—in love. "I..." She tried and failed to put words to it all.

"What is it?" Hannah stepped up to her side. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded, her smile stretching wide. "It's just...I look like..."

"A Princess?" Ella offered. And though she had tossed that phrase around before in jest, she was completely serious as she smiled at Maddie.

"Yes." The weight of the admission made Maddie's chest swell. She allowed for the tiniest moment of unfurl, the tiniest minute of craziness to breeze across her mind and then, with a deep breath, she took control. Deep breath in. Let it out slowly. She smiled.

This was it. She was ready.
"Okay ladies," Ms. Schuler stepped into the room, a warm smile and task-oriented eyes. "Your bouquets are downstairs and the cars are awaiting us outside."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, snapping her eyes away from her reflection and turning towards the two most important women in her life. "Now listen," she spoke softly to them, her voice full of love. "I don't know how I'll ever be able to thank you for today..." She met their eyes; steady and calm. "But thank you, both of you, for being here with me today. I would not have made it through this morning without either of you."

"Oh honey," Ella blinked, tears loosening in her eyes. Hannah smiled, her hands moving to comfort both of the girls.

"Also..." Maddie smiled. "The second we step outside of this home, you should assume that everything you do, everything, is being recorded for posterity. So...if you don't want Sylvia at your salon to see you blowing your nose or adjusting your knickers..." Maddie winked at her mom. "Do it inside."

"Yes darling," Hannah laughed.

"How in the world are you so calm right now?" Ella looked to Maddie with a slight tremble. "How is it that you're not a mess?"

"Easy," Maddie smiled; a small, simple smile that spoke thousands of words. "At the end of this parade, at the end of that aisle...is Harry." Maddie blinked at the tears in her eyes, the peacefulness in her heart. "Harry, who loves me more than anything in this world. Harry, who came to Bendal to kiss me, who asked me to be his wife, who has been waiting...all day...for me."

"Wow..." Ella was going to cry. It was a done deal. This wedding was going to take her down.

"There is absolutely nowhere else for me to be." Maddie's eyes were shining, her smile bright. She was ready.

"It's time," Ms. Schuler announced. Maddie nodded and, releasing her hold on her mother and her best friend, she watched as they moved around her and towards the door. Taking one last look around the room, Maddie took a deep breath and followed.

Holding tight to the railing, she descended the stairs, noticing the way the staff, both permanent and hired-for-the-day, softened as they took her in. With her head held high, she accepted the bouquet from the florist, thanking her with a teary voice for adding the delphinium to her bouquet; remembering both of her fathers as she looked it over.

"Ms. Marshall," Joan smiled to Ella with a nod. It was time for her to go. Without words, Ella turned to Maddie; meeting her eyes with love, squeezing her hand with affection. And then, with a deep breath, she was gone; moving to the car that would take her and the little ones to the Cathedral.

Maddie took a deep breath and met Hannah's eyes.

"You look beautiful mother," she smiled sweetly, comfortingly.

"Hmm..." Hannah chuckled softly. "We're quite the pair, aren't we?"

"Yes we are." Maddie's cheeks pulled wide. Their eyes were trained on the cars lined up outside.
It was all arranged; meticulously so. It had been rehearsed and rehearsed; timed down to the second. Ella's car pulled away and hers moved forward; that beautiful classic Rolls Royce. Arthur lead up the security team ready to move in the Land Rover behind it. Maddie turned then, to the team of people who had been helping her all morning. "Thank you," she was genuine with her words, with her smile. "Thank you all so much. For everything...."

"Ma'am," Joan's voice was warm; calling Maddie's attention forward. "It's time."

"Okay," Maddie nodded and looked to her mother.

"What do you say sweetheart?" Hannah held her hand out. "Should we go find out what Harry's been up to all morning?"

"Ha!" Maddie's laughter resonated around them. "Yes. Yes...I think maybe we should." She took her mother's hand and, without another look back, she took that first step through the door, that first step towards the cathedral; towards him.

And though she was nervous, her heart beating wildly in her chest, nothing could sweep the smile from her face, the joy in her soul. Slowly, they made their way to the car; taking great care as she slid into her seat. Arranging the fabric around her, she settled into the warm, plush leather seats and looked out to the gates. Throngs of people were gathered; waving flags and cheering. With her mother settled next to her, the door closed and the car rolled forward towards the beginning of the craziness.

Maybe she should have been more nervous than she was. Maybe she was naïve and young and silly and slightly high from the excitement of it all.

But she didn't care. It was time. Time to go to the Cathedral. Time to walk down that aisle. Time to marry him; Harry.

She was ready. It was time.

(To Be Continued...)
Chapter 102

Twenty years from this day a retiring driver for The Royal Family would sit down with a publisher to discuss a book—a book he had zero intention of writing. But, when the publisher would ask of his fondest memories, the driver would get a twinkle in his eye and, with a slight smirk, he would talk about this day. The day he was called upon to drive the Duchess to St. Paul's to marry the Duke. He would talk about how sweet she was; bidding him good morning before they set about the long drive. He would talk about how at ease she was; waving to the people who lined the streets, smiling wide, bowing her head in the appropriate places. He would talk about how she and her mother hummed "Going to the Chapel" from the backseat in order to, he guessed, quell high nerves. He would talk about the way she paused, just before stepping from the car, and thanked him; the way she met his eyes, used his name. He would say that even on this day that was so important in her life, this day that surely brought up anxiety, she made it a point to remember his name and to say thank you. For the rest of his time with The Royal Family, he would smile fondly when he was driving her, when anyone spoke of her.

When Maddie stepped from the car at St. Paul's, she could hear it—the roar from the crowd that had camped overnight across from the Cathedral. She could hear it over the cascade of bells announcing her arrival. She could hear it over the pounding of her heart in her ears. It was loud and boisterous and for her. Her life with Harry so far had been peppered with surreal moments, with larger than life extravagances. But none had ever been quite like this day was starting out. Her eyes met Ella's, who was standing at the ready, and Maddie nearly started laughing. Both of them knew very well that, had Ella not been invited to this event, she would have most certainly been camped out across the street. Ella bit back her laugh and offered the slightest wink to her best friend before moving into her role.

Maddie took a moment to find her footing, her gown flowing around her and then she turned to the crowd; offering up a wide smile and a wave. The cheering increased. She already felt like she had been waving for hours. She had waved at so many people on the way; people waving flags, people wearing masks of Harry's face, people wearing "Team Maddie" shirts, people who were clearly mourning Harry's marriage and subsequent departure from bachelorhood. She felt like she had been waving for hours and the waving was far from over. She would have never guessed the impact of her wave, of her smile. But there it was, all lined out in front of her. This was her life now. Smiling and waving.

She took a few steps forward as her mother rounded the car and Ella handed her the bouquet before moving to adjust her train. The Bishop was standing on the red carpet at the top of the stairs, waiting for her to join him, to follow him into the Cathedral. It was funny, Maddie thought, how they had spent so much time waiting. Waiting for this day, waiting for the call to go, driving through town at such a slow pace and now that they were finally here, they were moving quite quickly.

As the bells continued to peal, as the crowd continued to cheer, Ella's steady eyes met hers and nodded with a grin. She was ready; dress and veil adjusted. Maddie took her mother's hand and, with one last look to the watchers, she focused her attention forward and they all began up the stairs.

There were moments; moments that people would remember forever. Of course this day would be
chronicled like none other before in her life; videos and photographs in abundance. Maddie would forever be able to access every potential angle of the moment she stepped into St. Paul's cathedral that morning; full of people rising to their feet and turning to her.

Deep breath in, let it out slowly.

Maddie's smile never drifted from her face, from her eyes—not because they had rehearsed it, not because she was stepping into this new smile and wave role. That smile was in place because she knew, with every step, exactly what was waiting for her at the end.

Her very own pot of gold.

Her eyes twinkled with amusement as her lips absorbed the laughter. Stilling in the entryway, Ms. Ellis worked quickly behind her, adjusting her train, her veil, and stepping from the moment. The Bishop spoke softly to her; reassuring words, comforting words, congratulations. But Maddie remembered very little of it. Her fingers grasped Hannah's with a reassuring squeeze; hoping her mother was ready for this, praying she was going to be okay. Ella fell into place behind her, the Bishop gave his last nod to Maddie and, to signal their procession, he turned towards the Cathedral.

And then it began. The music played out; a triumphant announcement. Her mother's fingers stroked hers.

Deep breath. Smile. Head high.

Step forward.

In the future she would slowly forget the details; the music, the flowers, the vast majority of the guests. But she would always remember the stunned happiness she felt standing in that massive opulence on the precipice of her married life with Harry. She would always remember how it felt to look out over the sea of smiles, past the plethora of flowers, and know that he was there, in that building; waiting for her.

Harry. With his bright red hair; tamed for this day. Harry with his soft, blue eyes; looking for hers, offering her all of his strength, all of his certainty, all of his grace as she made her way to him. Harry. With his smile; full of assurance and love and... Happiness.

She knew there was music; there must have been music. They had spent hours upon hours listening to an abundance of song options—narrowing it down to this one that would play in this exact moment. She knew there were guests; there must have been guests. She had seen the list of at least a thousand, had felt weak in the knees when she looked at it. And she knew her mother was there with her; she must have been there with her. Because it had been she who had flown to London, she who had climbed into the Rolls Royce with her, she who had held her hand, leading her to the doors of the church, it had been she who had brought her right to this spot; to this moment.

And though the music played and the guests stood, smiled and nodded and her mother held her steady as her knees grew shaky, it was truly Harry who moved her down that aisle. With his promise of what was to come. His promise to love her; always. To be her friend; always. To be there; always.

With a wide smile and a feeling of euphoria, Maddie took a few moments to look around, to take it all in, before her eyes settled on his location and they walked. Slow and steady, they passed throngs of people she didn't know; local VIPs, representatives of various organizations and
charities. Smiling wide, they passed foreign dignitaries; The Crown Princess of Denmark, The President of the United States. They passed celebrities; Elton John, David Beckham. Her breath grew wavy then, her mind just the tiniest bit jolted by the knowledge of all of the power and prestige that sat along that aisle.

And then she saw them; people she knew. Kiki. Collins. Bishop. And she had to look away; it was much too early to fall apart.

In all honesty, the tears didn't come until the moment she saw Autumn; lovely, sweet, Autumn Philips. She was standing tall in a beautiful teal dress and smiling directly at Maddie. And when their eyes met, realization sank into Maddie. They were walking by family now. Filling with tears, her eyes moved away from them; knowing that their families would make her cry. So instead she looked forward.

To him.

And her heart warmed; flushing heat through her entire body. Her eyes swept over him, watching as Will turned first; humor in his eyes at the switch in position. She watched him nudge his brother ever so slightly but it wasn't needed. He was already turning around. And then he saw her.

Maddie decided right then and there that this was the reason that brides were kept from grooms the night before a wedding. This, right here. This anticipatory feeling, this look that crossed Harry's face when finally, finally, she was there. With a shuddery breath in, his smile widened, his eyes danced and Maddie swore she saw him take the smallest fraction of a step, as if he were coming to get her. But he stopped. He waited.

Resisting all urges to skip the rest of the way down the aisle, Maddie kept her pace and silently thanked Joan for making her walk this aisle a dozen times and her mother for her gift of patience. It was all that was keeping her from throwing herself into his arms and kissing him; long before it was officially acceptable to do so. She knew she should be watching her pace, she should be smiling at Charles and Camilla and The Queen, but she simply could not move her eyes from his. It was only when she made it to the front of the church, when she and her mother took those last few stairs, that she realized she had made it to the altar; this was it. It was time.

The music continued to play as she took her place at his side. He was all smiles as he nodded to her mother, all joy as he turned to her, eyes locking into hers.

"It's about time you got here..." Harry whispered; a twinkle in his eye. "I've been waiting so long."

"Hmm..." Maddie's cheeks pulled into a wide grin, mindful of the watching eyes, the watching world. Trying to keep this moment between just them, she spoke low. "If you remember, it takes nearly four minutes to walk this aisle."

"I wasn't talking about just today..." His voice caught in his throat, his hands flexed—aching to reach out to her.

"Henry..." She warned under her breath; her eyes growing fuzzy.

"Thirty years..." He breathed; deep breath in, slowly out.

"Shhh..." She begged, pleaded with him through her smile to stop, to spare her the tears that were threatening to spill.
And then, as if sent from the God she could feel all around her, the Bishop stepped forward and gave a nod to Hannah. Maddie turned to face her and Ella who came to take her bouquet. Hoping to ground herself, hoping to anchor her heart, Maddie looked to her best friend and, though Ella smiled wide, though she silently offered her all of her strength, the tears in her eyes only pushed Maddie closer to the edge.

"Hey..." Hannah breathed; calling her daughter's attention in the softest way possible. "You're okay..." She smiled, her hands reaching to move the veil up and over Maddie's head. As she straightened the soft fabric, she ran her hands over her arms, she met her eyes and she smiled; that comforting, assured smile that only her mother held. Maddie nodded, blinked, and with a deep, settling breath, she turned forward.

"You look beautiful," his voice was warm next to her; his finger on his left hand rising to stroke the back of her right hand; one swift swipe of his skin that sent shivers through hers.

"So do you..." She risked a glance, risked the tears, and smiled up at him.

And then, in effort to pull her from the tears, to pull her into the revelry with him, his lips pulled up into the slightest of smirks and he winked; knowing fully well it would be talked about the next day. He didn't care. This was his day; his and Maddie's. And it worked. Maddie's lips pressed together, muffling the giggle; stopping the laughter. The Bishop stepped forward and gave them a nod. It was starting. Seriousness washed over them both, pulling them into the gravity of the day.

"Dearly beloved," the music had faded and the Bishop's voice boomed throughout. "We are gathered here in the sight of God and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God himself, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, at first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee, and is commended in Holy Writ to be honorable among all men; and therefore is not by any to be entered, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly; but reverently, discreetly, soberly, and in the fear of God, duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained."

Maddie could sense Harry next to her, could feel his impatience as he rocked ever so slightly on his feet. To be fair, she was impatient too. Though she understood the protocol of it all, the propriety, the traditions, she desperately wanted to touch him; to hold his hand, to feel connected. As the Bishop finished speaking and stepped away and the Archbishop of Canterbury stepped forward, Maddie knew what that signified. His job was to marry them, to ensure that they left the Cathedral as Husband and Wife. He nodded a smile to the two of them and then, in a loud, commanding voice,

"I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it. For be ye well assured, that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God's word doth allow are not joined together by God; neither is their matrimony lawful."

A moment of silence followed; allowed for a breath, a pause, before the tall, regal man turned first to Harry, "Henry Charles Albert David, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together according to God's law in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"
"I will." It wasn't a whisper. It was loud and clear and declarant. A promise. An answer he had been waiting his whole life to give.

As the Archbishop turned to face Maddie, the roar of the crowd outside drifted through the congregation, bringing a slight laughter to the moment, a wide smile to Harry's face and a warmth to Maddie's heart. It truly was the only reminder that there were others watching.

"Madeline Jae, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together according to God's law in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love him, comfort him, honour and keep him, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

Maddie's eyes shifted to meet Harry's eyes, "I will." The crowd roared again.

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" As Hannah held Maddie's right hand, giving it over to the Archbishop, the two women shared one last moment of familial love, a look that spoke multitudes of emotions. But before she could be overtaken by feelings, Maddie was being handed over to Harry.

With the softest of fingers, the most gentle of touch he took her right hand in his and they finally, finally, faced each other. Her eyes settled a hazy focus on him; realizing there were so many more people there than just the two of them, but refusing to acknowledge it. It had taken them much too long to get to this point where they were together; their focus on each other, their hands clasped between them. She wanted to keep this flash of time only for her.

But, knowing that they needed the Archbishop to make it official, Maddie's subconscious let him into her bubble. He nodded to Harry and directed his vows.

"I, Henry Charles Albert David..." The corners of Harry's mouth tugged up just slightly, just enough, remembering Maddie's recitation. Sucking in his breath, he repeated.

"I, Henry Charles Albert David..."

"Take thee, Madeline Jae..."

"Take thee... Madeline Jae..." Maddie watched his Adams' Apple bob and her throat tightened.

"To my wedded wife..." The Archbishop encouraged.

"To my wedded wife."

And it hit her. The wave of emotion she had hoped they had rehearsed out, the tide of feelings that washed over her. They had spent hours in this Cathedral; walking and standing and kneeling but not once, not one single time, had they repeated these vows.

"To have and to hold from this day forward."

Maddie blinked her eyes, praying she wouldn't break down, praying she wouldn't cry.

"To have and to hold from this day forward..." Harry, catching her struggle, offered all he could in that moment; a stroke from his thumb, warm, welcoming eyes.

"For better, for worse."
"For better, for worse." He was beaming. And she was on the brink of blubberyng. She could see the headlines now.

"For richer, for poorer..."

"For richer, for poorer..." Blubbering Bride Ruins Royal Wedding.

"In sickness and in health..."

"In sickness and in health..." Maddie looked up to him then, wishing she could share her headline with him, share a laugh with him and instead, her mind was silenced.

"To love and to cherish..."

Harry was crying.

"To love and to cherish..." His voice wavered. It wasn't full on crying but there were tears and he was sniffing and his hand was holding hers as though it were the only thing he had in the world.

"Till death us do part."

And she was missing it all trying to keep the tears from her own eyes.

"Till death us do part." Harry was solemn, stoic; he wasn't playing, he wasn't laughing. He was pledging his entire life to her.

"According to God's holy law..."

Maddie's fingers moved in his; propriety be damned, she was holding onto him in this moment—this moment when he became her husband. Her hand wrapped around his and she let the tears fill her eyes.

"According to God's holy law."

Harry smiled wide; lighting up the entire room.

"And thereto I give thee my troth..."

His eyes flashed wicked; he knew what that word meant.

"And thereto I give thee my troth."

Maddie's hands shook as they let go and Harry's fingers stroked hers as they reclaimed each other. His right hand resting in hers as the crowds roared outside. Her lips trembled as she smiled at him and his shoulders shuddered as he took a breath. The Archbishop smiled encouragingly and nodded to Maddie.

"I, Madeline Jae..." And then, with a voice that spoke of absolute certainty, of a single, clear mission, more sure than anyone in the entire world, Maddie repeated her vows; line for line, word for word—never once breaking eye contact with Harry.

"I, Madeline Jae."
"Take thee, Henry Charles Albert David..."

Her lips formed love around all four of his names. His tongue tipped out of his mouth, pulling his bottom lip between his teeth. Nerves. Nerves and excitement.

"To my wedded husband." My husband, she thought. Mine.

"To have and to hold from this day forward..." Her smile stretched.

"For better, for worse..." It was a cadence; marching her to the end of this long journey.

"For richer, for poorer..." Her chest lightened.

"In sickness and in health..." Her shoulders felt weightless.

"To love and to cherish..." Her heart swelled.

"Till death us do part." She was floating.

"According to God's holy law..." So this was what heaven felt like.

"And thereto I give thee my troth."

She was his wife. His wife. His.

As the crowds cheered from outside the Cathedral, William handed the rings he had been carrying to the Archbishop, who held his hand over them as they rested in his Bible. "Bless, O Lord, these rings, and grant that they who give them and they who shall wear them may remain faithful to each other, and abide in thy peace and favour, and live together in love until their lives' end. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Harry was first; first to declare his intent, first to say his vows and now, first to slip the ring onto her finger. With great ease and eyes full of pride, Harry repeated the words from the Archbishop, "With this ring I thee wed; with my body I thee honour; and all my worldly goods with thee I share." His hands held hers in both of his, his thumbs stroking the back of her hand tenderly. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

And then, as realization settled over Maddie, as a wave of peace and contentment calmed her beating heart, she took his hand, his ring, and repeated the same. It was getting easier and easier; the recitation, the words, the breathing. Maddie's eyes twinkled, her smile carefree. Harry held tight to her hand as they turned towards the Archbishop, letting go only as they moved to their knees; bowing their heads.

"Let us pray," the Archbishop called out. "O Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind, giver of all spiritual grace, the author of everlasting life; send thy blessing upon these thy servants, this man and this woman, whom we bless in thy name; that, living faithfully together, they may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made, whereof these rings given and received are a token and pledge; and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together, and live according to thy laws; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Their hands came together one last time; wrapped in the cloth of the Archbishop as he ordered, "Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder." Their hands were released and
Maddie hated the way it ached to let him go. It seemed so unfair. This moment in time when they were pledging so much to the other, the very least they should be allowed was to hold on to the one thing that was pulling them through this.

Alas, the Archbishop paid no mind to the musings in Maddie's head; instead addressing the congregation as she and Harry remained on their knees. "Forasmuch as Henry and Madeline have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of rings, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that they be man and wife together, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

And the roar that came from outside could not compare to the roar that came from within. Maddie swallowed the lump in her throat and fought to control her urge to hug Harry tightly to her. The Archbishop continued with his blessing,

"God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, bless, preserve, and keep you; the Lord mercifully with his favour look upon you; and so fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace, that ye may so live together in this life, that in the world to come ye may have life everlasting." Maddie blinked back tears. "Amen."

The music sounded out. The singing began. And, before Maddie could move to her feet, Harry was there; offering a steady hand. With a wide grin and matching teary eyes, she let her fingers slip into his and rose to his side. William and Hannah left them at the altar then and Harry, his hand wrapped snug and secure around hers, led the way to their chairs for the remainder of the service.

From that moment on, Harry kept her hand in his. He snuck glances; offered his knee-weakening grin, and kept her with him; physically and emotionally. Though he knew there would be talk; that comparisons would be discussed, judgments made. But he didn't care. He had waited thirty years for this moment; he a husband, she a wife. Besides, what were they going to do? Un-marry them? They couldn't. The Archbishop had just called upon God to bless them. Take away his title?

They could have it.

Cause he had her. It was as simple as that.

This day was many, many things. It was a beginning. It was a conclusion. It was momentous. It was effortless. It was flawless in execution and overrun with love and excitement, friendship and passion, festivity and joy. It was a day they had imagined, a day they had planned for, a day they thought would never actually arrive.

It was the day Harry had become her husband. It was the day Maddie had become his wife. It was an occasion to be marked, an occasion to be celebrated, an occasion to be revered. The enormity of it escaped all of his words. The simplicity of it escaped all of her sentiments.

They remained together; through the Hymn, The Anthem, The Address and, when called to the High Altar, Harry linked her hand through his arm and, resting his hand on top of hers, they followed on.

Falling to their knees one more time, they snuck a private glance, an isolated smile. It was beautiful. Maddie couldn't quite contain the way her heart warmed as the Motet was delivered, as they moved into a long, liturgical list of prayers. She had never been incredibly religious, not nearly as devout as some but in this moment, kneeling before God, next to Harry, it was a spiritual
experience unlike any other. With every prayer, every blessing that was bestowed upon her and her new husband, Maddie felt wave after wave of love and devotion and significance and finally...

"Let us pray." Heads bowed. "O Almighty Lord, and everlasting God, vouchsafe, we beseech thee, to direct, sanctify, and govern both our hearts and bodies, in the ways of thy laws, and in the works of thy commandments; that through thy most mighty protection, both here and ever, we may be preserved in body and soul; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen." Maddie sucked in a breath; this was it. "The blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you always."

The fanfare sounded and, taking Harry's extended hand, Maddie rose to her feet; singing the National Anthem to her new Queen, her new Grandmother. And as the congregation sat, as the choir sang, the newlyweds, followed by their families and Ella, made their way out of public view for the first time since this had all began. The very second they disappeared, Harry broke and pulled her hand into both of his, turning to her; eyes wide and bright.

"Madeline..." One hand moved to her face, his fingers daring to stroke her cheek. "Baby you look amazing."

"Thank you," she whispered, still unsure of the formality this moment required. Her hand lifted to his, pressing it closer to her cheek as she breathed a little easier. "You clean up well yourself, Captain."

"How are you? Are you holding up?" He looked her over, his hand moving down the base of her neck.

"I'm fine," she grinned, blinking back tears for the umpteenth time that day. "I'm...wow...Harry. I'm your wife."

"Yeah..." He breathed. His head bobbed into a nod as it hit him again; not for the first time, not for the last. "You most definitely are that."

"Are you okay?" She smiled up at him sweetly.

"I want to kiss you..." He wasn't being mischievous, he wasn't trying for naughty or wicked. He genuinely wanted to kiss his wife; very, very much. Swallowing back the lump in his throat, he met her eyes. "Can I kiss you?"

"No..." Though nothing inside of her stood behind her words; her head shaking weakly. "I think you'll get me into trouble with God...and The Queen. And Ella." His lips pulled into a smile as he sighed his defeat.

"Probably best not to tangle with any of those."

"Probably," Maddie agreed.

And then they were no longer alone. Ella was the first one through the door, her eyes puffy as she held onto Maddie's bouquet. Harry turned a smile to her, opening his mouth to say hello, but she held up her hand.

"You two..." She shook her head, taking a deep breath. "You know you're taking down weak willed women all over the world right now?"
"Sorry," Harry held up his hand that wasn't holding onto Maddie.

"No you're not," she eyed him, her smile moving back into place.

"No I'm not." He watched as Ella moved around Maddie, checking her makeup, tending to her dress. His family stepped in then, with Hannah mixed among them. Unable to resist, his grin turned slightly wicked. "Ella, you've met my brother Will, no?"

"Sorry?" Ella's eyes went wide just as the very same brother stepped up to the group.

"Yes of course," Will smiled; poised and charming as he held his hand out to her. "Ella. We met in Bendal. And a few times since then, I believe. You look lovely today."

"Thank you," she flushed slightly as she shook his hand, her eyes darting to Harry who winked like the naughty little boy she knew he really was. The group moved further into the space; parents hugging Maddie and Harry and, before too long, the Archbishop brought them all back to point, back to focus.

Leading the way to the strong, ornate table, Harry and Maddie signed a set of documents; license, Cathedral Registry, Royal Registry. It felt like mere moments before the family was being sent back into the Cathedral; save for William and Ella. As members of the clergy filed past them, only the four remained. Maddie moved her engagement ring back to the correct hand, resting it against the new ring Harry had placed there just that day. She tucked her hand into the crook of his arm; his hand instantly covering it with warmth and assurance. Ella handed her bouquet back to her and fell into place behind them, next to Harry's brother.

"Hey Maddie?" Harry spoke in soft tones; his fingers patting against hers.

"Harry?" She whispered back.

"I love you for this," he turned to look at her then. "For many, many reasons, but for this specifically."

"This?" She lifted her eyebrows, tears racing back.

"Showing up today." He chuckled. "We're not even close to done and...thank you," he squeezed her hand under his. "Thank you for today."

"Don't mention it," her voice wavered ever so slightly as she sniffed and shrugged; hoping to elevate the moment. "Besides...I had nothing better to do."

"No?" He grinned.

"No." She nudged him with her arm. And then, as if on cue, the fanfare sounded out. "Not even close."

Harry took a deep, cleansing breath, and, hand over hers, they took a step forward; towards the congregation, towards the rest of their day, the remainder of their lives. Ms. Schuler had told Maddie at least a hundred times 'Remember to smile.' It was her wedding day and nobody liked to see a sullen bride. And though there were moments when her nerves had threatened the best of her, there were times when the enormity of it all came close to too much, Maddie never once had to remind herself to smile.
It was with that same, complete-happiness smile that reached her eyes, that she walked back into the sanctuary on Harry's arm. It was that same smile she turned to the congregation, now on their feet to greet the newlyweds. It was the same smile she held as she dipped to curtsy before The Queen while Harry bowed his head. It was the same smile that found her cousins; beaming and wiping at their eyes. The very same smile she carried with her down that four minute walk towards the doors to the Cathedral.

With every step towards the outside, Harry had become more and more lively, more giddy; smiling and laughing and holding her hand to him as they walked. Stepping out into light of day was jarring in the most wonderful of ways. They were greeted by the grand cascade of The Bells of St. Paul's. They were welcomed by thousands of cheering fans, most of whom were smiling just as wide as the bride and groom.

They paused for a moment; allowing for photos and for Harry to pull on his gloves, situate his hat. And then, taking great care to support his new wife, Harry led the way down the carpeted stairs to the awaiting carriage. A few salutes, well wishes, and Harry was up and holding out a hand to her, ready to pull her up to him, ready to sit next to her in the parade that was his life. With her bouquet resting on the seat across from them, Maddie sat down and let out her breath, the very last bit of tension slipping away from her as Harry settled in his spot. His hand found hers, pulling it into his. With a smile and a wave to their collective parents, the horses lurched forward and they were off.

"I'm dying to kiss you..." His hand was tight around hers as he spoke to her across the carriage. They had barely pulled away from the church, barely made it onto the parade route and he was already pushing. His eyes carried the same wicked twist as his lips. "Is there any way that can happen?"

"Absolutely not," Maddie breathed; though everything in her body was screaming for him to do just that. Turning her face from his, her eyes from his, she waved to the crowds as they passed. This was the part she hadn't been prepared for; the delay in gratification—all of the formalities that had to be met before she could celebrate her husband.

"Fine." He sighed heavily; smile never wavering. "I'll behave," Harry squeezed her hand in his before bringing it to his lips. Maddie's face turned to his as the on-lookers clapped and cheered at this display of affection. "From here on out," he winked. "I'll behave."

"You're going to be in so much trouble," she spoke between teeth, smile masking the words.

"Totally worth it," he kept hold of her hand in his and turned to wave to the crowds. Not one ounce of him regretted taking just a tiny bit for himself.

The journey to Buckingham Palace was invigorating. Though Maddie had seen the people lining the streets on her way to the Cathedral, she had been more nervous, more focused. And now, with Harry next to her, she could feel their excitement compound her own. And Harry was right there with her the whole way. They smiled, they waved, they shared laughs and sidelong glances and when Harry dropped her hand to salute, he was quick to sweep it back up into his.

Finally, when they came to a stop at Buckingham, Maddie felt completely at ease; relaxed and overjoyed as Harry stepped from the carriage and reached back to help her out. With big smiles to the awaiting photographers, they stepped, hand in hand, into the palace and out of view.

They were going upstairs to be with the family for just a brief glimpse of time before they went to the balcony. Fifteen minutes to hug their parents, to have a much deserved drink before they faced
the public who was coming to the Palace in droves. Staff came out to greet them; to take Harry's hat and gloves, to take Maddie's bouquet. As the rest of the wedding party and their families began to arrive, Harry took Maddie's hand and nodded to the side.

"We're going to take the elevator," Harry informed the staff that was waiting for him, leading her in that direction.

"The elevator?" Maddie giggled slightly but followed anyway. He had done this before; this was her first time. Stepping in next to him, she smiled as the doors closed before her.

"God you're beautiful," his voice was low, rough, as he turned to her.

"Oh I see what's happening..." She felt her stomach stir as he stepped towards her. "Are you trying to rattle me?" She met his eyes; narrowed and playful. "Do you keep saying these things because you want me to push you up against the nearest wall and..."

"Are you going to push me up against the nearest wall? Cause I am completely okay with..."

"You know your family is just outside that door and..."

"I can't wait to kiss you." He cut her off; his head shaking as his hands moved to her neck, cupping her gently; tipping her face to his. "Truly. I've waited long enough. I think I've lasted longer than anybody would have guessed. But I can't wait any longer."

"Such a big talker," Maddie grinned as the elevator began to move. "So many words from you with, what I'm guessing will be, a small delivery."

"Ohhh..." Harry chuckled; a deep rumble that resonated in his chest. "Dangerous move Doctor."

"I'm not afraid of you," she took a deep breath, her fingers curling around his wrists as he moved closer. "And I don't know if you've heard..." Her eyes flickered in anticipation. "But it's Duchess now."

Harry nodded; a heavy, deep nod as though he were letting that wash over him once more. With a grin, he dipped his head. "I've heard..." He muttered against her lips and then, as his lips slid against hers, she closed her eyes and sighed into him. With a moan, he stepped closer; his hands still on her neck, angling her up to him. Her lips parted under his, welcoming him with enthusiasm.

The fight was futile. He had won. She had surrendered; happily. They had been pronounced Husband and Wife. He was kissing his bride. He only had very few precious seconds before he was going to have to share her with the world again; he refused to be cheated of this moment. This silent, intimate, private moment where he kissed his wife.

"Harry..." She gasped as the elevator slowed to a stop. With great effort, she pulled her lips from his; her heart aching as she moved.

"Mmm..." He smiled, his mouth seeking hers again; oblivious for the moment of his surroundings.

"We have to..." Her fingers fell to his chest, stilling him in his quest. She could feel his heart pounding under her hand, under all of that cloth; she could feel his heartbeat.

"I know..." He nodded; taking a breath to calm himself.
"Your family and..." She began her explanation.

"I know," his eyes lifted to hers; full of adoration. With one more kiss to her mouth, he sighed and reached for her hand with a groan. "This is going to be a very long afternoon."

"Yes." She smiled; slipping back into work mode.

"Drinks with the family," Harry's hand smoothed over the front of his uniform. "Balcony. Brunch..."

"Yes," Maddie squeezed his hand.

"You okay?" He looked her over, wanting to be sure.

"Yes," she turned her eyes to his. "A little breathless, but I'm just fine."

"I'll take it," he grinned, proud, as the doors opened before them.

When they stepped into the room, the family was assembled; Charles and Camilla, William and a very pregnant Kate, Hannah, Ella, The Queen and Prince Phillip. As they breeched the doorway, Charles led a light round of applause and Maddie felt her cheeks flush. How funny, she thought, that the smaller group brought about more nerves than the masses of people from this morning.

But there was no time for her to spiral in any sort of fashion. As bottles of champagne were popped and poured, rounds of hugs began.

"Your Majesty," Maddie curtsied as The Queen moved to hug her, pressing a kiss to her cheek with a smile.

"That tiara looks magnificent on you, dear," her eyes grew a bit nostalgic as she looked the bride over. "My mother would have been very proud."

"Thank you," Maddie whispered, a sob in her throat. "Thank you very much. It was...quite the honor to wear it."

"Madeline..." Charles rich voice called out. "Darling. Welcome to the family." He hugged her tight; pressing a kiss to her cheek.

"Thank you, sir," Maddie hugged him back; feeling at home in his warm arms.

"The wedding was beautiful," Camilla took her turn.

"Thank you," Maddie agreed wholeheartedly. And then Hannah stepped forward. Maddie blinked back the tears as she hugged her mother tight and smiled with great joy when Hannah moved to hug Harry.

"Congratulations sister," William pressed a kiss to her cheek and then offered a wink. "And best of luck to you."

"Thank you," Maddie chuckled softly. "And how are you doing little mother?" She turned her attention to Kate.
"Really well, thank you," Kate smiled; her hand lingering over her belly. "I think he slept through most of the ceremony, so that's nice."

"Ella darling," Harry smiled at Maddie's best friend as he hugged her close. "Did we make you proud?"

"Above and beyond my expectations," she was still a bit teary as she lowered her voice. "Also...that particular shade of lip gloss looks wonderful on you...Your Royal Highness."

"Of course," Harry nodded, swiping at his upper lip as Ella moved to Maddie's open arms. "You let me walk out here with your lip gloss on my face?" His eyes flashed jokingly to Maddie.

"I'm sorry my darling," she blushed slightly, her eyes sweeping over him for any other hints of their private indiscretion. "You left me witless; what can I say?"

And, as Ms. Schuler stepped into the room with a nod to the Butler, indicating it was time to step out to the balcony, Harry met her eyes, ready with a snappy comeback, but he saw the waver in hers and he silenced himself.

"Harry..." Her voice had the slightest shake to it.

"I got you," he nodded; pulling her hand into both of his. "Don't worry, I've got you." The family stepped to the side; parting as Moses had the sea. And Harry, the steadier of the two at the moment, held her hand in his and, together, they stepped through the doors onto the balcony.

And the world below them went wild.

"Wow..." She couldn't help the word that bubbled up from deep inside, pushing through her lips in a gasp. It was indescribable; unimaginable. She had never, ever, in her entire life been part of something so...magnificent. There were people as far as she could see; cheering and clapping and waving the Union Jack.

He watched as she took it in, watched as her mind processed it all and, when he saw her lips let out that last breath of anxiety and pull up in a smile, when he saw her hand lift in the air and offer a wave to the adoring crowd below, he relaxed and let his heart out of the protected gate. He turned to face the crowd with her, tossing up his own wave and beaming grin. The family filed out behind them; taking their spots around them as they waved to the people.

And then because he didn't want to wait for the chanting to start, didn't want to wait for that awkward moment where they hemmed and hawed and went for it—because he didn't want to wait any longer.

"Madeline..." In truth, he could have said any word at all but when he said it in that voice, she would always turn to him. And she did. She turned. Her eyes finding his and she knew. Her hand stretched out for his, pulling it up from his side and she smiled; bright and cheery and ready.

And he wasn't facing the crowd. He was facing her. He was attending only to her. He lifted their join hands, pressing a kiss to her hand; a reverent, eyes closed, lips lingering kiss. And then in the beat of a blink his face lifted from her hand and he leaned into her. She felt his free hand move to her cheek, tilting her face to his and she closed her eyes.

This moment was hers. She didn't care that there were thousands of people watching from the street, thousands more watching from TV. She didn't care that her mother stood to her right or that
the Queen of England stood to his left.

In truth it lasted longer than either of them had ever planned, longer than even Harry would have pushed. But he took that half a step closer and she tilted her head that few degrees more and their lips held on to each other, grasping for fractions of seconds.

Maddie was the first to step back, a flush in her cheeks. Her eyes met his with half warning, half promise and he smiled wide; registering the enormous roar from the crowds below. He dropped another kiss to her lips, one to her forehead and, with a wink from his wife, turned back to the crowds; her hand held tightly in his.

Only a few more minutes and they could retire inside. Only a few more minutes and they could go to their reception and begin the celebrations. Only a few more minutes before the duty of his role, of her new role, could loosen just a bit. There would be more cheering. There would be a flyover and there would be one more kiss for the books. And then there would be an entire day of festivities. But for now, Harry was content to watch with pride as she accepted her new role in his world and as his world accepted her.

(To Be Continued)
Chapter 103

"Wow..." Maddie let out a breath as they pulled up outside of their home at Kensington Palace. The decorations trailing behind the Aston Martin drifted down; crinkling as they did. It was a beautiful day; bright and breezy and the most warming sense of calm had settled over Maddie.

"Hmmm?" Harry turned his eyes on her as he killed the ignition; his lips holding onto a lazy sort of grin. Cars full of security, Ms. Ellis, Tara, were pulling up behind them, around them. But in his eyes, it seemed like just the two of them. Maddie hoped they would always have that as they went out in the world in their roles—the ability to center on each other, even when surrounded by others.

"It's just. That brunch was..." She shook her head slowly; still a bit in shock from all the formalities and traditions, from meeting so many heads of state. The switch was so sudden and her mind was working to catch up.

"HA!" Harry clapped his hands together as laughter burst from him. Maddie's smile widened as she watched him chuckle; her eyes registering confusion. "I'm sorry. I just...I love that I got you all the way to the altar before you figured it out."

"Figured it out?" Maddie watched as he slipped from his side of the car, shutting the door and leaning on it as he lowered his voice.

"How incredibly boring my life is."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back as she laughed; good-natured and at ease as he rounded the car to open her door. "Well...you're forgetting one thing."

"What's that?" He took her hand and pulled her from the car.

"Hmmm..." Maddie's eyelids dropped a bit as she stepped up to him; leaning her body to his. "You have me now."

"Yeah?" He moved closer; pressing her between him and the car, his hands resting on the door behind her.

"Mmm..." She nodded, her hands running over the cords and spinets on his uniform. "We can be bored together."

"Yes..." He smiled, his face nearing hers as he nodded. "You make an excellent point."

"I do," she bit at her lip suggestively, her eyes darting to his lips. "I make lots of excellent points."

"You do," his voice dropped suggestively.

"Want to hear another excellent point?"

"Yes."

"You should have let me drive the car from Buckingham."
"Oh wow!" Harry rolled his eyes as he pushed away from her in laughter, taking her hand in his. "You're not going to let that go."

"Your father said I could drive and you...went right ahead and drove anyway."

"Yes, well..." He shrugged as they walked towards the house; looking quite the pair still in their formal dress, tiara still on her head. "I'm the man. I had to drive."

"What?!" Maddie's head tossed back as she laughed. "You're the man?! I cannot believe you just said that. Do you remember who I am? What in the world could have possibly motivated you to..."

"The same thing that's motivating me to do this." And, with a quick kiss to her hand, he dipped down, pulling her up into his arms.

"Oh!" Maddie gasped as he settled her there. "Carrying me over the threshold? Little antiquated, no?"

"It is," he smiled, moving to push the door open. "But this day has been a bit antiquated, wouldn't you agree? I mean, you did just promise to love, honor and obey me."

"I did no such thing!" She laughed as he stepped through their door. The home had been cleaned; tidied and ready to transition into the evening events.

"I'm pretty sure you did," he smirked.

"I can youtube it right now and prove to you that I did not." Though she didn't allow herself to dwell on that fact too long.

"Or..." He moved into the living room and sat her gently back on her feet. "Or we can change out of these clothes and rest up before we head back to Buckhouse for the party."

"Or that..." Maddie smiled, leaning to kiss him. "Brut."

"I think you mean gentleman."

"I think I mean sexist."

"Chivalrous," His eyes flickered with amusement at their back and forth. "Come on, love. Let me do my thing."

"Your thing?" She laughed into a sigh. "Well...I can let it slide just this once. But only because you're in uniform."

"I'll most definitely make note of that," his lips found hers again.

Pulling back, she looked around the room, seeing that the staff of people who had been assembled to dress and make them up that morning had returned to retrieve their items; to prepare for the evening. They were gathered inconspicuously in the entryway, some in the kitchen.

"Ms. Ellis?" Maddie turned around, her dress swooshing around her as she moved.

"Ma'am?" The young dress designer, now instantly famous worldwide, stepped from the office
with a smile.

"Regrettably, I think it's time for me to surrender this beautiful gown."

"Here in the living room?" Harry's grin pulled wide.

"No..." Maddie shook her head at him before turning her attention back to Ms. Ellis. "I would imagine that they are also here for this..." Maddie tapped the beautiful tiara on her head.

"Yes Ma'am. They are upstairs with Tara and her crew."

"Wonderful. I'll be right up." Ms. Ellis nodded and with a sweet smile, she moved to join the others upstairs; ready to help Maddie shed her look from the day. "So..." Maddie turned to Harry, stepping close. "How long do you get to keep this?" Her head cocked to the side.

"Hmmm..." He smiled, his hands running over her arms. "Not long love. There's a crew upstairs waiting for me too."

"That's too bad," she grinned as her lips pressed to his. "I'll see you in a bit." Harry watched as she drifted away from him; one last look from his bride before she moved up the stairs to shed what was left from their morning wedding.

With great care, the veil was unpinned from her hair. With delicate hands, the tiara was lifted from her head and handed over to the Palace officials. With more quickness and ease than they had gone in, Tara pulled the hair pins out; allowing Maddie's hair to flow and cascade from its previous perfect updo. And finally, with the assistance of the others in the room for stability, Maddie stepped from the gown and into the waiting silk robe. Tara double checked Maddie's hair for pins while Ms. Ellis prepared the gown and veil to be transported. It would be cleaned and returned to the Palace offices for display. When both women and their crews were finished, they were ready to leave.

Maddie's reception dress hung in what had been Ella's room; her shoes and accessories lined up beside it. Tara would be leaving for a little over an hour and then she would be back to begin hair and makeup for the evening festivities. Maddie pressed kisses to cheeks, professed genuine thanks for all they had done and then, with a sigh of relief, she bid them good-bye and made her way to the waiting hot water of the shower. When she emerged, refreshed and clean, she found Harry relaxing on their bed.

"Finally!" Harry called out jokingly from where he laid back against their pillows. His uniform had been collected and now, clad in boxers and t-shirt, he was allowing himself a bit of the rest he had been denied the night before. "I thought you would never get out of that dress."

"You should have seen how long it took me to get in it," she sighed as she moved into the room, robe tied loosely about her, patting her hair with a towel.

"Well it was worth every minute. You looked beautiful," he watched her walk towards him with a smile. "Today at St. Paul's; you looked beautiful."

"Thank you," she shrugged lightly, climbing into their bed next to him; a part of her seriously considering a nap.
"I mean it," he reached for her hand, pulling it to him; his lips kissing the inside of her wrist. "You looked absolutely amazing."

"Thank you," she leaned back against the pillows, loving the way his lips caressed her skin as they kissed up her arm. "You know..." Maddie adjusted slightly. "We have an hour before anyone gets here to..."

She needn't say another word; not one. Harry was already there. He had been there all day. His head lifted from her arm and his lips met hers with a caress; a wordless 'I love you'. Maddie was taken back. Not by the force of the kiss but by the weight it carried. It was so heavy; so dense and saturated with emotion, it was almost too much.

Almost.

Her hands moved up to his shoulders as she turned into him, on their way to wrap around his neck, to hold his face to hers. But they couldn't make it any higher; they were weak, like her knees, like her heart, like her breath, like her resolve.

Since walking through the doors of St. Paul's she had been struggling with her emotions; wanting to feel what she felt, but wanting to hold them just far enough away that the entire world wasn't sharing in this most intimate of expressions. And now, having been relieved of the tiara, having shed the beautiful gown that would hang in the museum, she felt like those weights that were holding down her surge of emotions had been lifted.

She was weightless; free to let it all flow. And it did. It flowed from every pore, every corner of her heart. And it flowed right into him; her tongue tangling with his, her lips passing back that wordless 'I love you'.

His hands at her waist were greedy; like his lips, his heart. Maddie went willingly as he pulled; tossing her leg over his, straddling his lap. His hands moved up over her chest, running up her neck and burying into her damp hair as his face tipped up to hers; angling her lips to his. His neck stretched to meet her, to press further into her mouth, to claim her again; over and over.

The flimsy silk robe slacked around her shoulders; drooping to reveal her collar bones, the tops of her breasts, the bright pink, tender skin. Harry moaned as he dipped his head to kiss her there. His lips were soft and warm as her fingers twisted into his hair, holding his face to her; her head titling back so as to allow a groan from deep in her throat.

"I missed you last night..." She breathed. "I hated sleeping in this bed without you..." Maddie gasped as his arms snaked around her waist; pulling her down to him, pressing her closer. The feel of him between her legs, at the clear, stiff, presence of him—of his desire for her—sent chills through her bones.

Harry's chuckle brought goosebumps to her skin. "Do we have time to..." His eyebrows arched as his fingers trailed down the center of her chest, resting on the tie to her robe.

"Yes..." Maddie nodded, taking the tie from his hands and loosening it herself. As the robe fell open, she pulled at his t-shirt.

"Consummate this marriage?" He finished his thought with a wicked grin as she tossed his shirt aside and his hands moved back to her body.

"We do," she smiled wide, her hips wiggling slowly in his lap. "As long as you don't call it
"Would you rather..." His jaw clenched; his hands at her hips, stilling her movements. "Seal the deal?"

"Would you rather..." Maddie's hand tickled down his chest, sliding across his flat stomach and tucking into his boxers. With her hand wrapped firmly around him, she met his eyes. "Would you rather just keep your mouth shut?"

"Oh God..." He groaned; arching up into her hand. "I would absolutely rather keep my mouth shut."

"I thought so," Maddie bit lightly at her bottom lip as she rose up on her knees; allowing her better leverage and more room to slip his boxers from his waist. Harry was all too eager to take over for her, tugging them from his own legs and tossing them to the side. "Oh..." It rolled from Maddie's tongue when Harry's hands tugged the robe from her, the silk sliding against her skin as it went.

By-passing any teasing, any tantalizing, any build up, Maddie took him in her hand and slipped him inside of her. Harry groaned as she settled into his lap, warm and welcoming and so amazing that he need a moment, a breath, to calm himself.

"Hi..." Her cheeks were flushed, her eyelids heavy, her breathing jagged as she smiled down at him; her arms moving around his neck.

"Hello..." His tongue darted out of his mouth, wetting his lips as he fought to steady the surge of excitement that her placement elicited.

And there they were; connected from lips to hips, in the most intimate of places. Her nose was next to his, his cheek rubbing against hers. When he took those deep, necessary, breaths, she could feel his chest rise with hers. His hands were on her back, pressing her close in a delicate way; wanting her as near as he could get her without pushing them prematurely over the edge. Maddie laughed lightly at the way they struggled in that moment, the debate that occurred. It was funny, in the most deliriously sexy of ways, just how the simple act of deep breathing in this position could arouse them both into such a heated state.

Maddie's head tipped to kiss him then; a long, slow, sigh inducing kiss. Harry's hands grew rough as they clutched at her, his arms wrapping nearly all the way around her as his lips worked with hers.

"I love the way you feel inside of me..." She whispered into his ear, her lips tickling his skin causing him to shudder underneath her, bringing a delicious friction to every point they were connected. Feeling frisky and slightly naughty, she began to move; loving the feeling of control.

"Oh me too..." His lips moved to her neck, his hands moving down her back, desperate for more of the friction she was denying him. "Baby..."

"Yes?" Maddie breathed, allowing an achingly slow rock to her hips; feeling his breath shuddering from his lungs.

"Tell me what you want..." He kissed her chest, his thumb running over her nipple. "Do you want to go slow..." His tongue moved to where his thumb had just been; a long, drawn out journey that pulled something of a purr from his wife. "Or do you want to go fast?" His head moved to watch her as his arms pulled her down; rough and fast against him.
"Oh!" She gasped at the sensation. Recovering, her eyes met his, her lips pulling into a smirk. "Why can't I have both?"

"Oh..." Harry groaned, shaking his head against her chest with a chuckle. "You do know how mad you make me? Don't you?" He kissed her lips, a bit rough. "Do you do that on purpose?"

"Ha!" She tilted her head back in laughter; laughter that vibrated through the both of them. "I can't believe I got you all the way to the altar before you figured it out."

"Figured it out?" He smirked at her throwback to their earlier conversation.

"Mmm..." She nodded, lifting off him just slightly, just enough to draw a breath from his lungs before sitting back down. "That you have finally met your match."

Her grin was cocky, her eyes full of desire, as she smiled down at him. She was right; he knew it. He had met his match. She was smug and arrogant and full of all kinds of swagger. Though she was also caring and smart and funny and could work and play just as hard as he could.

She was his exact match. Now she was his wife.

And if he hadn't already been turned on by the slow, teasing way she was moving against him, those facts alone would have driven him to the edge. With a cocky grin of his own, his fingers pulled at her skin, running down her thighs to her ankles that he easily linked around him. Wrapping his arms tight around her waist, he lifted her up, taking her weight against him before moving, laying her back on the bed with an oomph and yelp from the beautiful blonde that dissolved into laughter.

As Harry moved over her, still connected from lips to hips, Maddie surrendered completely to him. Brut or not, he was her husband and though the majority of the day had so far been about tradition and formality and everyone else, she was claiming this brief time for her and for him. Just as she had done at the altar when they were repeating their vows, she tuned out the rest of the world and focused only on him; her husband.

This moment. This moment when he would absolutely give her both.

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Maddie stepped from the spare bedroom dressed and made up and ready to go. If her gown from that morning had been the classic, elegant representation of what a Duchess should be, her gown for that evening was the wild, fun, and happy depiction of how it felt to finally be Harry's wife. Even after her early morning wake up call, even after all of the pomp and circumstance of their ceremony, after her slightly stressful lunch with various heads of state, even after the love she made to her husband...Maddie felt revitalized. She felt alive and free and so ready to rejoice with their friends and family well into the night. The hard part of the day was over, now all that was left was the extravagant celebration of their marriage.

"Wow..." Harry breathed as she joined him in the entry way. "Look at you..."

"Thank you," she grinned; her lips stretching wide as her eyes scanned him in his tux. "I was just thinking the same about you. Do I really get to go home with you?"

"Every night of your life baby," he winked and reached out for her hand.
"I'm such a lucky girl," she laughed lightly as her hand slid into his and they stepped from the house. The car was waiting for them, their Security were waiting for them and, just a quick drive away at Buckingham Palace, their audience for the night was waiting for them. Maddie slipped into the car and Harry, shutting her door behind her, rounded the car to join her.

"How does it feel?" Maddie nodded to the ring on his finger; the ring he had been fiddling with absentmindedly since she had placed it there that morning.

"It feels...new." He grinned, twisting it once more before letting it alone and claiming her hand in his. "I've never worn a ring there so it feels strange and a bit foreign..."

"Constricting?" Maddie offered, her finger running over it.

"Anchoring," he corrected, eyes sweeping down over her reception gown. "You're beautiful."

"Thanks," she smiled, a slight flush rising to her cheeks. "But you've said that already."

"I meant it," his hand lifted hers up to his lips. "You're so beautiful. This morning, this afternoon..." They shared a chuckle in the dark backseat of the car. "And now. You're absolutely beautiful."

"You know, if you're trying to get me to marry you..." She sighed and waved her left hand, her rings shimmering in the moonlight. "Mission accomplished."

"Hmmm..." He smiled into himself, playing with her fingers. "Tell me, how are you, love? Is there anything you need? Anything I can get you?"

"No," she shook her head, looking out the window as they pulled up to Buckingham Palace.

"A drink?" He raised his eyebrows.

"I think the shot of tequila we had will tide me over until they hand me a glass of champagne on the inside..." She squeezed his hand in hers.

"How about...this?" Harry reached into his pocket then, pulling out a piece of her favorite Christmas candy. Maddie's features went soft. With a satisfied grin, he continued. "I mean, what kind of party would it be without..."

Maddie's lips moved to his then, silencing him completely. Her fingers were soft on the side of his face, her kisses featherlike. When she pulled away from him, she was smiling sweetly; her eyes a bit teary as she lifted the candy from his hand. "For the rest of my life..."

"Yeah?" His eyes lifted to meet hers as the car came to a stop.

"For the rest of my life, I will thank God for all of the decisions I made that led me to this moment; to you..."

"Are you trying to make me cry?"

"No," she shook her head and squeezed his hand. "But I mean it Harry Wales. Every single decision."
"You just want my candy," he winked and kissed her. "Me too by the way. Me too."

Their doors were pulled open, pulling them both from the moment. Harry was the first to step out, rounding the car quickly to reclaim her hand, to reclaim his bride. With a lightness in their steps, they moved together into the Palace, ready to join the party that was already gathered in their honor.

(To be Continued)
Chapter 104

The enchanting reception that Ms. Schuler had planned was the perfect combination of classic elegance and unbridled fun; laying the foundation for Maddie's life with Harry. With a Big Band playing in the background, the first part of the evening held the time honored traditions. And, as the evening gave way to the night, the Big Band would give way to the DJ, bringing the younger royals to the dance floor en masse.

When Maddie and Harry stepped into the opulent room, they were greeted with a thunderous round of applause, and quite a few raucous hollers. As Harry stood proud and took it with ease, Maddie was absolutely certain she could hear Bishop's voice above all others. The love and celebration their friends and family held for them was undeniable. Maddie grinned and held tight to Harry's hand as they made their way to their table.

The newly titled Duke and the newly married Duchess sat amongst their loved ones and ate course after course of a spectacular meal. They made conversation with those around them, met eyes with those across the room. They cut the cake, a multi-layered, exquisite creation serving up both Red Velvet Cake and Chocolate Cake respectively and then they sat close to each other, Maddie's hand held between Harry's two as the toasts began.

Charles rose to his feet and, joined by Hannah, they offered heartfelt thanks to the guests for being with them that night and an abundance of congratulations to the new couple; their equally happy children. Both grew teary when speaking about the wonderful new additions to their respective families and the smiles that had found home on their children's faces. Maddie would be forever grateful for the way Charles took her mother under his wing and included her in this moment.

William, acting as the Best Man, perfected his speech, leaving the crowd touched and amused. He offered up a great amount of love for his new sister and a healthy dose of brotherly snark for Harry. And then he brought pause to the room when he brought up their mother.

"People often ask what our mother would have thought, how she would have felt about what was happening in our adult lives, the choices we've made. Tonight, I feel incredibly confident that my mother, were she here, would have been beside herself with happiness. She would have been impressed with the amount of wisdom Harry exhibited in choosing Madeline to be his wife and astonished at his absolute luck in the matter. She would have been pleased with Maddie's character, with her integrity and drive and amazed that such a woman would agree to something so senseless as a lifetime with one of us." The room rumbled with a slight laughter. "She would have been absolutely overjoyed that Harry had found love in this world, that he had found such an amazing partner with whom to share his life and she would have been elated, just as we are, to welcome Maddie into our family." And then, when the applause faded out, Harry rose to his feet, kissing Maddie's hand in his, and drew the attention of the room.

"It would be an incredible disservice if I were to stand before you now and not take a moment to acknowledge the people who brought Maddie and I into this world, who helped guide us through life." He turned his body slightly, smiling down to Charles and Hannah. "Hannah, today you handed your daughter over, to an entire country, to me—a man who is certainly not worthy enough to claim her but lucky enough that she chose to claim me." As usual, his self-deprecation brought about a few chuckles. "I cannot think of words that are powerful enough to express my debt of gratitude to you for bringing such a light into the world, for bestowing upon her such wisdom and character and heart; all of which she has gifted into my life." He paused to swallow, to breathe, to widen his adulation. "You, my father, Camilla; your love and support for the both of
us during our courtship and subsequent engagement has been priceless and touches my heart in a
way in which I will never be able to adequately convey. You have all been so welcoming;
bringing me into your family, guiding Maddie into ours. It has truly been a blessing." Harry's eyes
turned to Maddie, sharing a shaky smile that she instantly understood. She glanced down at her
hands and prepared herself.

"I would be completely remiss as a husband, and as a man, if I didn't take a moment to honor the
memory of Maddie's father." The room grew quiet, stoic. "Though I was not lucky enough to
have met him myself, Jay Forrester was a wise, respected, wonderful man whose legacy lives on
in his amazing daughter and now, in our life together." Harry looked down at his hands then,
pausing to collect himself. "And of course, there's my mother. I think that my brother said it
perfectly. She would have been elated that both of her sons had found happiness with two
wonderful women. She would have been over the moon tonight...with a new daughter in the
family and her first grandchild on the way. The first of many..." It was as though he couldn't help
himself as he turned a wink to his wife; eliciting a few laughs and a smattering of applause from
the crowd. "But first things first," Harry took a breath. "As we move forward I know that
Madeline and I will keep all of our parents, those here and those passed, in our hearts and our
minds and we hope that you will all do the same." He took a deep breath then, growing soft and a
bit emotional as he turned to Maddie; the lump rising in his throat.

"And now...my love..." Her eyes lifted to his and she took his outstretched hand. "What a show
we've put together, no?" They shared a soft chuckle before he opened his stance up, welcoming
the rest of the crowd back to the moment. "The day I met Madeline was completely representative
of who we were. Truly, we could not have been more ourselves than we were. We were in
Bendal; she working for Doctors Without Borders and me...cutting ribbons." The room laughed as
he gently ribbed the way the work he did matched up with the work she did. "I saw her from
across the way and immediately sought her out. True to form, I had no plan, no idea what I was
doing but I went directly to her; jumped right in." His friends rumbled around them. "And, true to
form, Maddie quickly took over and began directing me, telling me what to do and where to go..."
Maddie's cousins let out a smattering of applause as Harry grinned wide. Next to him, Maddie bit
at her lower lip as she shook her head, amused. "And again, when our relationship began, I was
all in. No plan, no thought, I boarded a plane and flew to Bendal. And again, Maddie took charge
of the moment and kissed me. Me, blindly jumping. Her, bossing me around..."

"Ahem," Maddie could hear his cousins laughing from their table. Harry leaned to kiss her hand,
meeting her eyes as he stood tall.

"It was quite easy..." He sighed, one hand clutching to his chest. "Falling for her—it happened
with very little effort. But I had my work cut out for me if I had any shot at competing with
Bendal for Maddie's heart. Thankfully for me, she had a moment of weakness and found
something in me worth clinging to." Maddie shook her head at him, warning in her eyes. "When I
asked Maddie to be my bride, I told her that I had spent much of my life making personal
sacrifices; for the country, for my public role, for the greater good. And I had no reason to believe
that, when choosing a partner, a wife, I wouldn't be faced with the same sacrifices. As we all
know, I'm not exactly young," a light laughter rolled around him. "And I know there are people in
this room who worried that my bachelor lifestyle would follow me well into my retirement. But I
was waiting, preparing myself for that moment in which I would choose between the lesser of
evils." He glanced down at his feet. "But that moment never came. I was never faced with a
sacrifice. There was no settling, no lesser of evils, no compromise. Instead...there was Maddie." A
collective aw passed around the room as Maddie's eyes filled with tears, his thumb rubbing
soothingly at the back of her hand. "To say that my life has been irrevocably changed by this
phenomenal woman is a vast understatement. I met her and I fell; hard and fast and so upended
that there really was no hope, no other option than throwing in everything I had, jumping into the
deep end and hoping, praying that she was...crazy enough to catch me." Harry turned to Maddie, a hint of tears in his eyes. "And you did. I am so eternally thankful that you stepped into my life, into my world. And today, when you made this lifelong commitment to me, to my crazy life..." He took a deep breath. "The happiness I feel today is indescribable. Thank you; for being here now, for promising to be there tomorrow. Thank you for coming to London, for showing up this morning..." The room rumbled with laughter as a few tears were dabbed. With is voice just for her, his emotion just for her, he spoke softly. "I love you."

"I love you too," Maddie smiled up at him, bring his hand to her lips before he called upon their guests.

"So, if you could join me in toasting the most amazing woman I've met; my bride, my wife..." He raised his glass and turned to her. "To Madeline."

"To Madeline," the room echoed. Glass clinked and smiles flowed throughout and with the same sort of disregard he held on that balcony, Harry bent his head to her and kissed her; soft and slow.

Of course, if anyone thought that the wedding of Maddie and Harry would stay in the world of tradition all night, they were terribly mistaken. As the toasts ended, the reception morphed into the party that the people who knew them were expecting; the people who had been there on the journey, those who had watched Harry struggle with the search and the sacrifice, those who had watched Maddie navigate the losses in her life, the hang ups—those who knew that nobody deserved this moment, or each other, more than these two.

The party was far from over.

They watched as the formalities gave way to celebration. They watched as Harry, hanging onto the last ritual of the evening, took Maddie's hand in his and led her to the dance floor. And then they watched with love, admiration and the slightest bit of jealousy as he took her in his arms holding her just so, as Maddie gazed up at him just so, and they watched as they took their first dance as husband and wife.

It was lovely. It was romantic and sweet and cheesy in a way that almost made the observers embarrassed—but didn't. It was clear to anyone in that room that the two of them adored the other; the way his hands clung to her not wanting to let her go, the way her body leaned to his. And, when the song finished, Harry grinned as he dipped her down with a dramatic flourish and a kiss. Setting her upright, he laid one more kiss on her hand before he surrendered her to his father and, walking tall and proud, sought out Hannah for her turn around the dance floor. And as the big band faded out its last tune, the DJ picked up and the romance and tradition gave way to the exuberant celebration.

And the party hit full swing. And though they were still surrounded by people, rushing to wish them love, to have their turn to hug the newlyweds, Harry and Maddie stayed connected as much as possible. If he wasn't by her side, if she wasn't in his arms, only minutes would pass before one or the other looked up, eyes searching. And when they found the other, it wasn't long before they were together again; his hand at the small of her back, her fingers running over his shoulder, fanning into his hair. Those moments that were as private as it would get at such an event; when they thought nobody was really watching, when he would feel free to kiss her longer, with more passion—when she would squeeze his ass and hint at more to come. Moments when they sat in contended silence, reveling in their newlywed status.

But there were other moments, not many but a few, when Maddie and Harry were pulled in opposite directions. A few moments when they would find themselves without the other.
The first people to pull Maddie into their arms, were her family from home. Her cousins, her uncle, her grandmother; the family that had come all the way from Colorado and was taking their first real chance to hug and congratulate her. Through the events leading up to the wedding, they truly had come to terms with seeing Prince Charles and to some extent The Queen. But even still, the fact that they were dining and dancing in Buckingham Palace still held onto some of its surreal glory. And Maddie couldn't fault them for that; it still held some of that for her too.

She danced with Kyle, she mooned over the dresses and the service with Jenna, and when her Uncle Patrick took her in his arms and pressed a teary kiss to her forehead, she hugged him tightly and thanked him for being there; for remembering her father while he was there. Most of them were staying past the wedding; choosing to enjoy a European Vacation, but this night was truly the last time they would see Maddie for a while and they wanted to love on her before it was all over.

No sooner had Maddie stepped away from her biological family, she was scooped up—literally—by her Bendal family. The beaming grin on Maddie's face when she spotted them was indescribable. Collins was laughing as he swung her into his arms; hugging her tight before putting her down.

"Your Royal Highness," he couldn't hide the gleam in his eye as he bowed over her hand.

"Oh good God," Maddie groaned with a smile on her face. "I wonder how long it's going to take to get used to that?"

"I don't know," Khenda shook her head and leaned to hug and kiss her friend. "But I'm guessing the vast majority of people around you have already made the adjustment in their minds."

"You're probably right," Maddie held onto a hand from each of them as she shook off that line of thought. Her smile grew sweet, mushy, as she looked from Collins to Khenda and back again. "Honestly, I cannot tell you how wonderful it is to see the two of you right now. Thank you both, so much, for coming."

"Please," Collins shrugged with a grin. "We wouldn't have missed this moment for the entire world."

"The entire world?" She arched her eyebrows jokingly.

"The entire world," Khenda reiterated Collins' declaration.

"Where's my favorite little man?"

"With family in Paris," Khenda smiled. "We wanted a weekend to ourselves."

"Well...Harry will be incredibly sad to hear that. But I suppose it'll do."

"Thanks."

"Listen...I owe the both of you a lot..." She grew misty-eyed for a moment. Collins opened his mouth to speak, but Maddie hurried ahead of him. "No no. I do. I...you both did so much for me, even before Harry. You helped me move through everything that was going on for me at home, with my dad and... You were my...you were my home for over a year." She laughed at the tears in her eyes. "You were my family. You are my family..." She wiped at her tears then, feeling silly.
"And then you gave me Harry. Wow." She exhaled. "Who knew I would turn into such an emotional mess?!"

"Come on Doc," Collins winked and nodded towards the dance floor. "What do you say you let me spin you around the dance floor...emotional mess and all...for old time's sake?"

"Done," Maddie nodded; leaning to kiss Khenda's cheek again before allowing Collins to pull her to the middle of the action. As he spun her into his arms, his laughter, his ease, his confidence, his big brotherly way with her—all of it served to ground her back to this unforgettable moment. There were so many of those moments that night; poignant snapshots of time that made Maddie pause, take a breath and catalog them in her mind.

Dancing with her Father-in-law; his arms guiding her expertly around the room, his deep voice reiterating the sentiments of his speech.

Giggling with her slightly-intoxicated mother as she admitted London was growing on her, that she thought the Queen was incredibly sweet, and that she took Harry's joke of grandchildren as a promise.

Drinking with the Duke of Edinburgh. He was classic elegance on the outside with a dash of impropriety and imperviousness to the irritation of others and Maddie loved that about him. In truth, she could see so much of Phillip in Harry. And it made her thoughts about them as an old couple that much more enjoyable.

It really was fairy tale-like.

Despite the fact that she had married a Prince, despite the fact that they were dancing the night away in a Palace, she felt like Princess; light and free and deliriously happy. She spent time sitting next to a very pregnant Kate, quietly mocking their husbands and their respective dance moves. She sat with an incredibly drunk Eugenie as she thanked Maddie over and over again for 'making our Harry so happy.'

And of course there was the moment when Bishop took Maddie around the waist and, while impressing her with his surprising ability to dance with grace even in his tipsy state, he made an admission.

"Madeline, my love," he gazed down into her eyes with a wide, delirious grin. "You get more and more beautiful every time I see you."

"Bishop, my darling..." She giggled as she held onto him. "You get more and more drunk every time I see you."

"Hmmm..." He sighed, pulling her tighter to him. "Talk with me for a moment, won't you?"

"Whoa!" Maddie laughed as she followed his quick clip. "Easy Fred Astaire..."

"Sorry," he slowed down and met her eyes. "I desperately need your help."

"Oh honey, I'm not sure I have that kind of time tonight..." Her sarcasm flowed so naturally with him that when she was met with serious eyes and a straight face, she was stunned. "Bishop? What is it? Are you okay?"

"Yes." He spoke the word but shook his head. Turning his face from her then, he took a deep
breath in and let it out; his hand running through his thick head of hair.

"Bishop..." Maddie's hand squeezed his shoulder, trying to draw him back to her.

"I'm in love with her..." His voice was low, confessional.

"Her..." She shook her head, confused for a fraction of a second. "You mean..." Maddie whispered, her eyes welling up involuntarily. She knew.

"I'm so in love with her," he repeated, shaking his head as though he were trying to shake it from his mind. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he met her eyes again. "Today my best friend married this amazing woman and they are starting their life together and this wedding and the party and..." His lips twitched into a smile and he blinked at his watery eyes. "And I'm so happy for him. I am. I just...I can't help but think of her. I can't help but want to...be near her. Jesus! I'm a bloody mess Madeline." He shrugged; hopeless. "I love her."

"Wow..." Maddie breathed, choking up at his words, at the strong emotions behind them. "Bishop, that's..."

"I just don't know what to do and..." He laughed at himself. "I honestly have no clue what to..." Maddie stopped dancing then, wiping at her eyes and pulling it together.

"Okay," she sniffed and took a breath before she grinned up at him. "Well first, you stop dancing with me..." She laughed at his shocked expression and leaned to kiss his cheek. "And you just...you go dance with her." It was simple, really.

"But she..."

"Don't." Maddie interrupted him, eyes sparkling. "Don't argue with me. Just...go to her. Right now. And give her that dance you promised her this morning."

"But..." Bishop trailed off, his eyes drifting to find Ella in the room. Maddie knew the instant he found her, his entire face lit up. He nodded; defeated, surrendering. "Okay."

"Okay." Maddie grinned.

"I love you, you know that?" He turned his eyes back to her, pulling her into his arms, pressing his lips to her cheek.

"I do know that." Maddie nodded; kissing him back. And then, with a bit of a smirk and more than a bit of fondness, Bishop took her hand in his and bowed to her.

"Your Royal Highness..." And then, with a wink and a newfound lightness in his step, he left her standing on the dance floor.

Maddie sighed deeply, peacefully, as her eyes scanned the crowd, seeking her husband. Finding him, dancing with abandon with Zara and Beatrice, her grin widened. As though he could sense her, feel her eyes on him, his eyes rose to meet hers. Without a second thought, he offered a smile, a nod, and an excuse.

And he was at her side.

"So I saw you watching me from across the room," he stepped right up to her, his fingers running
down her arm towards her hand.

"Did you?" Maddie's lips pulled smug as she looked up at him.

"Mmm." He nodded, voice lowering as he stepped closer. "Did you like what you saw?"

"I loved what I saw," she chuckled as she stepped closer, enjoying this moment.

"Dance with me?" And though he meant it as a questions, his hands moved around her, pulling her to him, in more of a declaration.

"I have to tell you something," Maddie whispered, following him as he led.

"Go ahead." He watched her with adoration and amusement.

"Bishop is..." Her smile twitched as her hands moved up around his neck, as their bodies began to sway involuntarily to the music. Her voice dropped. "Bishop is in love with Ella."

"Yeah?" The corner of Harry's mouth tucked up in a smirk. "Baby we knew that already. Or at least I knew that. You didn't know that?"

"Well I knew that he did but..." She shrugged. "I don't know. I thought he had moved on."

"Moved on?!" Harry let out a loud laugh; his hands tugging her tighter to him. "What would have made you think that?"

"Oh I don't know..." Maddie rolled her eyes. "Brunette from the bar. Savy. Blonde from the club. And what was that woman's name who I couldn't stop giggling about..."

"Anita," Harry offered.

"Yes!" Her hand patted his shoulder. "Any one of those women made me think he had moved on."

"Well, you would be wrong."

"Apparently," Maddie sighed; happy, excited. "Bishop is in love with Ella." She looked up into Harry's eyes then. "He is...teary-eyed, can't speak correctly, in love with Ella."

"Mmm..." Harry nodded, moving in; resting his cheek against hers as he turned them both around. "I know somebody who is teary-eyed, can't speak correctly, in love with you." His voice was low in her ear.

"Oh?" Maddie grinned. "I wonder who that might be...Is he here tonight? Is that awkward for you?" She teased, loving the fire that sprang to his eyes when she did.

"Hmm..." He chuckled against her cheek as he placed a kiss there. "Come home with me?"

"Now?" Maddie pulled back slightly, looking at him stunned. "Really?"

"No," he shook his head. "We can't leave yet. But I like how serious you got there for a minute." And before she could say anything else on the matter, he pulled her back in, kissed her lips and spun them both around. And Maddie went, head tipping back in laughter. And there she was; lost
in the moment yet again.

The day had been full of moments. Moments between just them, moments between them and anybody with high speed internet or an extended cable package. There had been moments that had made Maddie laugh out loud. There had been moments that had drawn her to complete silence. Moments when Harry felt like he owned the world, moments that had humbled him; bringing an ache to his chest.

And then there was the Big Moment.

The moment guests would talk about for months to come. The moment that would bring the royals to their feet and Maddie to tears. The moment that only two men in the room knew of and caught the others completely by surprise.

Maddie was sitting with Ella and Khenda when it began; when she heard it. They were drinking champagne and laughing over their very early days together in Bendal while Maddie prepared to ask not so subtle questions about Bishop and Ella's intentions.

And then she heard it.

Two drum beats; loud and strong. Two drum beats that sounded out into the room, settled in her ear, resonated in her heart, and pulled memories from her mind like an old, homespun tradition.

"Hold on..." Her eyes flew from the drink in her hand, locking with Khenda's. Was she hearing things? "Was that..." She trailed off as the third drum beat echoed through the room and she spun around in her chair, looking out into the room.

"I heard it too," Ella's hand wrapped around Maddie's forearm as her face registered the same confusion Maddie's was.

And then it happened; the familiar rhythm of the drums, that unmistakable beat that could only mean one thing. Maddie's breath held, her eyes widened as Bendal rushed into the room. The music poured into her ears, her heart, as traditional dancers rushed into the room; men, women, children all dressed in traditional Bendal garb, all smiling wide as they moved among the stunned and smiling guests.

"Oh my God..." Maddie whispered, her heart catching in her throat. She had lived in Bendal long enough, had gone to enough celebrations, enough weddings to know what was coming, she spun to Khenda. "Did you?"

"No," Khenda shook her head, tears in her own eyes at the way this moment pulled at her own heart. "It had to be..."

"Harry." Maddie finished her sentence as she rose to her feet; her eyes scanning the crowd for him. And when she did, when she found him standing next to Bea and Peter and Collins with a wide grin, his eyes full of pride and excitement as they clapped along to the music, it only took a second for him to meet her eyes. And when he winked at her, her hand fell over her heart. "I have to go," she spoke to her friends at the table before she turned to them. They, as the rest of the room, had risen to their feet, Khenda with tears in her eyes, as they joined in on the clapping. They knew what Maddie knew—that soon the drums would come to a dramatic stop, begin again with a flourish, and the dancing would really begin. "I'm sorry. I have to..."

"Go." Ella waved her hand as Maddie kissed her cheek.
"This is so beautiful..." Khenda wiped at her eyes as Maddie kissed her.

And without another word, Maddie was moving towards her husband. She passed Mike and Zara, she passed her Uncle Patrick, she even passed Bishop on his way to Ella, she assumed. She passed them all as they got into the moment, caught up in the celebration, and she went directly to him.

"There she is!" Harry's voice was loud against the music when he spotted her; his face bright and excited. "Did you see?"

"I saw!" She nodded her head, her eyes growing teary. "You...I can't believe you did this." It touched her heart in ways she would never be able to articulate.

"Yeah," he shrugged, looking slightly humble, slightly shy, as she stepped up to him. His hands moved around her waist. "It would be a shame if we didn't pay our respects to Bendal, don't you think? After all...it's where we met...where you finally kissed me..." They both chuckled at that. "And how did I thank that beautiful country for such a gift? I took the very best it had to offer and brought you here to rainy England." He glanced out at the crowd. "Also, they assured me that this was how they celebrate a wedding in..."

"Shh..." Maddie tilted her lips to his. "This is..." She shook her head, turning to watch. "This is...I'm speechless."

"Good." He had been struggling to keep this surprise a secret. Since he first thought of it, since he first called Collins to solicit his help in bringing Bendal to England, all he had wanted to do was tell her, to let her share in his excitement. And he had come close, more than once. But he had resisted and this, this look in her eyes, this way she clung to him, this way her feet were already tapping to the familiar music—this made it all worth it.

"You know they're going to make you dance. It's a traditional wedding celebration. The groom has to dance."

"Yes love, I know." He looked smug as he shrugged. "You think I'm afraid of a little dancing?" The drums drew one thunderous strum and all went silent.

"No?" She giggled, turning her face into his shoulder. Harry dancing always made her smile, made her blush.

"No," he shook his head. "And what makes it even better...They're going to make you dance too." Maddie's heart pattered in her chest as the dancers all stood at attention.

And then, to the delight of the crowd, the music flared up and the dancing began. Harry's hands dropped from Maddie as they both turned their attention to the entertainment that had their guests on their feet, clapping along with wide smiles—enjoying every moment of this surprise. And though their Bendal family certainly felt at home, at a whole new kind of peace, it wasn't just Khenda, Collins, and Ella who were reveling in this display. Maddie could see Camilla nudging Charles as they passed smiles back and forth. She could see her mother dancing next to Leo and Penelope to the beat of the music. She could see Bishop watching Ella with adoration as he clapped along.

It was a beautiful moment; bringing that world—the customs, the people, the music—into this world. That warm, lively, culture dancing among their families was a sight to behold. The tradition
warmed her heart, the sentiment filled her soul and she wondered if Harry would ever really know, if he would ever really get it—how much this meant to her.

"Harry..." Her voice cracked as tears sprang to her eyes, despite the smile on her face.

"Love?" He called to her, his eyes focused forward.

"I..." She sighed and shook her head. "I love this. So much. And you...I love you so much."

"Good," he turned to her, wide eyes and smug grin and nodded to her right. She turned to look and she could feel a rush of nerves wash over her. "Come on my love," Harry's hand collected hers. "They are coming for us." And, though Maddie's initial reaction was anxiety, she felt nothing but joy in that moment.

The two dancers, one male and one female stood before them with beaming grins. The woman reached for Maddie's hand as the man took Harry's. Amidst wild applause and calls from their Bendal delegation of friends, the newly betrothed couple was pulled to the middle of the action.

"Do you know what they are going to do to us?" Maddie laughed as Harry took her hands in his and began to dance, his hips moving to the music as the pair who had brought them stepped away. He was so full of life, of joy.

"Tell me..." He beamed.

"Mmm." She nodded, moving closer as she danced with him. "They are going to wrap us."

"You don't say," he laughed.

"In cloth," she moved closer to him. "They'll have a long, beautiful cloth that they'll wrap us in while they dance around us."

"Kinky..." He winked and she laughed.

"It's tradition." She explained. "The cloth represents the love and support of the community, the hands of God, and..."

"And the protective embrace that they are symbolically wrapping the newlyweds in..." Harry finished, dipping to kiss her lips as the couple returned with said cloth. "Yeah. I know what they're going to do." He smiled to the two dancers as they stepped up to them.

True to tradition, the woman took Maddie's right hand and placed the corner of the cloth into her palm. Holding to it, Maddie smiled at Harry as the woman placed Maddie's right hand over Harry's heart. Harry's left hand moved instantly to cover it as she stepped closer to him, allowing very little space between them. And then, as the other dancers continued to entertain the guests, the couple attending to the newlyweds began to dance around them; the cloth unfolding as they wrapped it around Maddie and Harry.

"You know..." Harry began, his voice low.

"Shhh..." Maddie's left hand lifted to his lips. "You're not supposed to talk." He nodded and her fingers slipped away. Her eyes held his; intimate, personal—even with the room around them moving and dancing and clapping as they were wrapped in the beautiful purple and gold cloth. Harry blinked and, with a smirk, did what he wanted.
"I am never going to stop loving you." He spoke. Maddie's eyes welled with tears, even as she narrowed them.

"Harry..." She whispered.

"Never." He wasn't smirking any longer, he was locked in her gaze and absolutely serious.

"You're supposed to remain silent, introspective and..." She took a deep breath and rolled her eyes just a bit; giving in to him, to herself. "I'm never going to stop loving you either."

"I know." He did. There were no doubts in his mind.

"Now shush." She warned. "Before you get us into trouble."

Harry's lips pressed closed but his eyes held hers and they did what they were supposed to do in this moment. They held onto each other, being pressed closer and closer as a result of the wrapping. Their words ceased but their conversation continued. The fingers of his left hand stroked those of her right as it rested against his beating heart. Every deep breath she took, he felt against his chest. The music continued to build around them, the clapping and the cheering rising along with it and when the wrapping was finished the two dancers who had been their guides, stepped back into the circle of people that surrounded them, back into the revelry.

And Maddie wanted to cry. It was all so much; so much. This day—this perfect day—had been so loaded with emotion, with such big feelings. And it felt like it was all coming to a heated rush in this moment; this moment he had orchestrated to bring something so near and dear to her heart into their first day as husband and wife. Harry's eyes grew soft as he watched her, knowing she was fighting tears, knowing she was shuffling through the onslaught of emotions.

"Hey..." He whispered, unable to move enough to do anything to comfort her other than stroke her fingers. Maddie sniffed, offering a nod as she swallowed.

"Never." The strength in her voice told him exactly what she was talking about and it drew his own emotions to the surface.

"Never." He nodded again. And before either of them had a chance to dissolve into mush, the tempo of the music increased and all of the dancers began to move and both of them knew; this was almost the end. The elaborate unwrapping process began. The entire troupe of dancers was moving fast around them, in intricate steps, as they pulled the cloth from them; letting it pool on the floor. It was the strangest sensation, the relief of pressure, as the fabric moved. Maddie could feel the loosening, giving her the feeling of falling. And as soon as Harry could move, his right arm was around her waist, holding her tightly to him.

As the music reached its tipping point, the unwrapping was complete, the drums thundered once more and everything stopped. There was a split second when the world was absolutely silent, when Maddie swore she could hear Harry's heart beating in his chest. And then the crowd went wild; cheering, clapping, calling out their enormous approval. And Maddie, with the corner of the fabric still in her hand, lifted her arms around his neck and Harry brought his lips to hers; kissing his wife amidst it all.

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third and final number to an ongoing ovation, sometime after the fireworks, sometime after the two of them had shared a drink and a drag with Hannah from the Whiskey and Cigar Bar that had been set up with her father's favorites, the decision was made. Harry had spotted Maddie sitting next to Kiki and Anna, her fingers covering her mouth as she yawned, and he called it. Meeting her eyes he nodded his head towards the door and Maddie, unsure if she could even manage to will her body to move from the chair, nodded in agreement. She was ready.

Deciding to call it a night was easy.

But saying good-bye to her family was significantly more difficult. She and Harry were leaving for their honeymoon late the next afternoon and, since her family would be leaving for the United States before they returned to London, this was their good-bye—for quite some time.

With Harry at her side the entire time, she hugged and kissed her cousins; thanking them for making the trip, for taking the time. With Harry's hand resting on the small of her back, she promised her grandmother and her uncle that they would come to visit before the Christmas holiday arrived. And then they said good-bye to her mother. Though there were tears, there were more smiles, more words of love and congratulations. Hannah was thrilled for her daughter, even if all of this now meant that she belonged to England in more ways than one. She hugged and kissed them both and then, with Maddie's uncle Patrick there for moral support, she watched as her daughter and her son-in-law walked away.

Though most of the older generation of Harry's family had departed, his father and Camilla remained. With a brief stop at their table, they received travel wishes and requests for dinner upon their return. Though Kate had slipped away earlier to get some much needed sleep, Will had remained and, along with the other remaining cousins, they offered a round of drunken applause when Maddie and Harry approached them all to bid them good night.

And then it was the last branch of their family; Khenda, Collins, Ella and—not so surprisingly—Bishop sat together laughing and reminiscing when Maddie and Harry joined them. Khenda grew teary as Harry hugged her tight, kissed her twice, and thanked her with a lump in his throat for changing his life. Collins grew more and more father-like as he wished Maddie luck, as he told her how proud he was, and as he warned that should Harry ever step out of line, he would be willing and able to set him straight; prince or not.

It wasn't lost on Maddie that Bishop had to drop Ella's hand in order to hug and kiss them. It wasn't lost on Harry that Ella blushed a bright pink when Harry raised his eyebrows at her suggestively. But nothing was said as they hugged them goodnight, thanking them for all they had done. Maddie would hold her questions for her return.

And then, surrounded by applause and a few catcalls from more than one table in the room, Maddie and Harry slipped, hand in hand, from their reception to retire to their suite at the palace for the night. As they walked through the halls, Maddie grew more and more tired—the revelry and party no longer there to boost her energy.

"Harry..." She yawned, her head leaning against him.

"Hmmm?" His arm wrapped around her shoulders as he turned to press a kiss to her head.

"My feet hurt," she sighed; her body finally registering all that she had demanded from it throughout the course of the day.

"Take off your shoes," he nodded towards the ground. "I'll carry them."
"But it's Buckingham Palace," she giggled; the champagne still very present in her system. "Can I really walk barefoot through Buckingham Palace?" Harry chuckled; his arm tightening, pressing her closer to him.

"Actually...in simplest terms, it's your Granny's house..." He corrected. "Can you walk barefoot through your granny's house?" Maddie giggled again; her brain processing that fact for the umpteenth time that night.

"You know..." She sighed. "I suppose that I can."

"I suppose that you can," Harry agreed, drawing to a stop and holding out his hand. "Shoes. Please."

"Yes Captain," Maddie stopped and, holding onto Harry with one hand, she leaned over and pulled her shoes from her feet. Standing tall, she held them out to him with a deep sigh. "Wow...that feels so much better."

"Good," he grinned as they continued their way through the halls. It wasn't long before they arrived. His fingers on her arm held her at a standstill. "Hold on."

"What is it?" She turned heavy eyelids to him. Seeing the cheeky grin on his face, she rolled her eyes. "This again?"

"Yes ma'am," he chuckled and then, with much less ceremony than when they were at Kensington, he leaned over and scooped her up and over his shoulder; her body bending over him as she squealed.

"How many thresholds can there possibly be?" She giggled, her hands slapping his ass as he opened the door.

"Don't know love," he patted her ass gently, careful as he stepped through the door into the room. "But you can be damn sure I'll carry you over every one of them."

"Why?" Maddie laughed as he bent over to set her on her feet. "Because you're the man?"

"Damn right," he grinned.

"Lucky for you, I'm too tired to get into it tonight..." She took her shoes from his hand and turned towards the room.

"Well," he called out behind him as he moved to shut and lock the door. "I hope that doesn't mean you're too tired to..." He turned towards her then and stopped. She was standing only a few steps away from him, looking out into the lavish room with wide eyes and a heavy silence.

And he remembered. This was her first time staying in Buckingham Palace.

The room was immaculate, even by Kensington Palace standards. As her eyes travelled around, taking it all in, she didn't even want to guess how many of her Bendal apartments could fit into this one room. And she hadn't even stepped into the bathroom yet. The ceilings were tall and meticulously carved. The décor was opulent and ornate. All of their things for the night had been unpacked and set to their rightful places.
"Hey..." Harry's voice was soft as he stepped next to her; his fingers trailing down her arm to claim her hand with his.

"Hey..." Maddie turned to look at him, her lungs sucking in her breath as she tried to settle in the moment, in the room. She blinked her eyes a few times as she focused on him; knowing full well that her new life held so many more moments just like this one, when the luxury of it all would stun her for just a moment.

"You okay?" He squeezed her hand in his and she nodded. Taking a long slow breath in and letting it out slowly before a smile worked its way to her lips, she squeezed his hand back.

"I am. Now..." She sighed and, before she could say anything, there was a light knock on the door. Her face grew puzzled as Harry kissed her fingertips.

"The valet is here for your dress, I would imagine," he shrugged as he moved to open the door. He was right. Maddie laughed lightly as the woman stepped into the room. Thank God she had Harry with her as a guide in this crazy new phase of her life. He pressed a kiss to Maddie's cheek before he slipped into the bathroom to shower while she turned her dress over to the young woman for cleaning and storage.

As soon as Harry finished, Maddie stepped in; wanting to wash the sweat from her body before she crawled into bed. Harry slapped her ass playfully and ordered her to hurry back. And though she was tempted to follow his freshly showered body back into the bedroom, she stayed focused on the task at hand, knowing she would feel better if she washed the makeup from her face and the party from her skin.

When she emerged from the bathroom, refreshed and clean and dressed in a silky negligée, she was greeted with the lightly snoring, passed out, body of her new husband. Sighing into a grin, she moved to the bed and, looking down at him, she let out a light chuckle. He looked so peaceful; smile on his face, red hair mussed and spiked—his chest moving slowly up and down as he drifted further and further from wakefulness.

Maddie leaned to turn off the lights and, careful not to jostle him, she slipped into bed next to him. Sinking into the luxurious comfort of their bed, she let out a breath. It felt like heaven; a long awaited and well-earned reprieve from their long day. Her body welcomed the break, the support. And, as she moved closer to him, her eyelids grew heavy. The day had caught up with the both of them and they were exhausted. Next to her, Harry rustled; taking in a deep breath and shifting a bit.

"Madeline?" He called out softly.

"Mmm..." She smiled next to him, her hand reaching out to rest on his chest.

"Come here love," he pulled greedily at her hand, wanting her close to him. Maddie moved, nestling into the space below his arm, tucking into his warmth. "There..." He sighed, his lips pressing kisses to her head, his fingers smoothing back her hair. "You can't sleep that far away from me tonight baby."

"No?" She giggled slightly. "You seemed quite content snoring away all by yourself over there..."

"Hmm..." He grinned, his eyes closing involuntarily. "You want me to wake up?" He peeled his eyelids open only briefly. "I can. I can wake up...make love to my new wife..."
"You sure about that?" Maddie laughed, her hand running over his bare chest as she pressed a kiss there; her leg moving over his as she cuddled close, their legs intertwining.

"No," he shook his head; laughing at himself. "I'm sorry my darling..."

"Don't be," Maddie laughed, her own eyes closing as his breathing lulled her closer and closer to sleep.

"You know if people ever found out that I couldn't even..."

"But we did," she cut him off, her fingers to his lips. "This afternoon, we already did."

"Mmm..." He nodded, his fingers stroking up and down her arm. "But..."

"I'm sleepy," she yawned into his side, snuggling even closer to him. "And it's been a long day."

"Yes well..." He kissed her fingertips. "Tomorrow. Tomorrow you're in for it." His eyebrows lifted as his lips pulled into a smug grin.

"Oh...don't I know it," Maddie smiled as she lightly tickled his side.

"Sorry, was that sarcasm?" Harry's hands were strong as they hugged her tighter.

"If it was, do you have the energy to retaliate?" She giggled, her eyes closing heavy.

"Stop using big words..." He breathed.

"Henry..."

"Hmm?"

"Stop talking..." Her fingers lingered lightly over his lips; settling there as though she had no more energy left to move them. His lips pursed up as though to kiss them but not having the full amount of steam left to do it properly.

And there, in that immaculate suite in Buckingham Palace, after the longest, sweetest, most emotion filled day either of them had come across in years, The Duke and The Duchess of Sussex —quite fittingly—fell asleep. Wrapped up in each other with their entire lives ahead of them.
Chapter 105

When Harry woke the next morning, he already had a smile on his face. Though there was a slight headache leftover from the night before, it didn't compare in the least to how happy he was. The sun was peaking in past the draperies that had been drawn the night before. He lifted his head slightly, his eyes squinting to read the time on the clock.

"Good Morning Captain..." Maddie's voice was heavy as she called to him, instantly pulling him from his quest for time. Turning towards her, a grin pulled at his lips. She looked incredibly sexy — silky slip of a nightgown, hair mussed up against her pillow as she smiled up at him.

"Good Morning," his hand reached out to her, his finger tracing down the soft skin of her arm; tickling her slightly. "Tell me love...did you really marry me yesterday or was that a dream?"

"No dream..." She shifted under his touch, closer. "I really did."

"Good...good..." He sighed in mock relief as his fingers moved from her hand to her hip. His eyes lifted to meet hers; heavy with sleep and a reawakened desire. "And did I really fall asleep on you last night..."

"Yes." She nodded, her lips puckering into the smallest of pouts.

"Dressed like this?" His fingers moved across her stomach, walking from her hip to the small of her belly.

"Yes..." She breathed; that strong, familiar stir moving inside of her.

"Well now..." His hand pushed up under her slip to the warm flesh underneath; flattening out on her stomach. "That's not very nice of me at all."

"No..." Maddie shook her head as it pressed back into the pillow below her; her body warming, melting, underneath his touch. "No it wasn't."

"Well maybe..." His fingers dipped below the silky slip of fabric that rested low on her hips. "Maybe we should start this morning off with an apology."

"Ohhhh..." Maddie gasped, her body igniting under his hand. His eyebrows lifted as his hand slipped further down, his fingers sliding against her folds, his thumb finding home at that soft center that drove her mad. She was already aching for more as his thumb began to circle the nerves that gathered there.

"What do you say baby..." His breath was hot against her skin as he moved to kiss her neck. "Let me make it up to you?"

"Mmmm..." Maddie's hips arched up and her hands moved into his hair; pressing him to her. His fingers, strong and steady, began to stroke her as his thumb continued its slow, tortuous journey.

"Is that a yes?" He grinned, planting warm, wet kisses across her chest as he moved further down.

"Yes..." She breathed, her head nodding as her tongue licked her lips.
"Sorry, I didn't hear you. Yes?" He teased, as one finger pressed further, dipping into the slickness that he had aroused from her. Maddie nodded and, taking a cue, Harry slipped a finger inside of her.

"Oh..." She moaned at the feeling.

"Yes?" He teased again, his tongue darting below the silk that slacked at her chest, licking the soft, pink skin there, his teeth nipping lightly.

"Yes. Harry..." She pressed his head to her as he slipped another finger inside of her; her hips bucking up against him. "Oh God..." Harry moved then so that he was leaning over her. Without abandoning the steady in and out that was lulling her to the edge, his free hand moved up under her nightgown, desperately wanting to pull it from her body.

And just as his mouth reached one stiff, pert nipple; just as he pulled it into his mouth; just as he moved to slip another finger inside of her, just as Maddie sucked in her breath in anticipation, a hard, sharp knock on the door brought them both quickly to silence. His mouth lifted from her breast, his fingers stalled inside of her and his eyes turned a glare in the direction of the knock; his voice a low growl.

"What in God's name is..."

"Oh God," Maddie groaned. "It's my fault. I ordered breakfast." She breathed, her hand resting on his wrist that lay between her legs. "Before you woke up, I called up breakfast and..." Harry nodded, swallowing back his lust as his eyes moved back to her.

"Well...should we let them in or..." His eyes flashed as his fingers moved a few quick, shallow strokes within her. "Pretend we aren't here..."

"Oh God that." Maddie moaned, her hand pressing his closer to her. A chuckle rumbled from him as his head bent to kiss her again. But the second knock could not be ignored. Harry pulled away from her with a huff. "I'm so sorry..." She breathed, the regret evident in her voice.

"It's okay," he kissed her and, with great effort, slipped his fingers from her. Maddie groaned at their absence. Smiling wide, he traced a path up over her hip, tugging her nightgown down, putting it back in place, and lifting away from her. "Just one moment!" He called to the door.

"It's not okay." Maddie sighed, her body reeling from the abandoned build up. She wanted to go back in time and slap the phone right out of her hand. "I want this. I need this."

"Me too love," he flashed a grin as he rose from their bed, pulling a t-shirt on over his head. "I'll make it up to you. I promise."

"That's what you said last night," she reached for her robe as Harry rounded the bed.

"Ohhh..." Harry shook his head as he moved closer to her. "I knew you were going to toss that up again."

"Mere hours after vowing to honor me with your body..." Her eyes were fiery as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Oh baby..." He pulled her to him then, wrapping his arms around her, tugging her tight to his body. His face nuzzled into her neck as he pressed up against her, evidence of his own desires stiff
"I'm going to honor you with my body..." His hands went wide on her back, sliding down over her ass. "For the next ten days I'm going to do nothing but honor you with my body..."

"I can't wait," she whispered.

"Me neither." And then, with a wink and a pat, he stepped away from her and moved towards the door. He watched her pull her robe tight, watched as she tugged the ties into place before he pulled the door open with a smile. "Good Morning!" Maddie giggled at his overly cheery voice, at the semi-shocked look on the young woman's face as she pushed the cart into the room. She hurriedly set up the cart, pulling silver from atop the plates, adjusting things just so before she stepped back; well trained and meticulous. Harry snatched a strawberry from a plate and winked at Maddie. "Thank you," he spoke to the young lady who nodded and dipped into a slight curtsy.

"Yes, thank you very much," Maddie smiled at the young woman as she reached for a croissant.

"Your Royal Highness," the young lady smiled to Maddie, dipping into a curtsy as she slipped away from them, moving towards the door. Harry watched as Maddie's eyes grew big; her hand pausing midway to her mouth with the croissant. He couldn't help the chuckle that slipped from his lips as he reached for a glass of juice.

"Are you laughing at me?" Maddie spun around to look at him as the door to their room shut and they were alone again.

"A little bit, yes." He nodded, sipping from his glass. "You should have seen how big your eyes were. The size of saucers..." He chuckled again; sitting back on the bed with a plate of fruit.

"Ha!" Her head tipped back in a moment of laughter as she gathered a cup of coffee and her croissant and climbed back into bed. "It just felt...so strange to hear that."

"Yes," he nodded; his head leaning against the massive headboard as he began to eat.

"And when she curtsied..." Maddie's eyes flashed wide again.

"Yes," he continued to nod as he tipped back his juice with a sigh; he understood.

"I never got it, you know..." Maddie turned to look at him. "When I first met you and you tried to tell me...I didn't get it."

"Yeah," Harry chuckled. "Now imagine what it would be like if the person calling you that, the person curtsying to you was somebody you were trying to impress, to date...somebody you were trying to sleep with...to make love to..." He dipped his head to press a kiss to her shoulder.

"Oh..." The word was long and slow, just like her realization. "Oh wow."

"Exactly." He grinned up at her with a wink. Maddie's mind thought back to their beginning, to the awkward moments when she didn't know what to do or what to call him. And then she matched his grin.

"But...you know..." Her grin grew a little twisted. "I suppose you could have a little fun with it too."

"Fun?" His forehead knotted up in confusion.
"Yeah..." She shrugged. "You never...I don't know...played with it a bit?" She shrugged, pulling her bottom lip into her teeth.

"Played with it?" Harry's eyebrows raised as he scanned her face.

"Yeah..." She nudged his shoulder with hers. "The Prince and...the peasant. Don't tell me you never..."

"I never!" He cut in with a sharp shake of his head.

"Why not?" She grinned wide as she lifted her eyebrows. "You're a Prince. We just woke up in a castle..."

"Technically it's a palace," he corrected her before he could catch himself. Maddie snickered into her coffee cup.

"What's the difference?"

"Never mind," he shook his head, rolling his eyes.

"Aw come on," her toe poked his knee. "Tell me."

"Fine..." He sighed heavily. "A castle is built to withstand battle, it's fortified. A palace is built for living in opulence," Maddie giggled against the back of her hand. "You're laughing at me."

"No, no," Maddie shook her head. "I'm just..." She moved to set her cup on the nightstand next to her. "Wondering if you wanted to..."

"Wanted to..." His eyebrows lifted.

"Take advantage of the...palace..." She bowed her head. "My Lord."

"Madeline really," he laughed, shaking his head.

"What? You're making fun of me?"

"No. I just..."

"I'm telling my new husband I want to...play...and he's making fun of me," she sighed, moving to step from the bed.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Harry's hand darted out, grabbing her wrist before she could step completely away from him. "Hold on."

"No, it's okay," there was a small smile on her lips. "It's fine."

"No, no." He shook his head, his hand pulling her back to him, back to their bed. "It's not okay. I didn't know you were being serious. Baby, you wanna play?" He looked up to her, his eyes alive, his lips pulling into a grin.

"Maybe," Maddie shrugged; coy.

"Then we'll play." Harry bit at his lower lip; eyes heavy with want.
"Yeah?" She lifted her eyebrows. "That easy?"

"Absolutely." His voice was low, gravelly as he took a deep breath. "Absolutely that easy." Then, with an insistence born of desire and impatience, and the frustration that comes with constant interruptions, Harry tugged at her hand, bringing her back to the bed with a peal of laughter.

"My lord!" She giggled, her laughter very quickly muffled by his lips, by his undeterred drive to finally, finally, make love to his wife.

It took ten hours to get to their honeymoon, ten hours before they arrived in the Maldives; the beautiful, serene, peaceful setting for their ten days of rest, relaxation, and reconnecting. They had eventually risen from the bed at Buckingham, showered, dressed, and stopped at Kensington before they were back in the car headed for the airport and their beautiful piece of paradise.

Ten hours, one direct flight, one small prop plane with a water landing, and a walk along the walkway that was stilted over the water and they were there. At the end of the walkway was a large home built on stilts over the crystal blue water. There was a smaller place just before it where their Security Team would be making home for the next ten days. There were other similar, smaller homes situated in a group at quite a distance, but these two were alone—as though they were meant to provide just the privacy and security they would want. Maddie wasn't exactly sure how one went about finding such accommodations, so perfectly suited for their needs, but she was thankful somebody had.

Given the time in the air and the time difference, it was early morning and the sun had already risen over them. Having dressed on the plane, they were wearing light clothes; shorts, skirts, sandals. And with hats and sunglasses on their heads, the young couple was ready to jump into their surroundings.

"Wow..." Maddie breathed, looking around her as the soft breeze fluttered her skirt just so. "This is..."

"Remote?" Harry grinned wide; relaxation and vacation already taking home in his soul.

"Yes," she nodded. "And beautiful and...damn Wales. You're a genius." She stepped up next to him, kissing his lips with a sigh.

"Thank you," his arm looped loosely around her waist as the owners, a quiet, friendly couple who weren't too much older than Maddie and Harry, opened up the place for them; handing over information and keys to the Security team.

"Tired?" Maddie leaned against his chest as they waited for the okay to step in.

"No." Harry's hands ran over her back as he kissed the tip of her nose. "You?"

"Completely rested," she smiled wide and then, with a nod from Jim, who was heading up the team, they were free to enter. "Come on husband..." Maddie pulled away from him, her hand grabbing for his.

"Whoa..." Harry tugged her back to him. "What did I tell you about thresholds?"
"Oh for Heaven's sake..." Maddie rolled her eyes, arms crossing over her chest. Harry smirked and held his ground. Maddie laughed as her arms went limp in defeat. "Fine. Man of mine. Let's do this."

With a snarky chuckle, Harry moved to her, his hands firm on her waist as he lifted her up and into his arms; face to face so that her legs could wrap around him. She loved the way his hands slid down to grip her ass as he carried her over this particular threshold.

"Smooth baby," Maddie giggled, tapping his hat down on his head with one hand while her other wrapped around him, holding tight.

"You know it."

While the resort staff unloaded their bags, half the security team began to move about their place, doing their thing, while the others set up at the place that had been secured for them. Maddie had half a moment of sympathy for the protection officers who were forced to be there for her honeymoon, for the way Harry was holding her, the way she knew he was going to continue make up for falling asleep the night before, the way they were going to play their way through the next ten days.

She had half a moment of sympathy for them. But, wrapped around Harry, taking a look around for the first time, it didn't last very long.

Harry held onto her well past the threshold and into the place. Maddie lifted her sunglasses from her eyes and took it in. The extravagance of their home for the next few weeks was breathtaking—completely unimaginable at another time in her life. As her eyes moved over the beautiful furnishings, the abundant amenities, the way almost every room opened up to the view of the water—Harry's eyes moved over her. Feeling his gaze on her, she met his eyes and hugged her arms around his neck.

"Are you going to let me down now?" She smiled down at him as Arthur and Jim moved about, checking rooms and clearing entry points.

"Not a chance," Harry grinned and tightened his hold on her with one hand while the other reached into his back pocket; tossing his wallet onto the table in the living area. "You have anything in your pockets?"

"I don't have pockets," Maddie shook her head, slightly confused.

"Excellent," he beamed and, as his hand reached around, pulling her shoes from her feet, he began to move through the house again, Maddie secured and settled around him. With great ease, he navigated them across the house and outside onto the stilted deck. Maddie's breath drew in as she took in the view, as she looked out across the water.

"Oh my God..." She was stunned; in awe. Her hands rested on his shoulders as her head spun around, looking around them; taking it in. But before she could register her surroundings in any real sort of way, they were moving lower.

Harry, with Maddie in his arms, took to the stairs; walking right into the crystal clear water of the Indian Ocean.

"Harry!" Maddie's arms tightened around his neck as she realized what he was doing.
"Hold on baby," he kissed her neck with a grin as he lowered them further into the water. And she did. She held onto him as the water lapped up around them, soaking their clothes and soothing her skin.

"Harry!" She giggled into a sigh; so totally unsurprised with him.

"Here we go..." He tipped his lips up to kiss her; his hands pushing her closer to him. "We're here, love. Honeymoon."

"Just had to bring me right into the water?" She pinched his cheek lightly between her thumb and forefinger.

"Absolutely." He turned his face to kiss her hand.

"You're insane." And she loved it.

"Yes." He nodded. God how he loved her.

"You're in so much trouble." She shook her head, her hand splashing in the water; happy.

"It's funny..." He looked smug as he looked her over; eyes predator like. "I was just thinking the same thing about you."

Maddie wondered for half a moment if her laughter could be heard on the island. But, as Harry's lips took hers with expert ease, that half a second passed and she settled into honeymoon mode; she settled into him.

**Day One:**

At the end of their first day, Maddie and Harry had already pushed themselves in their efforts to explore their immediate surroundings; swimming, splashing, snorkeling. They had spent the entire day in the sun, soaking up as much of the paradise around them before they dragged themselves home for the night. The wedding, the windup, the travel—it was finally catching up with the both of them—mostly Maddie.

Maddie was already yawning when they sat down for dinner. She was heavy lidded when she stepped into the shower and, by the time Harry stepped from his own shower to join her in their large, plush bed, she had fallen asleep. Though he was incredibly tempted to jostle her awake, to tease her like she had him, he was too at peace to disturb hers. Instead, he slipped in next to her and with a wide smile on his face he watched her—much longer than he thought he would—before he fell asleep.

**Day Two:**

"Good Morning Sleeping Beauty," his voice was rich with sarcasm when she stepped out onto the deck to join him the next morning. He was sitting at the table, looking out over the water, with a breakfast spread before him; freshly showered and donning sunglasses. Maddie knew they had another day of exploring ahead of them.

"Good Morning..." She smiled and walked lazily slow over to him, her hand landing on his shoulder as she bent to kiss him. "I'm sorry I passed out on you last night."

"No worries," Harry chuckled as he pulled her hand from his shoulder and placed a kiss in her
palm. "I mean, I know it's our honeymoon but..." He kissed her wrist. "That doesn't mean it has to be non-stop sex." He looked up to her then, smirk in place.

"No?" Maddie arched one eyebrow coyly, her hand slipping lightly through his fingers and moving to the ties of her robe. "Well..." She sighed dramatically. "I suppose that's too bad."

"Too bad..." Harry's eyes narrowed slightly as he turned in his chair to watch her; confused.

"Mmmmm..." She nodded, biting at her bottom lip as her hands untied the long strips of fabric, allowing the robe to fall open; revealing sexy new, and meticulously selected, lingerie. "You see..." She shrugged a bit, loosening the robe even further. "I was hoping I might be able to show you what I had planned on wearing last night."

"Oh?" Harry's voice abandoned him, his throat dry as he took her in, his eyes widening as he looked her over. "Ohhhhh...Wow. You look..."

"Nice?" She offered with a smirk, slipping the robe down her shoulders.

"Better than nice..." Harry's eyes widened. It was almost funny for Maddie to watch him process this, to watch his mind juggle his intense desire for her to lose the robe along with his innate need to stop her from losing the robe in such an easily viewable location.

"Better than nice?" Maddie smiled, her head tipping to the side in her best rendition of seduction. "What's better than nice?"

"I..." Harry shook his head, laughing at himself, at his predicament. "Jesus Madeline..." His eyes raked her over; from her tousled hair and come-get-me eyes all the way to the heels she wore at the end of her long legs. How had he just now noticed she was wearing heels?! His heart skipped in his chest.

"Harry?" Her voice dropped low.

"Yes?" His eyes shot to hers.

"Follow me inside?"

"Absolutely."

And in the split second it took for him to bound out of his chair, Maddie tossed her robe to the side and turned—strutting back into their place with Harry following behind her and every intention of making up for lost time the night before.

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"Look at that..." Maddie nudged Harry with her toe as she looked out over the water.

"Look at what?" Harry's eyes peeked out from underneath his hat, glancing around them.

"Nothing..." Maddie sighed; leaning back in her seat and smiling wide. "Absolutely nothing." They had rented a boat for the day and, having left the security team back at home (with proper precautions and plans in place), they brought the boat as far out as they could go. They had played; driving at top speed, stopping to swim and now, as they laid back on opposite ends of the long bench in the back, bobbing in the water, they were enjoying something that had become a
rarity for them—absolute solitude.

"Hmmm..." Harry grinned at her as he rubbed her foot that was tucked next to his knee. "You've been a Duchess for two days and already you're coveting solitary confinement. So fast."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed out loud—disturbing nobody. "I know, I know..." She looked out over the water again and shrugged. "It's just really quite something, you know? Two days ago we were getting married in front of thousands..."

"Millions," he corrected, pulling her foot fully into his lap so he could massage it properly.

"And now..." She sighed again. "I know the POs are just a quick boat ride away and that they could be here in seconds but...it feels like it's just you and me."

"It does," he nodded, pulling her foot up and to his lips; placing a slightly ticklish kiss at the bottom.

"And it's nice," she giggled a bit, her foot jerking in his hand.

"It is," he agreed and, pulling her foot down to rest in his lap, he leaned back against the pillowed armrest behind him and closed his eyes; soaking up the sun.

Behind the darkness of her sunglasses, below the cover of her own wide brimmed hat, she watched him as he luxuriated in the sun, on the water. She looked him over—his swim shorts still damp from their swim, his t-shirt had been tossed aside so that his bare chest could soak up the rays. Maddie took a long breath in. He was gorgeous. Strong, broad shoulders; tight, well defined muscles; firm hands that were so soft with her. She exhaled slowly as she moved to his face; that jawline, that smile, those blue eyes she knew were behind his sunglasses. And he was all hers; to hug and kiss and...she rolled her eyes as she felt a flush rise to her cheeks.

Whenever she wanted. He was hers. That ring on his finger signaled that to the world.

Maddie looked out over the water again, up at the blue sky and back to him.

"Harry?" Her voice was soft as she ran her foot over his thigh.

"Mmmm?" His eyebrows lifted, his hand reached for her foot, but he didn't move.

"I have a question for you."

"I have an answer for you," he squeezed her toes with his fingers, a slight smile creeping onto his face. Maddie took a moment to gather her nerve before she continued.

"Hmm..." She slipped away from her spot, moving towards him; crawling up his body as if she were going to lay over him. "How good would you say your lookout skills are?"

"My lookout skills?" He raised his head then, looking right to her as she moved. "You mean like...surveillance?"

"Exactly." She nodded, stretching out to lay on his chest; her legs over his, her arms crossed over him as she smiled up at him.

"I don't know," he chuckled with a shrug of his shoulders; his fingers tracing down her back
lightly. "I suppose I would say they're pretty good. Why..." He looked her over and nodded to the water. "Are you going in starkers?"

"No," Maddie shook her head and, with fire in her eyes, she moved back slightly, her lips pressing a kiss to his chest.

Then another, and another and—when she reached his belly button, she let her lips linger for a moment longer. Looking up to him through lowered lashes, her eyes locked with his. And she knew, despite the dark lenses, his eyes were wide; watching her intently.

"Madeline..." His voice was low; half lust, half warning. There was a moment of pause before her hand moved, tracing the same path her lips had just taken and, passing his belly button, her fingers stopped at the waistband to his swim shorts and she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth.

"I just thought...I don't know..." She shrugged innocently as her fingers moved further down, tracing the outline of his growing cock. "I thought maybe it might be your turn to be at my mercy."

"You do know we're out in the wide open..."

"Are you telling me no?" Her hand paused, feeling him pulse underneath her. "You can tell me no and I won't be offended..."

"I'm not telling you no," he shook his head, the debate raging inside of him. "I'm telling you..." His words cut off as her hand slipped into his trunks. His breath held as she took his length in one hand, her other already at work pulling his shorts from his hips; exposing him. "Jesus..." He groaned, his arousal mounting at her intensity, at her boldness, at the thought of what was about to happen, where it was about to happen.

"Keep your eyes up Captain." She ordered before her head dipped, her blonde hair fanning over him as she smiled up at him and then, with bated breath, he watched his wife take him in her mouth. His head rolled back and his eyes pressed shut for the briefest of seconds before he pulled himself together—at least enough to open his eyes. Knowing fully well this was going to require every bit of self-control and effort he had within him, he did his best to look casual, to remain alert all while her mouth was turning his insides into liquid fire.

As the sun set that night over the glistening water, Maddie sat at their kitchen table, remnants of their dinner scattered about, drinking champagne while Harry finished his shower. She had gone first and, instead of falling asleep like she had the night before, she was wide awake and enjoying a bit of quiet time. They had spent so much time on the water that day, she was enjoying dry land.

Lounging in one kitchen chair, her feet resting in another, Maddie sighed into the breeze coming in through the large open walls, rolling off the water. She had foregone her selection of lingerie in favor of a button down and boy shorts; comfort her main priority as she stretched out and relaxed even further. Her moment of solitude was drawn to an end when Harry stepped from their room, pulling a t-shirt over his tanned chest.

"You're awake," he teased.

"And you're tan!" She looked him over as he walked across the living room. "I hate that you tan so easily. You're a ginger. Aren't you supposed to burn?" She giggled into her glass of
champagne; slightly tipsy.

"I defy all laws of nature baby," he smirked as he ruffed a towel over his hair; stepping up to the table. "You should know that by now."

"Oh God," she rolled her eyes, setting her glass back on the table with a giggle. "What is with this cocky, beastly man before me?"

"You've unleashed a monster." He stood before her then, his hand reaching out, his finger tracing over her shoulder, across her collar bone towards the pink skin of her cleavage; tickling her as he moved.

"Well, monster of mine...are you tired?" She grinned up at him; her body rousing under his fingers.

"Not at all." His grin was wide, his eyes sparking with mischievousness.

"Mmm..." Maddie nodded. "Are you at all interested in a little nature defying playtime?"

Harry chuckled his response as he leaned to kiss her; his lips soft and firm and warm and wet against hers. Maddie sighed as her head tipped up, her lips clinging to his; needy.

"Baby..." She looked up at him through lowered lashes. "Don't tell me playtime's over..."

"Madeline..." He groaned, shaking his head as he leaned to kiss her again; hotter, more urgent. "It's a dangerous thing, you know...calling me to duty like that."

"Oh?" Her eyes widened. "Should I be afraid?" She was tipsy; tipsy and in love and apparently awash with lust for her husband.

"No..." He shook his head, moving around her chair so that he was standing behind her; bending to kiss the crook of her neck.

"Ah..." She sighed; loving the way he ignited her skin. Her hand moved up behind her, finding his neck and pulling him back to her skin as her head tipped to the side; needing his lips on her body.

"Madeline?" She could feel his lips pull into a grin against her as her heart fluttered in her chest at the way he said her name.

"Yes?" She breathed; anticipation surging through her veins. His hands moved to her shoulders then, massaging lightly as they moved down her arms.

"Do you trust me?" His voice was so low, so heavy, that Maddie's breath sucked into her lungs, her hair standing on edge. And then a deep, wide grin spread over her lips, her entire body warming as she contemplated what could possibly come next.

"Absolutely." Harry laughed softly at how certain she sounded; how strong and firm her response was. He kissed her softly; her shoulder, her neck, her cheek, before his lips settled close to her ear and he whispered. "Keep your eyes closed."

Maddie gulped at the way his breath tickled her ear, at the sensations it drew from her body. Unable to speak she nodded, her tongue swiping over her lips as she took a breath. And then his
hands left her body and he stepped away from her. The room grew quiet, only the sound of the ocean in Maddie's ear, as she sat with her eyes pressed closed waiting for his return.

She wasn't alone for long. She could sense his return, sense his presence before she felt his hand on her shoulder. His thumb drew small circles there; comforting, reassuring as he leaned closer.

"Harry..." She breathed.

"Shh baby. I got you..." His hand moved down her arm, finding her hand and taking it gently into his. The next thing she heard was the slide of metal against metal; the next thing she felt was the cold steel against her wrist and then, before she could find the words to ask, Harry had slid one of her wrists into what she was certain was a pair of handcuffs.

"Harry..." She moved slightly; surprised but not deterred by the introduction of the restraints. She felt him kiss her other wrist before slipping the other cuff through the bars on the chair and around her tiny wrist. And just like that, Maddie was handcuffed to the chair. She was excited and nervous all at the same time. She trusted him, implicitly, completely and they had played before. But everything felt so new, so elevated here in paradise.

"Is that okay?" His hands ran softly over her arms, taking care of her first. "Not too tight or..."

"No," Maddie shook her head; her voice soft and whispery. "It's not too tight."

"Good," he smiled and rose to his feet, circling around her chair so that he was facing her. His fingers reached out to the smooth skin of her cheek. Maddie smiled at the contact, leaning into his hand. Her eyes fluttered open and she took him in. "Hey." His grin pulled wider as he looked her over.

"Hey," Maddie took a breath, trying to calm herself; not wanting to get too far ahead of him, ahead of the moment. "Do you want to tell me what you're planning on doing?"

"Hmm..." Harry chuckled lightly, his finger trailing down her neck to the top of her shirt, dipping into the open v at the peaks of her chest. Her body moved of its own volition, arching towards him. "I think I would rather show you."

"Oh?" Maddie's eyebrows rose, her skin tingling; blood boiling.

"Oh." Harry leaned in then, his lips meeting hers with a kiss—a light, simple kiss that already left her wanting more. Maddie's neck stretched to kiss him, straining against the cuffs as he stepped away from her.

"Oh no..." She shook her head, fighting a grin, at the cocky look that took over his face at her reaction. Moving her feet from the chair in front of her, he took a seat. "I'm not sure I'm going to like this."

"No?" Harry's lips tugged up as his hands reached out to her again. "I think you're going to love this." Maddie's body stirred at his words, at his confidence. His fingers moved to the top button of her shirt, his eyes flashing as he began the long, slow, torturous task of unbuttoning the shirt that covered her. Maddie's breath held as she watched him move from one button to the other, the way his eyes watched her, the way his lips pulled up, the way his other hand rested on her thigh—it was already driving her mad.

As he finished the last button, he brushed the shirt to each side of her, exposing her skin to the
cool breeze. Air sucked into her lungs and she arched closer; the metal of her cuffs clinging against the chair. She let out a groan of protest but had very little time to let it sit before he was touching her.

Harry ran a hand lightly up her side, the featherlike touch bringing her towards him in reflex. Reaching the soft underside of her breast, he took it in his palm and, with that familiar wicked grin, he leaned closer, taking her nipple into his mouth.

A hiss pressed through Maddie's lips at the soft, warmth of his mouth. Harry moved closer to her then, his chair screeching against the floor as his other hand moved up her other side, to her other breast; his thumb teasing her nipple before his mouth moved to join it in rendering her crazy.

"Oh God..." Her head tipped back as she arched against him—wanting more friction, needing more heat. It was amazing how her inability to move, her inability to direct, was driving her into a slow, sensual madness. And just like that, just as quickly as he had drawn her to this moment, he pulled away from her; leaning back in his chair, thinking over his next move.

Maddie's head snapped up, her eyes opening and zeroing in on his instantly. Her arms moved, struggling against the cuffs; desperately wanting to be free to pull him back. But she couldn't move. He had made sure of that. Her breathing was labored, her pulse pounding in her ears as she watched him; thinking over any negotiation she could possibly offer to bring him back.

"You okay?" He asked her; wanting to take care of her even in this moment of playfulness.

"No..." She shook her head, taking a deep breath before nodding in truth. "Yes."

"Good..." Harry bit at his bottom lip and moved forward, his hands reaching out to her again. This time they settled on her knees; strong and firm. Maddie inhaled sharply as they began to inch up her thighs, firm and strong. Her hips wiggled involuntarily in her chair; eager, ready for the direction his fingers were moving, for the contact she hoped was on the horizon.

But not quite so fast. His hands stalled, coming to a stop at the top of her thighs, right at that juncture where her boy shorts began, right at that spot that made her groan in anticipation.

"Harry...You're driving me crazy."

"That's the idea, love," he smirked and, giving into his own excitement, moved forward, abandoning his chair altogether.

Kneeling in front of her, his hands moved, pushing her legs apart slightly. Sliding his hand slowly across the thin fabric that covered her, his thumb moved to her center, tracing the damp cloth that laid tight against her.

Her head dropped back with a moan when his head dipped, his lips following that same torturous trail his hands had taken up her leg; leaving wet kisses on her thighs as he moved higher and higher and higher.

And when he reached her core, his thumb moved to the side and he pressed an open mouthed kiss there. Maddie gasped at the sensation, heat pooling inside of her as his breath warmed the thin fabric that separated them. Her hips arched up towards him, wanting more—needing more.

And just like that. He was gone.
Or at least his mouth was. Pulling back slightly, he smiled up at her; waiting for the glare he knew
was headed his way. And it was. Her head pulled forward, her eyes narrowed. But before she
could chastise him, before she could demand anything, his thumb returned to her.

Long...slow...mind-numbing circles meant to leave her senseless as he took a deep breath needing
to steady himself.

"You're so beautiful..." He spoke softly as he began to straighten up. "You are so...brilliant. Sexy.
Amazing." His thumb pressed closer with each word as he moved in. "The things you do to me..."
He shook his head and stretched his neck to kiss her. Maddie's lips parted instantly, her tongue
pushing into his mouth with a breathy moan. But before she was even close to being satisfied, he
was pulling away from her again.

"You stop this Henry." She glared, her chest rising and falling with deep breaths. "You are being
mean and...mean..." She struggled for the right word as her hands struggled against the cuffs.
"Damn it Harry! Let me out of these or..."

"Or?" He arched an eyebrow; amused.
And turned on.

And not at all afraid of her. Cocky, certain, he pulled his hands completely away from her and
rose to his feet. Maddie watched as he took a few steps back and shrugged.

"What are you...where are you going?" Harry smiled, lifted the bottle of champagne from the table
and filled both their glasses and, watching her frustration, drained his.

"Would you care for more champagne love?" He held her glass out to her.

"No," Maddie shook her head, her jaw clenched slightly. Her eyes watched as he moved closer,
her heart thumping as he looked her over and then her breath sucked in sharply as Harry tipped
the glass—the chilled liquid pouring down the center of her bared chest. "Harry!"

"Mmm?" He smiled and, with very little thought to answering her, he returned to his knees. His
face pressed to her stomach, his tongue warm and flat against her skin as he sucked at the
champagne that trickled between her breasts. Maddie groaned at the mixture of his hot mouth, the
cold champagne, her completely aroused body, and she wasn't sure she could take much more of
this slow, methodical deconstruction of her wits. For a split second she contemplated fighting
back, teasing him by closing her legs, turning her mouth from his. For a split second she tossed up
the idea of trying to pick the lock on the cuffs. Because God knew...she could handle very little
more of this tease he was giving her. And when he pulled away from her this time, she was ready
to scream.

But she didn't have to. His torture was coming to an end—or his own restraint was fading—either
way, his hands moved with purpose back to her hips. His fingers were strong as he looped them
into the waistband of the boy shorts she wore. His eyes locked with hers as he peeled them away
from her skin. Maddie gasped as he slid them down her legs, not breaking eye contact for a
moment as he tossed them to the side.

His fingers pressed into her thighs as he pushed them apart, a bit rougher this time. Maddie's body
ached for him to touch her and, when his tongue smoothed over his lips, she sucked in a breath.
As his hands massaged her flesh, Harry leaned forward and, bringing all of her tensions to a head,
his mouth was hot and wet against her. And she wanted nothing more in the world in that moment
than to push her fingers into his red hair and press him closer to her.

"Oh God..." She called out into the room; her hips pressing forward. Harry's hands moved under her ass, pulling her to him as he pressed closer; his lips sucking her in, his tongue stroking against her. "Oh..." The word tumbled from her throat as her head fell back, the cuffs clanging against the chair. The buildup, the pressure, the skill and expertise he brought to this moment, it was almost too much for her to take. She felt tears press into her eyes as her body neared the release he had teased her with; the release she ached for.

And when he pulled back this time, his eyes heavy with lust, Maddie wanted to cry.

"No!" Her eyes were wide; desperate. "Harry please. Please..." And because he had very little left in him to refuse her, his lips returned to her in a flash. As his tongue flicked against her, his fingers pressed into her and, with a few, long strokes, Maddie was unraveling against him. Her fingers gripped the chair, her legs squeezed against him and she cried out into the night.

Harry stayed in place, his kisses slowing, his hands softening his grip on her thighs as Maddie recovered. His head moved up as she breathed; kissing up her stomach, the soft skin of her breasts, her collarbone and then, finally—her lips. Maddie sighed into him; her lips soft and palpable against his. His hands moved into her hair, gentle and sweet, as he held her face to his; his forehead leaning into hers.

"Harry..." She breathed.

"I have you, love..." He smiled against her mouth with one more kiss before he moved around her. His hands were loving as he released her wrists from the cuffs one at a time; pulling them to his lips as he pressed kisses to the light, pink marks they had left behind. As soon as she was free, as soon as he dropped the cuffs to the table next to her, Maddie was up and out of the chair, pulling him around and back to her. Her arms, free and needy, wrapped around his neck, bringing his lips to hers.

And he kissed her; long, slow, warm, kisses meant to soothe, meant to contrast the teasing ones he had given her before. His arms went around her waist, hugging her close; her bare chest pressing against his.

"Oh my God..." She sighed into him. "What was that..."

"What was that?" He chuckled against her lips. "Me. Making good on my vow."

Maddie laughed softly. "Honoring me with your body?"

"That would be the one..." His hands were soft as they ran along her bare skin; warming her even further.

"Though I would say..." Maddie smiled as her fingers lifted to trace his lips. "That was really more the work of your mouth..."

"Hmmm..." Harry grinned, nuzzling her closer. "And who said I'm finished."

"Oh..." Maddie bit her lip as her arms tightened around his neck. And then, with firm, gentle hands, Harry lifted her up into his arms; legs wrapping around him.

"Come on baby..." He tipped his lips to hers. "Let's go to bed."
"Yes my lord..." Maddie kissed him back and with a sigh of happiness, a sigh of anticipation, she held onto her husband as they abandoned their moment of play for a moment of love.

Honeymoon To Be Continued...
Chapter 106

Day Three:

On Day Three of their honeymoon, Maddie convinced Harry to venture into town. She wanted to shop a bit, look for some sort of silly souvenir to take home with them, take in the Art Gallery. So they went. They enjoyed lunch in town, eating at an off-the-road bistro that another shopper had recommended. They had gone on a hike, they had signed up for a scuba trip and, by the time they made their way back to their place, to unload bags and refresh, Harry was happy he had given into her and travelled into town. And they found plenty of souvenirs to take home with them; framed paintings, a few small knick knacks that made Maddie giggle, and some fabric that she thought she might have something made out of.

After dinner they sat together outside, his arm draped around her shoulder, his fingers twisting at her hair as he looked out at the water and she read from her book. When she finished her chapter, she put the bookmark in place and set it to the side; her head tipping back to lay on his arm as she turned her eyes to him. Harry, feeling her move, turned to place a kiss on the tip of her nose, a contented smile on his face.

"Hi..." Maddie sighed, leaning into him, her arms wrapping around him as she snuggled closer.

"Hi..." His hand dropped down to her upper arm, rubbing softly; holding her tighter. Maddie smiled wider, pressing closer, and let it all settle over her; how blissfully lucky she was.

Maddie's face turned into him then, pressing a kiss to his chest, warm under his light t-shirt. She felt him kiss the top of her head, his hand squeezing her shoulder as his lips lingered in her hair for a moment. Her legs stretched out along his, taking a deep breath as she tried to nuzzle closer; wondering if she would ever be able to actually be close enough to him.

"Mmm..." Her lips hummed as she kissed his chest again. "I love you..."

"I love you too," was his quick response, his ingrained emotion.

Maddie's smile widened still as her hand, tucked around his waist, began to move; tickling a trail across his stomach to the top of his shorts. With her bottom lip pulled between her teeth, she turned suggestive eyes up to him as one finger traced further down; causing him to stir. His deep chuckle rumbled in his chest, against her cheek, as he shook his head slowly.

"Really now?" He was smirking; eyebrows high on his forehead.

"Mmm Hmm," she nodded, her hand slipping up under his t-shirt to the warm flesh of his stomach.

"Wow..." He was amazed really, his smirk deepening as he pulled her hand into his.

"Aw come on Captain..." She tugged his hand to her for a kiss. "Do I really need to remind you of your vow?"

"Oh for Heaven's sake Madeline," he laughed out loud; amused at her seemingly unquenchable desire. "Maybe I need a day to recover and..."
"With my body I thee honor..." She repeated verbatim, even slipping into her British accent for effect. Her eyes were wide and smiling and he could tell she was messing with him—mostly.

"You're incorrigible." He shook his head.

"Insatiable..." She countered.

"Unhinged..." His eyebrows arched again.

"Uninhibited...." With a smirk firmly in place, Maddie sat up and moved into his lap; facing him with one knee resting on either side of his legs.

"Okay. I'm putting a stop to this..." He pointed a finger at her in warning.

"Putting your foot down?" She grinned.

"Putting my foot down," he nodded, his hands moving instinctually to her thighs.

"Because you're the man?" Her head tipped to the side, his hands moving slowly, rousing the both of them.

"I am the man." He squeezed her hips, pulling her closer—despite his weak protests from only moments before.

"Then be the man..." She challenged and he couldn't deny how sexy she looked in that moment; trying to seduce a man who needed no seduction. He was hers already; always. Her voice dropped like her lashes as her hands moved down his chest again. "Be the man, Harry. Be my man..."

"Madeline. My darling, darling wife..." His voice was gruff, wanting her but enjoying her game so much.

"What happened to all those laws of nature that you defy?" She was smug as her fingers worked their way back under his t-shirt. "My big, manly beast."

"Wow..." He shook his head with a chuckle, one hand leaving her hip; running over his face and into his hair. "I really need to stop talking."

"I couldn't agree more." She leaned forward then, her lips finding his warm and willing.

"What is with you tonight?" His eyes danced as he met hers, his fingers moving into her hair.

"You've unleashed a mad woman." She giggled, pressing her body close to his; her chest resting on his, her legs holding him tight between them.

"It appears that I have," his hands moved down her back then; slowly, soothingly. She smiled softly, allowing her body to rest against him; her desires waning slightly as she prepared to relax and let it go. "At least you're my mad woman."

"That I am." She tipped her lips up to kiss him.

"Madeline?"
"Henry?"

"Follow me inside?"

With a squeal of a laugh, she perked up and even Harry couldn't deny the deep, intense gratification he felt at how excited and happy she was to be with him—at the thought of being with him.

"Come on Captain..." She slid from his lap and held out her hand. "I'll be gentle."

**Day Four:**

"Maddie!" Harry's voice was bright, chipper; rejuvenated as he bound from the house to where Maddie lazed in the sun.

"Harry!" She called out from under her hat, from behind her sunglasses.

"Step it up, love," his fingers wiggled one of her toes. "A full day ahead. Deep sea fishing till this afternoon, or till I catch something," he grinned. "Home for shower then into the resort for that band that lady told us about in town and..." He trailed off, noticing her complete lack of movement, the absence of response. "Madeline?"

"What if..." She stretched out and took a deep breath. "What if you go deep sea fishing and I stay here and nap?"

"Nap?" His forehead creased.

"And read a book..." She waved her hand at the stack of books on the table next to her.

"You want to nap and...read a book—in paradise..." Harry studied her for a moment before his smile grew incredibly smug; stretching all the way across his face. His arms crossed over his chest. "Oh. I see."

"You see?"

"Is somebody worn out?"

"Excuse me?"

"Tired? Exhausted? No energy left?" He cocked an eyebrow; his chest rumbling with laughter. "Has your husband driven you to fatigue?"

"Oh please!" She sighed deeply, pulling her sunglasses from her eyes so he could catch her glare. He caught it and met it and wasn't backing down.

"Say it." He commanded. "You want me to leave so you can rest up."

"Henry."

"Say it."

"Fine." With a deep sigh, she put her sunglasses on and shrugged; going for casual. "I want you to leave so that I can rest up. There. Happy?" She could admit it. The first three days of their
honeymoon were catching up with her.

"Not yet," he shook his head, laughing as he leaned to kiss her. "Rest up love. I'll be back this evening...ready to honor you with my..."

"Please don't say your body..."

"Honor you with my body!" He nodded; his nose bumping against hers.

"I really should have known better."

"You really should have," he agreed; kissing her once more before standing up straight and moving to the door. "I'm taking Jim with me. Williams is at their place."

"I know." She smiled at the way he looked out for her.

"Tell me you love me." He turned back to her as he stepped through the doorway.

"I love you." She smiled, despite herself. "Tell me you worship the ground I walk on."

"Oh baby, you know I do..." He looked so damn sexy standing there; cocky and smug and in love with her. Maddie almost regretted sending him off for the day. "I'll see you later today. You still want to go in for drinks and music tonight?"

"I do," she nodded.

"Excellent."

"Hey Harry?" He turned back to her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Enjoy your day."

"Come back to me!" She called out as he moved from the room.

"Wait for me!" He called back, disappearing from her view.

Maddie sighed at the lack of him; for a split second contemplating jumping up and following along. But instead she reached for her drink, a book and, with every intention of rejuvenating for the night, she leaned back in her chair and soaked up their vacation.

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When Harry returned, Maddie had slept away most of the day; her body and her mind were refreshed and ready for a night of mild to moderate debauchery. Drinking. Live music. Harry dancing. Harry, having been successful at catching something, was in top form; rearing to knock back a few and listen to some music. He showered and dressed and, with an arm wrapped loosely around his wife's waist, they walked along the elevated walkway towards the resort.

It was a beautiful evening. The resort was spectacular with open walls and views of the water, and Maddie found great humor in the fact that they had been there for days and had only now stepped foot in the main house, but who could blame her—being locked up with her husband in their place far outweighed this option—as much fun as it was.
They took a booth off towards the side, in a less well lit part of the bar—hoping to remain anonymous as long as they could. But as Harry slid into her side of the booth with her, Maddie realized that most of these people were so engrossed in themselves, in their travel companions that they didn’t stop to care who else was around.

The night was lively; fun and entertaining and just the sort of mild craziness the two of them needed in the middle of their trip. They ate some amazing food and tried some new cocktails and, by the time the local band hit the stage, they were pretty well tipsy. As the night grew on, the dance floor grew heavy, thick with people and Harry was ready to join them. His hand slid along her thigh under the table before it reached for hers.

"Come on love..." He smiled that crooked, tipsy smile of his that made Maddie warm inside. "Dance with me." It wasn't a question. And Maddie, feeling drawn to him in so many ways, shrugged away her innate defiance and slipped her hand into his.

He pulled her from the booth and out onto the floor, navigating them through the other couples, the groups of friends and, finding a spot he was satisfied with, he turned and took her in his arms. If either of them had stopped to think about who they were and where they were, they might have thought that he was holding her a bit too close, that his hands were grasping a bit too tight.

But neither of them thought of it and, in truth, neither of them cared. Yes, they were in full view of the public and yes, after such a public wedding, more people recognized them than before, but it was late and everyone had been drinking and neither of them cared. So Harry let his hands move greedily over the curves of her body and Maddie tossed her arms around his neck and pressed her body into his and together they enjoyed the music, they reveled in the free spiritedness that seemed to surround them. And they danced.

It was well into the next morning before they decided it was time to leave. Maddie's hair was mussed, her eyes dancing, her smile wide and her skin glistening from the dancing and the drinks. Stopping at their table for one last drink before they headed out, Harry handled the tab and, when the woman who had been waiting on them all night slipped Harry more than just the receipt, Maddie's eyes grew wide.

There, along with his receipt, on a separate slip of paper, were a name and a phone number. Maddie's eyes flashed to Harry, her mind stumbling over the fact that this was happening; that it was happening in front of her. Her mind was slow, thanks to the drinks, but Harry's wasn't.

"Whoa, whoa," Harry called out the instant he realized what it was; his hand reaching out to the woman. "Sorry. I...No." He held the slip of paper out to her. "No. I'm married," he gestured towards Maddie. "Just married...and happily. This is...not okay. I'm not interested."

"Oh...no, no," she shook her head, the corner of her mouth twitching into half a smile. With wide eyes, slightly flushed cheeks, her gaze passed from Harry to Maddie and back again. "It was for the two of you." She paused for effect. "Together."

"Oh." Harry's lips puffed out a breath; mind numb. This was a first.

"Oh..." Maddie was stunned speechless for a split second.

"Wow. That's..." Harry took a deep, letting that sink for a beat before he held the paper out to her again. "The answer is still no."

"No." Maddie shook her head in agreement.
"Oh," the woman nodded, her eyes flashing with disappointment mixed with the tiniest bit of embarrassment as she took the paper back.

"Sorry..." Maddie offered a warm smile. "You're very beautiful but..."

"No," Harry shook his head, looking to Maddie and back to the woman. "I am not a big fan of sharing."

"He's not," Maddie agreed, her hand running down his arm to slip into his hand. "Thank you, though."

With a mumbled apology, the woman slipped away and Harry turned back to Maddie with a stunned look on his face.

"I think it's time for us to go," he squeezed her hand in his.

"I think you're right," Maddie nodded, suppressing a giggle as he lead her from the bar. They were half way down the walk when Maddie could suppress her laughter no longer. "Oh my God...did that really just happen?" Harry chuckled, pulling her hand to his lips.

"I told you that you looked fucking amazing tonight."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "So do you..." Her eyes took him in. "I suppose you can't blame her for trying."

"I suppose you can't," Harry's eyes grew darker as they met Maddie's.

"Just so you know...when I say I want to play, I never mean with somebody else. Do you ever..."

"Please," Harry shook his head. "I have zero intention of ever sharing you with...anyone." He kissed her hand again, his mind shifting. "Speaking of playing, love, do you need more time to recover or..." And before he could finish his sentence, Maddie had moved to him, pressing her body flush with his as she kissed him. His arms went tight around her waist as her tongue pushed into his mouth. It took them mere seconds for the heat to compound between them, for their collective breaths to grow heavy. When Maddie pulled back from him, her lips were pink and slightly swollen and her eyes were full of want.

"I'll race you back..." She pressed her lips to his and then, with a playful gleam in her eye, she dropped his hand and took off running towards their place. Harry watched her, grin wide, for a second before he bound after her; their laughter radiating through the night—morning—air.

To be continued...
Day Five:

When Harry woke up on day five, the day already felt off. To begin with, Maddie was no longer there in bed with him. And after a night like that, he had expected her to sleep in with him. As he peeled his eyes open to look around, he could see that their tropical sun had given way to a dark, cloudy, rainy day. Rubbing a hand up over his face, he tossed aside the blankets and stepped from their bed. Reaching for a t-shirt, he was surprised to find it felt kind of chilly. Funny how the sudden absence of sun in the tropics made what he would normally consider warm weather, cold. He glanced outside again and sighed; the rain was really coming down.

He moved into the living room, his eyes instantly seeking and finding her. He smiled as she looked up to him. There she was, content; bundled up in a large chair, blanket covering her legs; laptop open as she drank from a mug of what he assumed was something warm.

"I think it's going to be an indoor day," Maddie called out to him with a warm smile on her face.

"I think so," he agreed, stopping by the breakfast spread set up in the dining area for a cup of tea and a muffin. "What are you doing?" He nodded to the computer as he took a seat and took a bite.

"I don't want to tell you." She was sweet and slightly embarrassed.

"No?" He grinned, taking a sip of tea. "Why not?"

"You'll make fun of me."

"I swear I won't."

"Okay..." She looked down at the screen and back up to him. "I'm looking at pictures from the wedding."

"Our wedding?"

"Yes," she rolled her eyes at herself. "I woke up early and didn't want to wake you...and I was curious. So I googled it." She waved her hand to him. "Go ahead. Make fun."

"I'm not going to make fun," he took another bite, washed it down with some tea and, taking his mug with him, moved to her chair. "Let me see..." Maddie moved forward in her chair and Harry, holding tight to the mug, slid in behind her, his legs stretching around her as he cuddled close.

"What do we have here?"

"Well..." Maddie smiled, leaning back against him; tucking the blanket around his legs. "I was just looking at some pictures of the carriage ride from St. Paul's to Buckingham. Remember when you kissed my hand and the crowd went nuts?"

"Yes," Harry nodded with a chuckle. "Such a thirsty crowd, no?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "But there are actually some really good shots of it..." She pointed to the screen. "Look at that smile on your face."
"Yeah..." He looked at the screen and then turned to her; his head close to hers. "I was happy." He pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Incredibly happy."

"Mmm..." She sighed, settling closer to him as she turned her face to meet his lips. "Good morning."

"Good morning," he kissed her again. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Not long," Maddie turned back to the screen and laughed. "Look at Ella in that carriage. Lord, she must have just been dying..." She shook her head, her mind wandering to their friends back home.

"I'm guessing she enjoyed herself," Harry had a smirk on his face.

"I wonder what ended up happening between her and Bishop..." Maddie brought her mug to her lips as she thought for a moment. "Do you think they..."

"I have no idea," Harry shook his head. "With those two it could be anything."

"True..." Maddie sighed and closed the computer, setting it to the side; snuggling into his warm arms. Harry's hand rubbed up her arm, over her shoulder, pressing her closer to him as he settled in the chair; content with what appeared to be the extent of their day.

A wonderful silence settled over them; a silence born of comfort, of ease. A silence that spoke of a serenity they shared between them. Both had come to the conclusion that they would be spending the day indoors. Both had accepted that fact with a smile, both had welcomed a chance to be together in quiet closeness.

It was minutes later when Maddie's soft voice broke the silence.

"Hey Harry?"

"Hmm?" His eyebrows rose lazily as he smiled down at her.

"Does that happen to you often?" She adjusted slightly, wanting to look at him. "What happened last night...that's happened to you before, hasn't it." It took him a moment to pull forward enough of the night to remember what she was talking about.

"You mean the woman who propositioned my wife and I for a threesome?" He squinted with a smirk as he looked at her. "No. That was a first."

"Not that," she rolled her eyes, sitting up a bit more. "Well not that specifically. I mean...in general. Women slipping you their phone number like that."

"Ah..." Harry nodded, his voice flattening as he sighed and met her eyes. "I'm not sure you really want to know the answer to that."

"I'm sure that I do."

"Well..." He took a deep breath and looked down into his mug before answering. "No. This wasn't a first."

"I didn't think so." She paused, taking in his answer; weighing it in her mind as she looked at him.
"I mean...you're you...I suppose women meet you and figure, what the hell, and take their once-in-a-lifetime shot."

"I suppose," Harry shrugged, watching her carefully as she processed it.

"Did it always go down like that? An inconspicuous piece of paper with a name and number?"

"Not always," Harry shrugged. "Sometimes they were bolder, slipping it in the pocket of my jacket, pressing it into my hand, or...I don't know, writing it directly on a receipt or an agenda from a meeting or something like that. A room key now and then."

"Women would slip you their room key." Her voice spiked, her posture tensed and, sensing that, Harry worried he may have gone too far.

"I told you that you didn't want to know," he reached for her hand then, his fingers stroking hers as he smiled softly; wanting to guide the conversation in another direction.

"Did you ever..." Maddie's eyes were watching him intently.

"Call a number that a random woman slipped into my palm? No."

"What about..."

"No." He shook his head with a laugh. "I have never used a room key that some woman...Maddie, come on..."

"Sorry." Maddie shook her head, her eyes rolling as she snapped back to the moment. "Sorry. I don't know why I asked that. Of course you didn't. I was just...curious..." She shook her head again, dropping his hand and rising from the chair. "I'm sorry I asked..."

"It's okay," he watched as she walked to the kitchen, pouring more tea. "You can ask all the questions you want. It's really not a big deal."

"Sure," Maddie shrugged and turned her eyes away from him, looking out at the storm clouds rolling slowly through the sky. "Can you believe it's raining?"

"No..." Harry followed her eyes, not entirely sure that this conversation was over; even if it appeared over for the moment. But, not wanting to push, he rose from the chair and walked over to the large windows and watched the water fall from the sky into the ocean.

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Harry had been right to suspect that the conversation wasn't entirely over. Though they had moved on that morning to other things, planning their excursions for the remainder of their stay in the Maldives, taking guesses as the outcome of the Ella/Bishop extravaganza, the topic had stayed in the back of Maddie's mind. Despite her best efforts to rid it completely; it stayed.

They had just finished lunch and after a lengthy debate over if they were even going to bother dressing for the day or if they were going to stay in pajamas, they had finally given in and showered; opting for comfy, lounging clothes. Harry had just finished reading through a newspaper when Maddie's voice cut into the room.

"Have you ever been tempted?"
Harry froze in his spot, his eyes snapping to hers. There was a moment of stilted silence and he took a deep breath. He knew exactly what she was talking about this time; no guessing needed.

"Sure." He shrugged, tossing the newspaper aside and folding his hands in his lap. "I mean...I was once an awkward teenager with raging hormones. I was curious."

"Why didn't you ever call them?" She studied him as he spoke, her mind churning. She wasn't sure what emotions were brewing within. There was quite a bit of curiosity—at the whole practice, not just Harry's involvement. And, though she wasn't anywhere near ready to admit it, there was a tiny bit of jealousy, a smidge of defensiveness.

"Because..." Harry took a deep breath. "Because who knows who these women are or were. They could have been underage or...overage. Some of them could have been reporters for God's sake."

"What do you do with them?" She took a few steps into the room, sitting down on the couch across from him. "The numbers?"

"Throw them away, mostly. If the moment allows, I'll hand them back and tell them no thank you, just like you saw last night." He shrugged. "When I was younger, I used to pass them on to Bishop, Sean, and Leo. They got quite a kick out of it."

"I would imagine," Maddie smiled wide then, imagining the four of them riled up at slips of paper with phone numbers on them. "Wait...when you were younger? When did it start?"

"I don't know...when I was about thirteen I think."

"Thirteen?!" Her eyes went wide. "Jesus, you were a baby! And women were passing you their numbers?"

"Well they were mostly girls at that time, but yes." He laughed.

"Wow..." Maddie shook her head, relaxing back on the couch with a chuckle. "Did it stop when you started dating me?"

Harry grew silent, his eyes meeting hers. He studied her for a moment; wondering if she really wanted to know, wondering what he was about to jump into.

"No." He was honest; always honest.

"No?" She laughed, surprised. "What about when we got engaged?"

He blinked and answered. "No."

"No?!" Maddie's surprise shifted a bit, her territorial side showing.

"Honestly, no."

"But..." Maddie was stunned. "Why?"

"I don't know," he shook his head. "I think that maybe they are attracted to the challenge?"
"Wow..." Maddie shook her head. "I don't even know what to say."

"There's nothing to say."

"How often does it happen?"

"I don't know."

"Once a month?"

"No."

"More or less than that?"

"More."

"Once every two weeks? Once a week?"

"About once a week, once every two."

"Jesus Christ!" Maddie rose to her feet, not entirely sure where she was going or what she was doing.

"Easy..." Harry's chuckle was low, his mind working overtime to keep up with what she was doing, where she was headed.

"Easy? Harry..." She took a breath, trying to maintain control of her heated emotions, unclear as to why she was getting so worked up. "When was the last time it happened?"

"Maddie." He could see she was getting upset and everything inside of him wanted to back it up, calm her down.

"Harry. When?" She held her ground, knowing he would be honest with her. And he was; painfully so.

"Not including the woman last night?" He breathed. "A few weeks ago."

"A few weeks? When? Where? Who was she?!"

"I don't know who she was," Harry's mind went back and forth between finding this funny and finding this disturbing. "It was the night of my stag party and..."

"You never told me about that."

"I know." His hand reached out to her as she paced past him. "We decided not to talk about the parties and..."

"You never told me about any of them." She spun around on him then, pulling her hand out of his reach.

"That's because..." He looked up at her, the smile fading from his face. "Hold on. Are you mad at me?"
"No!" She yelled out, catching herself. "No. I'm not mad. I'm just...I don't know what I am. What I do know is that women have been slipping my husband their phone number and...and this is the first I've heard about it..." Her eyes narrowed slightly as she looked at him; confused.

"Hey..." He rose to his feet. "Come on. This is not a big deal."

"Not a big deal? Women are trying to sleep with you and..."

"And they don't get to sleep with me!" He yelled out, astonished. "Come on Madeline. Women hit on me. Sometimes women hit on me. They see me in a magazine or on the internet and they think they know me, they have this delusion of what it might be like to be with me and they think they want to be with me and they...they take a shot and they hit on me. That cannot be news to you. Men hit on you. That's not news to me."

"Men do not hit on me," she shook her head.

"Bullshit!" Harry laughed, wide and loud. "I see them hit on you."

"Please."

"Please."

"Men are not slipping me their phone numbers, their room keys..."

"That's because I'm a Captain in the British Army and they know I'd hunt them down and..."

"Harry," she cut him off, halting the grin that was working onto his face. "Why didn't you ever tell me this?"

"Because..." He grew serious, taking a deep breath. "Because it doesn't matter. They don't matter. It's so not a big deal, it's so completely not worth mentioning..." He snatched her hand into his. "Look at you. You're mad, you're upset, your mind is processing this like it's something that matters and over what? Women who I don't know slipping me a piece of paper that I'm never going to use...Madeline..." He tugged at her hand, wanting her to really hear what he was saying. "I'm married to you. To you. I can't help what these other people are doing and..."

"Stop," Maddie's voice was quiet as she squeezed his fingers. Her eyes met his with an apology, with confusion. "Stop. You don't have to...Jesus...what is wrong with me?" She rolled her eyes and sighed; dropping his hand and turning away from him. "I'm sorry," she looked out the window. "I'm sorry. Please don't explain anymore. I feel...ridiculous for even asking, ridiculous for even..." She turned a smile to him but what he saw was the tears in her eyes.

"Madeline..." He was soft, sweet, and she felt so stupid. "What is going on right now?"

"I don't know," she shook her head. "Maybe the sun's gone to my head..." She laughed. "I'm sorry. You don't need to explain yourself. There's nothing to explain. You can't help that women see you and want you and can't help but take their best shot at you." She waved her hand at him. "I know I would."

"Sure you would..." He chuckled, watching her carefully.

"I'm sorry. I don't know why I feel like...this." She cringed a bit, trying to shake it off. "I'm sorry I got all...crazy."
"It's okay," he shrugged; happy she was moving on from it.

"No, no it's not." She shook her head. "You know what...I think I'm going to take a walk."

"A walk?!" Harry looked to the window, to the pouring rain. "But you'll be drenched."

"I'll take an umbrella." She had made up her mind and, as such, was heading towards the door; slipping into shoes.

"Wait a second..." He moved towards her. "Where are you going to go?"

"I don't know," she turned a small smile to him, pressing her lips to his quickly. "I just need to take a breath and calm myself down. I don't need to be acting like this. I need to..." She met his eyes. "I just need a minute to get myself in check. Maybe I'll head up to the resort or...I don't know. But I'll be back. I promise."

Maddie wasn't sure how long she had been sitting there. After she left Harry at their place, she picked up Williams and had walked along the pier for quite some time before she went to the main house. The storm was dropping rain heavy and steady and she needed a moment of reprieve. She checked first for the woman from the night before—not wanting to handle that situation at this particular time—and then, finding she wasn't there, she took a seat at the bar and ordered a drink. Williams, wanting to be respectful and give her some space, took a seat off to the side and ordered a soda. She sat there for a while, sipping her way through two cocktails while she tried to sort through her wild mind.

She trusted Harry—with everything about her, she trusted Harry. So why in the world was this notion of women slipping him their numbers getting to her so? She had no idea but she knew it didn't make sense. She was a strong woman; independent, confident, one hundred percent secure in her relationship with her husband. But for whatever reason, this new information was under her skin.

She sighed and glanced over at Williams with a smile before looking back to her drink. It was then that the bartender returned to her; drink in hand. He sat it in front of her with a small napkin folded in half.

"Oh...I didn't order another..." Maddie looked up to him with a smile.

"I know," he nodded, handing her the napkin. "A gentleman sent it over for you."

"A gentleman?" Confused, she looked down at the napkin, opening it up to read the writing on it. A wide grin spread across her face at the unmistakable penmanship.

"If you would like to make him jealous, I'm available."

Maddie's eyes lifted up to the bartender who had already moved to the other side, slowly wiping down the counter. She turned around on her stool, scanning the bar. And then she found him; sitting off to the side, near a window that looked out over the rainy day; Jim moving to sit with Williams. His eyes were intent on her as she shook her head back and forth slowly, fighting a grin. With a sigh, she lifted her glass from the bar and abandoned her stool. She stopped in front of his chair, holding the napkin out to him.
"When you say him, you mean..." Her eyebrows lifted.

"Your husband." He shrugged with a smirk on his lips

"Ah. And you're available for that?"

"Use me at your leisure." He waved his hand. "Care to join me?"

"Hmm..." She sighed, lowering into the seat across from him. "I'm not mad. I'm not upset."

"Okay."

"I'm not. It's just...strange. It's hard to wrap my brain around it...all of these women hoping they'll be the one you leave me for."

"They will never be the one I leave you for." He was dead serious, eyes steady and dark. "I'm not leaving."

"I know that." She reached for his hand. She did know that. Nothing inside of her doubted him. "This isn't about that. I'm not worried. I'm..."

"Jealous?" He offered, stroking her fingers. "Territorial?"

"Oh God..." She rolled her eyes; feeling more and more like a silly, prepubescent girl than the strong, confident woman she knew she was.

"I would be." He admitted. "If men were slipping you their numbers, handing you room keys..."
He let out a staggered breath. "I would be mad crazy about it."

"Lucky for you that doesn't happen," she smiled again, the tension easing from her a bit.

"I don't know," he kissed her fingers. "I've seen Bishop slide you a few slips of paper. Who knows what was on them."

"Bishop!" Maddie's head tossed back in laughter. "As if you ever had anything to worry about with Bishop."

"You never know," Harry shrugged, happy to see her relaxing. "He's basically the less-baggage version of me. I had a few moments of valid concern along the way."

"Please!" Maddie laughed again. "That is the most ludicrous thing I've ever heard."

"More ludicrous than me calling some random woman who totally disregarded my commitment to my wife and handed me her phone number? More ludicrous than my wife being the tiniest bit jealous over women who I will never see again?" Maddie sighed at the truth in his statement. "More ridiculous than that?"

"No..." She shook her head; conceding, giving in, letting it go. "You're right. It's not more ludicrous than that."

"No," he shook his head. "It's not. Listen. I know you trust me..."
"I do." She was quick to reiterate that.

"Then you are just going to have to trust that, when this happens, I handle it as best I can. I always refuse, I am always polite and...and I don't know what else I could possibly do about it."

"I know," she moved closer to him then.

"I mean...I took vows, incredibly public vows, to be faithful to you. I'm not sure how much more obvious I can be about my devotion to you..."

"I know."

"And if they still don't get it, if they still think they have a shot...then...I don't know..." He shrugged. "Let them take it. I will continue to refuse them, every time. I will continue to tell them no. And, if you want me to, I can start telling you when it happens; every time it happens."

"No," Maddie shook her head, her face scrunching up. "I don't want to hear about it. I really don't. I don't know what came over me today. Maybe the rain has thrown me off." She moved to sit closer to him then, pulling his hand into both of hers. "I don't want you to think that I'm questioning you or doubting you or..."

"I don't."

"Good. Because I'm not. This was me; all me." She took a deep breath and let it out. "And I'm done. The walk, the sitting, the drink...it worked. I'm done being a nutty."

"You sure?" He winked. "Cause I kinda like you when you're nutty."

"Of course you do," Maddie shook her head, leaning to kiss him. "I'm sorry Harry..." She kissed him again.

"Mmm..." He smiled against her lips. "Who's Harry? I'm Paul..." He nodded to the napkin on the table. "Here to make your husband jealous...remember?"

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, leaning to nuzzle his neck. "Well I'm sorry Paul. I have every intention of going back to my husband...to wait out this storm together. In bed." Her eyes locked with his.

"Lucky Bastard," Harry grinned wide, pulling her lips to his.

"Nah..." Maddie shook her head, her nose bumping his. "I'm the lucky one."

"Come on..." He nodded his head towards the outside, his heart warm in his chest. "Can we go now?"

"We can," Maddie nodded, rising to her feet. "We absolutely can."

And then, arm in arm, hand in hand, Harry held the umbrella over the top of them as Maddie snuggled close and they made their way back to their honeymoon. She would never really be sure what exactly it was that had sent her reeling that day, but she recovered quite quickly and quite permanently. She meant what she said, she let it go, she let it drop. For the remainder of the trip, the whole incident was essentially forgotten and the newlyweds had survived their first, and only, bump in the road for their time in the Maldives.
Day Six:

When Harry woke up on day six, the day already felt better. Though the rain continued to pour outside, though the heavy clouds spoke of yet another day of shut in, he turned to his side and smiled wide. This time Maddie was still there next to him; naked and warm and sleeping soundly. Moving his hand to her waist, he moved closer to her; his nose nuzzling into the sweet smell of her hair as he tucked her close and closed his eyes.

He knew that life with him wasn't going to get much easier for her. He knew that she would continue to face bumps in the road like the one from yesterday, that women would continue to assume he was who they thought he was, a rouge playboy ready for anything. He knew that there would still be moments when he was presented with a number, a key, an opportunity to step out on her, on this.

But he also knew what they didn't. He had waited a very long time for this kind of moment. He had waited through years and years, through doubts and regrets. And he had finally found it, found her. A partner, an equal; Maddie. And if anyone, anyone, thought he was going to step out on that, they were going to be horribly disappointed. His head bent to press a kiss to her shoulder, knowing that her worries from the day before had drifted, knowing that she was confident in herself, in him, in them. And, as he let the rain lull him back to sleep, he was prepared to spend their lives reinforcing her, reinforcing their bond.

To Be Continued
Chapter 108

**Day Seven and Eight:**

On Day Seven they finally saw the last of the rain. They woke up to sun and heat and Maddie didn't even need to say anything to Harry before they were out in the water; soaking up the warmth of their last few days in paradise. Then they packed those last few days to the brim with activity.

On Day Seven they took the boat out again, finding a small, uninhibited island where they anchored the boat and swam ashore. Exploring the island was amazing. Being in a place where there were literally no other people was a beautiful experience. They spent an entire afternoon on that island; laughing and hiking and laying together in the warm sun. It was only when Harry's stomach began to growl that they swam back to the boat and turned towards home.

On Day Eight, they rose early and went to meet their chartered boat for their scuba trip. It was a husband and wife operation; the husband, Nick, handled the boat and the wife, Lissette, was the scuba guide. Maddie laughed good-heartedly when Lissette recognized her and Harry; her hand clamping over her mouth as she tried to control her reaction. And Harry was sympathetic and apologetic when Nick admitted his wife had set an alarm so that they could watch The Royal Wedding. Though they were clearly aware of who they were, and she was somewhat of a fan, they were good natured people and quickly moved past the "celebrity" of it all. Maddie and Harry were hardly the first "famous" people they had come across while running this operation. Though they admitted in hushed tones that so far, they were their favorite.

So they gathered their gear, loaded the boat and went out to Fish Head to dive. It was amazing. Maddie couldn't believe her eyes, it was so beautiful. The hours slipped away so fast when they were underwater that she was amazed when they came up to the boat and it was time to head back. They climbed aboard, they peeled off their suits and they laughed with Nick and Lissette the entire way back to shore. Finally, before they parted, Maddie and Harry gladly posed with the young couple for a photo and signed their guest book on their boat.

**Day Nine:**

On Day Nine, their final in the Maldives, they returned to that private island they had explored on Day Seven. Only this time, Harry had insisted she dress up. And this time, they were met by a smaller row boat to take them to shore. And this time...there was a candlelight dinner waiting for them.

And this time Maddie felt her breath catch in her chest. It was a little overwhelming, the vast beauty of it all, the fact that it was the last night of their honeymoon, the idea that he had planned for this stunning surprise.

The day had been perfect; the weather had been clear, the water calming and now, the night air was soft and sweet and it only made Maddie more emotional. Her hand had tightened on Harry's when she first took it all in and, when he pulled her chair out for her and smiled through the warm light from the candles, from the torches, Maddie felt butterflies in her stomach; just like she had in the beginning.

"I feel so silly right now..." She whispered to him as he rounded the table and took his seat.
"Silly?"

"Like I'm on a date..." She took a breath. "Like a first date. I'm nervous and...anxious and..."

Harry leaned across the table and lowered his lips to hers; kissing her fully, strong and deep and full of purpose. "Don't be nervous," he kissed her again.

Maddie sighed, relaxing, and let him take her hand in his as dinner was served before them. She hadn't even noticed there was staff there with them. As plates under silver where laid before them, Maddie looked around her; checking it out. There was a tent further up the beach, she assumed that was where the staff had been, where the food was. Just off to the side was a low couch with blankets and pillows and...she assumed they were going to be here for a while. As Harry popped the cork on the bottle of champagne, Maddie looked out over the water and let out a breath. It was time to relax and enjoy her evening.

And she did. The meal was wonderful; flavorful and filling. The champagne was crisp and light and went straight to her head; making her happy, giddy; her cheeks flushing pink. When they finished dinner, Harry held his hand out to her and nodded towards the couch. Wordlessly he asked her to join him. Wordlessly she went.

Maddie tossed her shoes to the sand and Harry, with the bottle of champagne in one hand and her hand in the other, lowered to the couch—pulling her with him. Maddie giggled as she sat down, sighed as she leaned back against him; his arm wrapping around her shoulders. She was happy, content; serene as she sat next to him, her eyes tipping up towards the sky, shining with stars.

"Still nervous?" Harry's smile was crooked as he held the bottle out to her. Maddie giggled again as she took it from him.

"Little bit." She took a long drink and shrugged, her fingers playing with the label. "I'm a little bit nervous."

"About the date?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, his fingers stroking her hair.

"About tomorrow," she smiled weakly; her lips twitching shakily.

"Tomorrow?" Harry was a bit surprised. "Why tomorrow?"

"Because..." She sighed, her eyes gazing out over the water towards the horizon. "I was barely learning how to be a Prince's girlfriend and now I'm..."

"Madeline..." He breathed with a shake of his head, already mounting his dissent.

"A Duchess..." She turned a lazy smile to him and took a deep breath and another drink. "Tomorrow we go back to...the real world."

"The Real World?" Harry laughed, taking the bottle back from her. "I would hardly call what we're going back to...the real world. You've lived in the real world and trust me baby...this isn't it."

"You know what I mean..." She nudged his ribs lightly with her elbow. "We go home and right away there's the Trooping of the Color, there's the Royal Ascot and then it's Polo Season and..."
She trailed off with a chuckle. "And I'm nervous."

"There is absolutely no reason for you to be nervous."

"And after that the meat of it starts." Her mind began to churn; thinking back to her last meeting with Thomas before the wedding, knowing exactly what meetings and events awaited her when she returned. "I go back to work." Harry was quiet for a moment, watching her fidget; watching her process.

"Okay...look at me..." He was gentle with her, calming as he sat the bottle of champagne on the low table before them. Maddie took a deep breath and did as he asked. "You are going to blow this out of the water. The speeches, the charities, the ceremonial stuff, the meaty stuff. All of it." He shook his head; his eyes wide and open and honest. "You're going to blow this out of the water. I promise. I promise." He couldn't be more convinced of it.

"Of course you feel that way," she met his eyes; shy. "You're biased and drunk."

"I'm not," he shook his head again. "You're going to be an amazing Duchess, Maddie."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe," she shrugged, pulling her knees into her chest as her arms wrapped around them; hugging them close to her. She turned her head, resting on her knees as she smiled at him. "You know I'm giving a speech in two weeks."

"I know."

"At the announcement of my involvement with Walking With The Women."

"I know."

"There's a dinner, a photo call and I'm giving a speech." She repeated it all as though she were letting it sink in.

"I know," his smile twinkled in his eyes. "Do you think I haven't been reading my memos?"

"Hmm..." She laughed lightly. "I'm about to be busy again."

"Yes you are."

"That will be nice at least..." She shrugged. "I did have two jobs before I said yes to you. It will be nice to have at least one again."

"It will be," he agreed. "And you're going to love it. Don't get me wrong, sometimes it will feel incredibly weird and out of sorts but..." He leaned forward feeling a little silly, a little embarrassed about what he was about to admit to her. "It feels odd...that people want to take your picture, shake your hand or stand next to you. That part feels a little odd. I mean, I've been doing it my whole life and it feels odd to me, so I'm sure it will feel odd to you. But...Maddie you're going to love the other part. The part where your presence helps raise money for a charity that helps the people you want to help; the children, the veterans, the families..." He squeezed her hand. "You're going to love that part and that part makes the other parts completely tolerable." Maddie pondered
that for a moment, her mind at work as he played with her fingers.

"Yeah..." She squeezed his fingers in return. "And you'll be there with me, right?"

"Absolutely," he nodded. "That'll be my favorite part."

"I suppose you're right..." She sighed, sitting up a bit.

"Maybe just this once," he winked. There was a long pause, a content sort of silence as both of their minds moved into the future; glancing forward at what was to come.

"I am excited to meet the team of women who I'll be going with."

"I bet."

"I'm not so excited about meeting with the trainer..." Maddie cringed, a chuckle slipping through her lips. Harry's head tossed back in laughter.

"He is going to make you run." He was absolutely certain about that.

"Ugh."

"Run. Run. Run."

"Well there had better be somebody there to chase me," she leaned into him then, settling into his side as his arm moved back around her; the tension easing from the moment.

"Maybe I'll be there to chase you." His eyes raked over her suggestively.

"Well then I am in," her voice dropped as she turned her eyes up at him. "I just hate running."

"I know baby," his head lowered to kiss her cheek. "But you're going to be skiing miles every day and they want to build up your endurance and..."

"I know, I know..." She sighed; her fingers toying with the buttons on his shirt. "Isn't there a better way to build up my endurance?" Her bottom lip pulled into her teeth and Harry caught her intention with a laugh. "Something we can both enjoy?"

"Ha!" His fingers moved into her hair, tipping her lips up to his. "Well, I can promise you that I'll do whatever I can to help."

"Good," she leaned up to kiss him, a hand slipping into his shirt. "Anything for a good cause?" She kissed him again.

"Absolutely," his voice dropped low as his lips took hers; deeper, longer.

"There is one bad thing about the trip in April and all of the training that comes before it," she pulled back slightly. "Other than the running I mean."

"Oh?" He breathed, his mouth posed for protest as she moved away from his side. He silenced when straddled his lap and sat closer. "What's that?" His hands found home on her body, running from waist to hip with a soft grip.
"Well..." Her hands moved to his face as she looked down at him; her eyes wide and innocent and full of love. "You know...you are a Duke now."

"I am..." He searched her face for clues but found none.

"And..." She took a deep breath and smiled sweetly; genuine. "I'm a Duchess."

"Yes," he nodded. "You are."

"That only leaves one thing..." Her eyes twinkled as she held her breath; watching, waiting for it to hit him.

And then it did.

His breath sucked into his lungs, his hands gripped her tighter, and she could feel him warm and begin to harden below her. It made her flush, giddy and excited, at the numerous ways his body reacted to the possibility.

"Baby..." He whispered; eyes locked to hers.

"Baby." She smiled and, suddenly felt nervous, shy; her eyes shifted to look at the beach over his shoulder for a split second. His arms wrapped all the way around her then, pulling her close to him; his face leaning to kiss her chest, just over her heart, before he looked up at her.

"You want to make a baby..." His smile made her heart thump in her chest. Biting her lip, blinking back tears, Maddie nodded. And his smile stretched even further. "Tonight?" He breathed, his own heart swelling.

"Yes..." Her voice cracked, the tears pushing through the dam she was building; her arms wrapping around his neck. "I mean...of course my answer is yes. If we could make a baby tonight..."

"We can."

"We can't," she shook her head, wiping at her tears with the back of her hand; laughing at herself as she did. "We can't."

"Why can't we?" His eyes were scattered as he searched for an answer.

"Harry..." She ran her fingers over his forehead, across his temple; loving him for his willingness, his excitement. "I'm about to start training for the trek to the Arctic. And then I'm going to be there for weeks, putting my body through the craziest workout imaginable. I can't be pregnant yet..."

"I hate that you're so reasonable," he shook his head.

"Me too..." She sighed. "But I want to talk about when. I am ready to talk about when. Can we talk about when?"

"Yes," he responded immediately. "Absolutely yes. Yes." He nodded to her; giddy. "You tell me when." She laughed at his eagerness.

"I want to...I need to wait until after the trip; at least until next May."
"Okay," he nodded. "Okay. Let's see..." Maddie watched as he settled in his mind, really thinking about it. And then she watched as he laughed, his eyes alive as he looked to her. "I'm trying to be responsible right now. I really am trying."

"But?" She grinned.

"But all I can think about is..." He swallows. "I know I should be suggesting that we wait at least a year, maybe two. I know I should be suggesting that you get your head around this new life of yours, that we get you adjusted to this royal role, these royal duties and then..." He laughed again, pulling one of her hands from his shoulder so that he could kiss it; his lips warm and soft. "But all I can think about, all I can think about is making a baby...with you and..."

Maddie's lips brought his words to a close; his thoughts to a halt. With her hands on either side of his face, she pressed her mouth to his and kissed him; full and warm and aching with love and desire. He responded in kind; his arms tightening around her waist and groaned into her mouth.

"Okay..." Maddie was breathless as she pulled her lips from his, allowing only inches between them as she tried to be thoughtful, purposeful. "Okay. How do you feel about two years?" Her eyebrows lifted. "I'll finish the trip. I'll get back in normal shape. I'll be a Duchess for a while. I'll get used to the press..."

"You'll never get used to the press," he shook his head, grinning as she kissed him again.

"...and then, in two years, we..." Her voice failed her as the emotion held heavy.

"Two years?" His hand ran up and down her back.

"Two years." She nodded, nudging her nose to his. "Do we have a deal?"

"We have a deal," he chuckled and then, as Maddie held her hand out to his as if to shake on it, he shook his head and pressed his lips to hers. "I refuse to seal this deal with a handshake."

"Oh?" Maddie giggled. "What did you have in mind?" His hands were soft as they ran over her body, his eyes sweet on her.

"Maybe a little bit of practice?" His eyebrows waggled suggestively.

"Here?"

"No..." He shook his head; wanting to make slow love to his wife. "Back at the house."

"Hmmm..." She sighed. "I like that." She kissed his lips quickly and, stepping from his lap to stand before him, she held her hand out. "We just have one last thing to do before we leave."

"Like what?" He was confused, but followed her from the couch.

"Well, you know what they say..." She began to walk backwards, pulling him with her.

"They?"

"Bishop, Kiki, your friends..." Maddie shrugged towards the water. "A party isn't a party until everyone ends up fully clothed and in the..."
"Water..." Harry finished her sentence with a wide grin.

And then, holding tight to Harry's hand, Maddie turned and took off running. Neither of them stopped until they were waist deep in the crystal clear water of the warm, beautiful ocean. They were soaked; clothes, hair—soaked.

But they were smiling. They were laughing. They were ready to go home to all that awaited them—a solid, unified, blissfully happy union.

And they were in love; so in love.

**Day Ten:**

Maddie had thought that it would be difficult to leave the Maldives. The whole time leading up to the wedding she had thought that the rest and relaxation would be so wonderful that she wouldn't want to leave it. When they had arrived on Day One, seeing the water for the first time, feeling the warmth of the sun and the sweetness of the breeze, she had thought that on Day Ten Harry would have to drag her from their paradisiac home; kicking and screaming.

But that wasn't the case at all.

She would miss the calmness, the serenity that the sun, sand, and water provided. She would miss those moments with Harry that had drawn them closer as a couple, those first days of husband and wife.

But, on Day Ten, when Jim stepped through their door and nodded to them, signaling their departure time, Maddie slipped her hand into Harry's and walked—willingly, happily—from their honeymoon.

She was ready to go home, ready to begin her new life, their new life—their new journey.

Together.
"Ugh..." Maddie groaned as she stepped out of the car. "That flight was brutal. I feel like I need another ten days on the beach just to recover..." Her eyes danced as she smiled at Harry over the top of the car.

"Well get back in the car baby," Harry patted the top lightly. "Let's do this."

"Such a tease," she scowled playfully.

"Only one way to find out," he winked at her. Maddie sighed deeply and let it go, her grin still in place as she rounded the car to him. Claiming his hand in hers, she looked towards their door.

"Come on Wales, we only have a few hours before Will and Kate are here for dinner and I am in desperate need of a shower."

"Yeah?" He sighed and pushed away from the car. "Are you in desperate need of a shower companion?"

"I am," she nodded, trying to remain serious as a smirk pulled at her lips. "Desperately."

"Excellent," he kissed her hand and, with a new pep in his step, pulled her towards the house. Maddie giggled, despite herself, and followed.

God she had married the right man.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

Though they were still very much newlyweds, they did manage to shower and dress and feel the tiniest bit settled before William and Kate were stepping through their door. There were hugs all around as they greeted each other and made way for the dining room. Bernard, happy to be back at service, had prepared quite the spread and Maddie couldn't wait to dig in.

"So...how was the Maldives?" William asked as he took his seat at the table.

"Oh yes!" Kate sighed happily; longingly. "The beach, the water...how was it?"

"The Maldives?" Harry smirked, shifting confused eyes to Maddie. "Did we go to the Maldives?" She caught his wink and narrowed her eyes in thought.

"Was there a beach there?"

"I don't know," he shook his head. "Maybe we should have left the bedroom one day..."

"Maybe." Maddie grinned while Will grimaced, shaking his head. "At least half a day..."

"Maybe next time," Harry shrugged.

"Probably not," Maddie's smug confidence oozed from her pores and Harry wanted nothing more than to hurry his brother and sister from his house and take her back upstairs.
"I told you we shouldn't come to dinner so soon," Will groaned; nodding his head towards his wife who was giggling; her hand resting on her belly.

"Leave them be..." She sighed, smiling sympathetically at Maddie across the table. "They just came home from their honeymoon."

"Yeah, yeah," William rolled his eyes at the group but sent the smallest of winks in Maddie's direction. "So tell me. When are you heading in to receive your assignments?" He turned his attention to Harry.

"Day after tomorrow," Harry swallowed a sip of his drink. "We have a meeting at St. James with Thomas and I'm sure he'll have an itinerary all lined out for us." Maddie watched the two brothers exchange looks and she knew; her life was about to get busy.

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"Henry..." It was later that night, long after Will and Kate had gone home, and Maddie was standing next to their bed as Harry finished up in the bathroom.

"Madeline..." He stepped from the bathroom, leaning against the door frame.

"What's this?" She looked up to him, her fingers dancing over a gift and a card sitting against her pillow.

"I don't know," he shrugged; his eyes offering up a completely different response.

"Of course you don't," she sighed, lifting the card from the box and pulling it from the envelope. On the front was a quote written in soft strokes. Maddie smiled as she read it.

"The same sun that rises over castles and welcomes the day
Spills over buildings into the streets where orphans play
And only You can see the good in broken things
You took my heart of stone, and You made it home
And set this prisoner free"-Bethany Dillon

"Harry...that's beautiful," she glanced up at him as her fingers slid the card open. He was smiling now; not at all trying to hide the surprise. Maddie opened up the card and read Harry's words. "Thank you for being my home." She sighed and pulled the card to her chest. "Harry..."

"Maddie..."

"What's in the box?"

"Only one way to find out," he pushed away from the door frame then, moving closer to her as she scooped the package up and began unwrapping. Tossing the lid to the bed, she parted the tissue paper and, with a gasp, her hand flew to her mouth.

"Harry." It was a whisper this time; her eyes shiny with unshed tears as she looked from the beautiful picture frame to him.

"It's one of my favorites from that day..." He stood behind her, looking at the photo from over her shoulder, one of the first private ones they had seen. "The dancers had just finished wrapping us, making our marriage official in Bendal. And you have this smile..." His words trailed as he bent
his head, dropping a kiss to her shoulder.

"This is beautiful," Maddie ran a finger over the frame.

"You are beautiful," he grinned against her skin.

"Hmm...come on," she leaned to sit the frame on her bedside table, loving the image of the two of them together, loving that he had thought to do this for her. Taking his hand from her shoulder, she pulled him to her. Her lips tilted up to meet his and, with no more words necessary, he followed her into their bed.

"Harry!" Maddie's voice was giddy as she hurried down the stairs. It was their last day before work began. The very next day they would be rising early and heading into meetings. But tonight, this last night, they were still free and relaxed and waiting for Ella to arrive for some much needed free time. "Harry! The gate just called and Ella's here! She's on her way now..." She rounded the corner and stepped into his office. "Harry!"

"I heard every word you said," he smiled up at her from his chair, his bare feet propped up on the desk as he flipped through a few folders that had been waiting for him when they returned the day before. "Ella's here." He had actually planned on meeting Bishop that night but was postponed, because Bishop's father had sent him off on business, until the following night.

"She is."

"Did you need me for this or can I come say hello and leave you two to your gossip?"

"Gossip?" Maddie rolled her eyes as Harry moved, his feet dropping to the floor, the folders shifting back to the desk. "We don't gossip."

"I have ten in my pocket that says you're gossiping within the first five minutes," his arm stretched around her shoulders as they walked from his office.

"You're on," Maddie held her hand to him; shaking on the bet. Magnificently timed, they stepped into the foyer just as a knock rang out. Maddie clapped her hands excitedly as Harry shook his head, amused, and reached for the doorknob.

Wisely, Harry stood aside as Ella bound through the door, Maddie instantly enveloping the petite brunette in her arms. He shut the door as the two hugged and kissed and, he was pretty sure, squealed the tiniest bit. And then Ella turned to hug him.

"Welcome home," she smiled wide.

"Thank you," he grinned, pressing a kiss to the side of her head.

"How was the trip?"

"Relaxing," He answered.

"Good. Good." She nodded and turned to Maddie. "I bet it was paradise."

"It was. It was." Maddie agreed with a nod before she took a deep breath and went for it. "Okay.
That night...after the reception...what happened with you and Bishop?"

"Wow." Ella laughed. "Just going right for it huh Maddie?"

"I've known you too long to prance around it," the blonde shrugged with a smirk to the brunette—who knew she was speaking the truth.

"And..." Harry nodded to his wife. "You owe me ten. Ella, come on in. Can I get you something to drink?" The three of them moved into the living room; the two girls getting comfortable on the couch while Harry went for wine.

"Okay..." Maddie swallowed a sip from the glass Harry handed her. "Are you going to tell me or do I have to wait till I see Bishop next?"

"No, no," Ella smiled. "I'll tell you." She took a deep breath and glanced over at Harry who had settled into a chair with his own glass and some folders he had retrieved from his office. "We talked."

"You talked." Her voice was flat.

"We talked and..." Ella's cheeks grew warm, a bit rosy, as her eyes shifted down to the glass in her hand. "And he told me that he loves me; that he still loves me, that he's..." Ella took a shaky breath, her eyes still averted from Maddie's. "That he's always loved me." She looked up then, a soft, sympathetic smile on her face; her eyes meeting Maddie's with just a hint of sadness. "And I told him that I love him. And I do." She nodded firmly. "I do. I love him...more than I could possibly love somebody else." Maddie glanced up at Harry, who was paying more attention than he would ever admit out loud, and then she watched her best friend; knowing there was more.

"But?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"And..." Ella countered with a small smile. "And then I told him what I'm going to tell you." Her eyes locked with Maddie's. "If I were in any way at all near wanting to be married and settled and having babies, Bishop would be it. End of story." Her voice was clear; firm. "I would drag him to the nearest church and marry him. We would buy a house and have a family and..." Her lips pressed tightly together; trying to stop the tears that welled behind her lids. "He would be it. No doubt."

"But..." Maddie's voice was a whisper.

"But Maddie...I'm not there. I'm not even close to there. And if I pretend to be there because I adore him and because he's the most amazing man I know and because I'm afraid to lose him...that's not fair to anyone."

"Wow." Maddie was stunned and sad; for both of them.

"Yeah..." Ella looked at her glass and took a breath before she smiled and looked back to Maddie. "Of course Bishop told me he didn't care, laughed at the shock on my face, and proceeded to unzip my dress. So..."

"I'm sorry...what?"

"Let's just say..." Ella sighed with a shrug. "You weren't the only one's getting lucky at BP on your wedding night."
"What?" Maddie's eyes flashed wide.

"Oh God I didn't need to hear that," Harry groaned, his head shaking despite his bemused smile.

"You had sex at Buckingham Palace." Maddie huffed into a laugh.

"I had sex at Buckingham Palace." She nodded, unable to help the smirk that spread across her lips. "I mean...how perfect is that? I tell Bishop that we're not going to work out right now and instead of being upset or...I don't know...he helps me check off one of my bucket list items."

"You're so twisted," Maddie shook her head, relaxing back into the couch as she took a long drink from her glass.

"It was awesome," Ella grinned.

"You're welcome, by the way." Harry nodded to her from across the room, his own raucous spirit emerging to show appreciation.

"Thank you," Ella lifted her drink to him. "And then he and I said a very sweet good-bye and...and..." Her eyes grew slightly shaky as she looked away from Maddie then. It did not go unnoticed by the quick blonde that this was the first time in the entire conversation that Ella had seemed nervous; unsure.

"Hey..." Maddie's hand reached out to her best friend. "Ella?"

"And I gave him the news." She let out a breath.

"The news?"

"I'm..." She took a shaky breath in and met Maddie's eyes. "There's a doctor at the hospital who I've been working pretty closely with. She's amazing; cutting edge. She told me that she's been setting up this service—something of a private flight service—what I'm doing now but not just for emergencies, for lesser stuff but in places that it's hard to get into or areas that are incredibly private and elite, for people who want to have private care."

"Oh?" Maddie's mind kicked into gear. "That sounds interesting." And Maddie knew that if it was something that drew her interest, it most certainly sparked that in Ella.

"It is," Ella nodded. "It seems like she'll spend about seventy percent of the time helping really wealthy people receive private health care services and about thirty going into remote areas where people don't have the means and ability to get into health care. So it will be a nice mix."

"Wow..." Maddie smiled. "I had no idea that such a thing existed here in England."

"It doesn't."

"What do you mean?" Both Harry and Maddie looked to her in surprise.

"I'm moving." Her voice didn't waver once. "In a little over a month. To New York."
"Good morning," Harry tipped his lips up to capture Maddie's as she moved behind his chair at the table.

"Good morning," she leaned down to kiss him; careful not to let her sleeves dip in coffee or tea or a pastry. They were headed into work soon, to a meeting with Thomas Smith who would be giving them an incredibly detailed itinerary for the next few weeks of their lives.

"You look great," Harry's eyes scanned her appreciatively; loving how incredibly sexy she looked—dressed up, casual, professional—working with her was going to be more difficult than he had thought.

"Thank you."

"How are you feeling this morning?" He watched her carefully as she sat in the chair across from him.

"I'm great."

"Still upset about Ella?" He lifted one eyebrow, careful of the smirk that pulled at his lips.

"I'm not upset about Ella. I wasn't upset about Ella. I was just..." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I was a little...sad...and shocked. You were shocked too!"

"I was shocked," he agreed with a nod. "At first I was shocked but...Ella's history seems to point towards nomadic life. I suppose it's not terribly crazy that she's moving again. It's been a few years here..."

"I know," Maddie sighed. She did. She had known Ella for a long time and she knew better than to be too surprised by her traveling ways. "I know she is a bit of a wanderer. I just thought...I don't know. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be here and..."

"Sorry," Harry cut in with an arched eyebrow and smug eyes. "If it weren't for her?"

"Well and you..." She waved her hand at him dismissively.

"Wow..." He chuckled as she continued.

"She was just a large part of it," Maddie looked down at her cup of tea with a bit of a frown. "And I'll miss her. I'll miss her a lot."

"For just a moment I'm going to pretend that you didn't just wave me off," Harry leaned in to grab her hand. "I know you'll miss her baby. I'll miss her too. Everyone will miss her..."

"Yeah," Maddie took a sip and met his eyes. "Speaking of which...have you talked to him yet?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "I'm waiting till tonight. Did you decide if you're coming with us or not?"

"I don't know. I don't want to mess with boys' night."

"It's not boys' night," Harry rolled his eyes. "Bishop asked if you would come."

"Well...if Bishop wants me there," Maddie winked at him as he shook his head with a warning.
"Yeah, yeah..." Harry finished his drink and sat back in his chair. "I think you should come too. I think you'll need a drink after we finish with Thomas."

"Yeah?"

"Mmm..." He nodded. "I mean...I know I'm not the reason you're in London or anything..." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "But I do think I make a decent consolation prize."

"Aw...come here muffin..." Maddie's lips pouted out slightly, her expression going soft as she moved closer to him. "You know you're what keeps me in London."

"Yeah, yeah." He rolled his eyes, but let her pull him in for kiss.

Maddie had visited Saint James Palace before; many times. She had come in when Harry was her boyfriend. She had come in while they were planning the wedding; having many meetings with Joan along the way. This wasn't the first time she had walked through the doors, through the halls—but this time it was a bit of a different experience.

She was a Duchess now.

The men who would smile politely and nod to her before, now stood aside and bowed. The women who would offer her a warm greeting and a sweet face, now rose to their feet—a slight curtsy. It wasn't completely new to her—there had been quite a few curtsies the night of their reception—but it did cause her the slightest moments of pause. With a knowing smile, and a steady hand at the small of her back, Harry followed her into the meeting room where Thomas was waiting with Anya, Harry’s Assistant, and another young lady who Maddie was certain she recognized from one of the offices. All three rose instantly to their feet as Thomas came around the table to greet them; shaking Harry's hand first before doing the same to Maddie—his head bowing both times.

As Harry moved to say hello to Anya, Thomas guided Maddie over to the other young woman.

"As was requested before the wedding, we have gone about securing your staffing. While I'll still maintain as Chief of Staff for both you and the Duke, you will both have your own assistants. We were happy to keep Ms. Tellington as your stylist, Ms. Wharton for hair and makeup and Ms. Ellis as a preferred designer. The one position we needed to fill was for your assistant. There was a large pool of applicants who requested to be transferred to your office."

"Oh?" Maddie was surprised to hear that.

"After an extensive process, we have selected Libby Florence." He smiled sweetly at the woman standing next to him. "She was previously on staff in the Duchess of Cornwall's office and comes with the highest of recommendations. I am quite certain you will be satisfied with our selection. Ma'am, please meet Ms. Libby Florence. Ms. Florence, Her Royal Highness, the Duchess of Sussex."

"Good Morning Ms. Florence," Maddie extended her hand.

"Your Royal Highness," Libby took her hand, dipping into a curtsy.
"Hmm..." Maddie smiled, despite the strangest sort of feeling in her stomach. "Would there be any way I can convince you to call me Maddie?"

"Ma'am?" She looked the tiniest bit nervous as her eyes flashed around the room.

"We'll work on it," Maddie tried to ease the moment. "It's a pleasure to meet you Ms. Florence. I'm very happy to be working with you."

"It's an honor, Ma'am." And this time, her smile was genuine, her eyes meeting Maddie's. She had been hoping and hoping that her request would be granted; she was quite entranced with the new Duchess and was drawn to her spirit and personality.

"Have you met my husband?" Maddie turned to Harry.

"Sir," Libby dipped into a curtsy.

"Good to see you again Ms. Florence," he shook her hand; considerably more at ease with the formalities than Maddie was. As introductions and hellos drew to a close, Maddie took the seat Harry pulled out for her at the table. And, as she sat, everyone else followed. With a nod from Harry, Mr. Smith began.

"Here we are," he handed over a leather bound folio to each of them. Harry's was well-worn, signs of use evident in the roughed up cover and the pad of paper inside that held many of Harry's doodles. Maddie's was fresh, pristine; a blank canvas awaiting. Mr. Smith placed a piece of paper in front of each of them; thick, weighted paper with a list of dates, times, locations. With a polite smile, he looked up to them. "First I want to go over a few solidified dates and discuss a few future events." Harry and Maddie nodded and he continued. "This Saturday is The Trooping of the Colour. Next Friday is the announcement of the Duchess's patronage of Walking with the Women. The two of you will be attending a reception where the Duchess will give a speech. There will also be a photo call." He glanced to Ms. Florence to ensure she was taking notes.

"Ma'am," Mr. Smith looked to Maddie. "Would you like us to schedule some time for you and the Palace speechwriter to meet in order to prepare something for you?"

"Actually," Maddie's hands moved from where they were folded in her lap to the bag she had brought along. "I already wrote something."

"You wrote something?" Mr. Smith tried to control his surprise but the wide flashing of his eyes brought out a tampered down chuckle from Harry. He wasn't the least bit surprised.

"I did," Maddie smiled, sliding a folder across the table to him. "I was able to do a great deal of research and preparing during the engagement and I had the chance to write down a few words. Perhaps you could pass them onto the speechwriter for suggestions or notes?"

"Of course Ma'am," he took the folder from her and slid it into his own bag. "I will have it back to you the Monday before?"

"That would be perfect, thank you." He nodded and moved forward.

"The following week is the Royal Ascot." Maddie glanced to Harry who smiled and offered a wink. "Now. Looking forward into the summer, we have the beginning of your Polo season."
"Yes," Harry nodded; amused at how at ease Maddie seemed—how ready she was to go to work.

"The Charity Match you're playing in in July would like for the Duchess to present the prizes to the winning team." Both men turned to Maddie who smiled and nodded.

"Of course."

"Excellent," a few notes were taken.

"We also have the London premier of the new James Bond movie in July."

"Oh..." Maddie grinned, her eyes flashing to Harry who narrowed his territorially. She laughed lightly as she reached for his hand. "Can we go?"

"Of course," he nodded, pulling her fingers into his.

"On a more serious note, Ma'am, we would like to begin to meet regularly with you and Ms. Florence in order to begin to make bigger and more decisive strides towards the work you would like to be involved in; the charities you would like to support, the events you would like to attend. Of course there will be assignments that are passed down, but we would like to tie those in with those more befitting your interests."

"That would be lovely, thank you," Maddie was truly, truly happy to be going back to work—that was evident to everyone at the table.

"And finally..." Mr. Smith reached for two new sheets of paper, sliding them in front of the young couple. "They are sending you on your first royal tour together; abroad."

"When?" Harry leaned forward.

"Where?" Maddie pulled the paper into her hands.

"August, this year," Mr. Smith nodded to Harry then turned a smile to Maddie. "The United States."

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"My God, you were right," Maddie sighed as she slid into the backseat next to Harry.

"About what?" He watched her with a grin as she stretched her neck from side to side.

"I do need a drink."

"I told you!" He laughed, pulling her hand into his. "Jim!" He called to the front seat. "We're heading out. Let's go pick Bishop up at his office and get my lovely wife a drink."

"Yes sir," Jim smiled to the driver before he radioed to the car behind them.

"I cannot believe we're going to the states," Maddie sighed, turning so that she could look at him while her head rested on the seat behind her.

"I'm not terribly surprised," Harry shrugged, loosening his tie a bit. "Like Thomas said, we're at a
popularity high with the Americans right now. It would make sense for us to go."

"New York..." Maddie smiled. "Washington DC..." She went through the list, images of the events Thomas had briefly mentioned popping into her head; polo matches, galas, state dinners, plays, concerts. "And. I love that you requested some time in Colorado."

"Well, it makes no sense for us to travel across the pond and not stop over to see family. Even if it is just for a few days."

"I appreciate that," she pulled his hand to her lips for a kiss.

"And just think. When we're in New York, Ella will be there too." Harry pulled his buzzing phone from his pocket and squeezed her fingers as he answered. "Bishop. Absolutely. We're right outside. Down the street. Yes she's coming. No. No she's not going to do that. You know, I would like to remind you...Get out here. Now. Maddie needs a drink. Let's go." Harry disconnected the phone call as the car pulled to a stop outside of Bishop's place.

"She's not going to do what?" Maddie grinned up at her husband as they waited.

"Nothing," he shook his head, his lips tipping up at the corners.

"Aw come on Captain..." Her hands teased at his waist. "She's not going to do what?"

"Ha!" He snatched her hand up into his. "If you think that looking at me that way and using that voice and...if you think that's going to get you anywhere with me..."

"I know it is," her voice dropped an octave as she slid closer to him and, just as her lips reached his neck, the door to the backseat flew open and Maddie sat up straight up. "Bishop." She turned in his direction, completely unable to be angry with him.

"Well, well, well," he looked in the car, his head shaking slowly with a smug smirk on his face. "If it isn't the Duke and Duchess of Sus-sex-y."

"Oh God..." Maddie groaned, leaning into Harry.

"Get in here man," Harry rolled his eyes as Bishop laughed loudly; sliding into the car with them. "You cannot just stand on the street and say shit like that."

"Madeline love, I'm so happy to see you." He turned his charming smile to Maddie.

"You too, Bishop," she leaned in to kiss his cheek.

"But did you really have to bring grumpy along for the night?" Bishop jutted a finger in Harry's direction.

"Well it's his car," Maddie shrugged.

"I have a car all my own," Bishop wrapped an arm around her shoulder as the car began to move. "What do you say we let him take this one back to the palace and you and I can go out and celebrate."

"Sounds like a deal to me." Maddie giggled at Harry's scowl, her fingers reaching to pinch his cheeks. "Bishop, how are you?"
"Smashing," his hand left her shoulder to pat Harry's. "How was the honeymoon?"

"Smashing." Maddie mimicked his voice; her laughter fading just a bit as their eyes met. "But really. How are you?"

"Ah...She told you?" He raised his eyebrows, his humor wavering as he looked from Maddie to Harry. There was a moment of seriousness that passed between them where tears threatened at Maddie's eyes and truth at Bishop's heart. Harry saw both and made an executive decision. If they started in this early in the night, he knew they would both be crying into beer much too soon.

So he was taking them in another direction.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "She told us. She told us all about the way the two of you committed treasonous acts together in the Palace and I have to tell you...I'm compelled to report this to Her Majesty."

"Well then..." Bishop's mind transitioned away from the sad; a smile tugging at his face. "I suppose if it's my last night as a free man, we had better hit it hard."

"I suppose we had." Harry agreed. "To the White Ox?"

"To the White Ox." Bishop nodded.

"To the White Ox." Maddie echoed.
The first three weeks of Maddie and Harry's marriage was like a crash course in her new life. Though Maddie knew better, she had a brief, fleeting thought that perhaps it was set up just to try her; force her to get her "royal legs" at the very beginning. Though that clearly wasn't the case, she had no idea the whirlwind into which she was about to jump.

First up. The Trooping The Colour.

"Holy shit..." Harry's eyes went wide as Maddie stepped down the last few stairs, joining him in the entryway. "You look amazing..."

"Thank you," she smiled, a slight blush rising to her cheeks. "You're sure the dress is okay? It's not too...I don't know..." Her hands ran over the printed skirt.

"It's not too..." Harry shook his head, taking her waist in his hands and drawing her closer to him. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," she repeated. "I want to get it right, you know? It is my first Trooping the Colour."

"It is," he nodded as he leaned to kiss her. "I feel like I should have given you a gift."

"Well surely there are cards made for this sort of thing," Maddie grinned, hugging him tight.

"One would think," he kissed her again and released her; reaching for his hat as the car pulled up out front. "I'll see what I can do."

"Of course..." Maddie's head tipped to the side as she watched him walk in front of her, reaching for the door handle. "You in that uniform is really gift enough."

"Now see," Harry stopped and, though he didn't turn around, she knew he was smirking. "I can feel your eyes on my ass."

"Mmm..." Maddie laughed lightly, plucking her clutch from the side table and moving towards the door. Her hand reached out to him. "Can you feel my hand there now?" With a light pat, she moved past him through the open door.

"Oh..." Harry shook his head, his teeth biting at the grin on his face. "This is going to be an interesting day."

"I would imagine," she tossed a wink back at him as the moved towards the car.

"Do you think you'll be able to control your hands...and your eyes...while we're working?" He loved the back and forth they had; the light ribbing, the playful nature.

"I don't know," she shrugged; her eyes too wide, her face too innocent. He could almost feel the sarcasm in the air. "But I do promise to try."
"See that you do," he was trying for stern as he watched her slide into the car. Rounding to his side, he slid in next to her; the door closing behind them. In a beat of a second, they were on their way. Maddie had grown to learn that, when it came to matters of The Queen, everything moved like clockwork.

"It's strange..." Maddie broke character as she looked out the window. "It feels like I'm dressing up to be paraded around town." Harry smiled into himself; his voice soft and comforting.

"It feels that way because it is that way." Maddie looked to him then and he shrugged. "At least the first part of it is."

"That's so strange." She smiled and relaxed. She understood it, was fine with it, expected it; it just felt a bit strange.

"Would it help to know some of the history behind it?"

"It would."

"Okay," he nodded, pulling her hand into his. "The Trooping of the Colour has been a tradition of the British infantry regiments since the Seventeenth Century. In 1748 it began marking the official celebration of the Sovereign's birthday..."

The very second they arrived at Buckingham Palace, Maddie knew it was going to be an emotional day for her. She was silly that way sometimes. She was a strong, independent woman who had the ability to keep her emotions at bay when working with clients—even during some very dire situations in Bendal and with children who had been victims of great trauma. But in reality, outside of the workplace, she was quite the sap. And this day, the traditions, the music, the pomp of it all—she just knew she was going to get teary.

And she did.

Upon their arrival, they had moved seamlessly from the modern luxury of the car to the historical antiquity of the carriages. As William and Charles were a part of the Trooping, Harry and Maddie were riding with Camilla and Kate. In what might have been the strangest part of the day, both women dipped into a curtsy as they greeted Maddie and Harry. Though Maddie knew that was protocol—her title-bearing husband was by her side, there's were not—it didn't make it any less shocking to see it unfold before her.

Ever the gentlemen, Harry had offered his hand first to his step mother, than to his very pregnant sister and finally—even the flirtatious jokester, he had offered his hand to his wife; his eyes raking over her as she stepped into the carriage.

"You know I could feel your eyes on my ass," she muttered to him as he took his seat next to her; the proper smile never fading from her lips.

"Did you want to feel my hands there later?" He whispered back; everyone adjusting in their seats in the final few seconds before they began.

"Yes please," Maddie nodded; not one hint of impropriety on her face.
And in that moment, when his eyes lifted to hers, recognizing the twinkle that radiated amidst the poised expression, Harry felt that tug in his heart and, frankly, in the seat of his stomach. God, he loved this woman.

And they were off.

As the procession began through the gates of Buckingham Palace and out onto the streets, lined with people just as they had been a few weeks ago for the wedding, Maddie smiled across the carriage at the other two women. Two of the very few who had been in her seat before. Kate offered a wink. Camilla offered a warm, comforting smile and, as though a 1-2-3 count was given, the three women turned their smiles to the crowds; their hands rising in waves.

Inside their carriage, there was light conversation; Camilla asking about the honeymoon, inquiring about the baby and Kate's comfort. Harry made them all laugh with a funny story from the year before and Camilla made Maddie feel at ease when she nodded in her direction and told her she was doing marvelously.

The parade route wasn't long and it was considerably less stressful and less focused on Maddie than her very first trip in a carriage had been. She had smiled, she had waved, she had bowed her head when necessary and, when Harry's hand found a momentary home on her knee, she had squeezed it lightly before meeting his eyes in a shared moment.

And then they were there. The Royal Family was greeted and escorted inside where they would all watch the festivities unfold from a window overlooking it all. As members of the family filed in, Maddie was delighted to catch up with everyone; smiling, hugging, kissing...and a few slight curtseys before they settled in to watch.

And Maddie had been right. The music from outside was loud and pompous and full of heart pulling strums and beats. The regiments moved past The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh offering salute after salute. And, somewhere in the middle of it all, Maddie's feelings washed forward and tears moved to her eyes.

"Would you look at this," Eugenie's voice was trying for a whisper—a loud enough whisper so that the cousins around her could hear it. "We have a crier."

"What?" Harry perked up, his attention shifting from the marching below; his eyes traveling to his wife.

"What?" She turned to face them, her fingers wiping at her wet eyes. There were a few muffled giggles around her.

"You're crying?" His hand rested on her leg as he smiled sweetly.

"Yes," she sniffed. "I'm crying." Her eyes shifted to Beatrice who was covering up a laugh.

"What? It's...beautiful. The music, the pageantry, the tradition, and your grandparents are..." Maddie sighed as she looked out at them. "They are just lovely."

"They are," Beatrice agreed, her eyes following Maddie's and Harry's heart softened. It made him warm to watch his wife, an American by birth, be so caught up in British traditions, in his traditions, that she was drawn to tears. His thumb ran back and forth over her leg as his attention returned to where hers was strictly focused.

The traditions. The music. The pageantry.
It wasn't the last time that Maddie would tear up (that day or in the future) and it wasn't the last time the group of cousins would point it out and poke gentle fun. It was their way of loving her, of breaking her in—making her feel a part of things.

Thankfully, Maddie could take it.

Hours later when they were all gathered to step out on the balcony at Buckingham Palace for the flyover, Maddie watched with a wide smile and a hint of tears in her eyes as the 41 gun salute rang out into the air; her shoulders flinching just slightly with every shot. And when The Queen led the family outside, Maddie took a deep breath and smiled out at the enormous crowd, the memory of her first time out there still fresh on her mind.

Harry stepped up next to her, his hands folded in front of him as he leaned to whisper in her ear. "Someday this will become so routine, it won't hit as hard. The emotion won't be so heavy."

"Wow..." She let out a deep breath and turned a smile to him. "I really, really hope not."

"You know..." Maddie stood in front of their bathroom mirror late that night, pulling pins from her hat, from her hair. "I actually feel a little terrible taking this all out..." She laughed softly as Harry appeared in the mirror behind her; wet and warm from his shower, a towel wrapped around his waist, his chest glistening.

"Oh?" He raised his eyebrows, roughing a towel over his spiky hair.

"Tara spends so much time making these...creations." She pulled at another pin, extracting the hat from her head; resting it on the counter. "I feel like I'm destroying a piece of art."

"Hmm..." Harry smiled, laying his towel on the counter; his hands moving up to her hair. "Do you want my help?"

"Yes please," she smiled at him through the mirror and both of their hands went to work. In less than a minute, they had pulled a small pile of pins from her hair and, with a shake of her head, her blonde locks fell in a cascade of curls and twists. She sighed at the relief it brought to her scalp.

"Hi." His heart tugged, his stomach pulled. He couldn't help it. It was out of his hands. She just had this effect on him. It had been a long day for both of them—not a difficult day, but a long day, one that kept them in the public eye for hours. And she had done marvelously. She had stood tall and proud and confident at his side the entire day; never once wavering or fleeing or stumbling over herself. And now, as she took her hair down, as she stood halfway undone in her dress without the sweater, in her stockings without her heels, he was so completely drawn to her.

And, as his hands reached out without warning to lower the zipper at the back of her dress, he had the fleeting question—would it always be like this? Was this how it was now? She, stepping into this role with grace and aplomb and in such a way that it left him at her mercy?

"What are you doing?" Her voice was soft, her grin coy as his fingers finished the zipper; moving up to her shoulders where they began to push the fabric from her skin.
"Well..." Harry moved closer to her, his lips dropping to her now bared shoulder as he pushed the dress down her arms. "I seem to remember you asking..." The dress fell to the ground at her feet, his hand sliding around her waist and when Maddie groaned, Harry grinned and stepped closer. "Very politely I might add..." His eyes met hers in the mirror before he turned her around, pressing her lace covered chest to his bare, wet one.

"Oh!" Maddie gasped at the contact, her eyes flashing excitement at the sensation.

"For my hands..." They ran, firm and tight, down her waist, over her hips, around to her backside. "On your ass."

"I did," she nodded, her teeth biting at her red lips, her eyes looking up at him through lowered, dark lashes. "Are you about to give me my first Trooping the Colour gift?"

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back in laughter, momentarily derailing the seriousness with which he had moved them to this spot. His eyes fell back to hers. "You were amazing today."

"At the smiling and waving?" She kidded.

"Yes," he nodded, lifting her up and onto the counter behind her; stepping between her legs. "At the smiling and the waving..." His head dipped to kiss her collarbone, the top of the valley that ran through her breasts. "I was so proud to have you standing with me today. So happy that it was you next to me..."

"Harry..." She felt the slightest prick of tears.

"I was," his lips returned to hers with warmth and sweetness. "I've been doing this for so long...alone..." His arms wrapped all the way around her; hugging her close. "And now...it's not just that I have somebody there to talk to, to joke with, to tease..." He kissed the tip of her nose. "It's the fact that it's you..."

"Yes, well..." She swallowed the lump in her throat, blinked at the tears, her head tipping to the side as her hands ran down his strong back. "It wouldn't work without you baby."

"Hmm..." He seemed in sort of a haze as her fingers reached the towel at his waist. "I love you Madeline."

"I love you too Henry." She kissed him sweetly. "Now..." She wiggled in his arms, her legs moving to wrap around him, her ankles linking to pull him towards her. "You had said something about...a gift..." Her eyebrows rose as she tugged at his towel, sending it to the floor with her dress. "Ooops."

"You're a naughty, naughty young lady." His eyes narrowed at her, his hands moving over her skin, over the lace that barely covered her.

"I am," she nodded; her eyes almost as wide as her grin. "Care to do something about it? Your Royal Highness?"

With a growl of a laugh, Harry tugged her to him; his face burying in her neck—kissing and nuzzling and forcing her to cry out in laughter. And desire. And want.

Her first "Royal Duty" had come to a successful end and, from the way Harry was moving against
her, hands nimble, lips supple, her first "after party" was about to become a glowing success as well.

Maddie's first foray into the public eye following their wedding had been a success. Of course, it had been relatively low stress. The Trooping the Colour had required much less from her than her next royal duty would. But it had gone well, nonetheless. The articles that were printed the following day mentioned her dress, her smile, her ease and...in more than one, the way she had teared up while witnessing the festivities.

People were fascinated with the newest member of the royal family, intrigued by her presence and they were excited to hear her speak, to watch her move into a position that carried a bit more spotlight, a bit more weight.

Next on the list. Walking with The Women.

"I'm nervous." Maddie's voice cut into Harry's thoughts as she stepped into his office the day before the Walking with The Women reception. The Palace had made the announcement the day before and now it felt like the public was just watching, waiting to see what she brought to the table.

"What?" Harry was clearly surprised by this admission as he looked up at her from his desk. "You're nervous?"

"Yes. A little bit. Yes." She took a deep breath; stepping further into the room.

"Don't be." He shook his head, rising to his feet. "The speech is going to be fantastic."

"I'm actually not worried about the speech."

"Good," he laughed. "Because I read it and that thing is amazing. It practically came back from the speechwriter with a gold star."

"It did not," she rolled her eyes.

"Well, it came back without any notes." He walked around his desk, leaning back against the front of it.

"There were notes." She blushed a bit, sliding to the spot next to him.

"Telling you how marvelous you are?" His shoulder nudged hers.

"Are you trying to distract me?" An eyebrow lifted sharply.

"A little bit. Is it working?"

"A little bit." Harry looked her over for a beat before he took a breath.

"Tell me what you're nervous about."

"The women," she seemed shy as she spoke; quiet. "I'm nervous about the women I'm going to
"Why?" He was shocked by her response. She was great with people; they loved her, were drawn to her.

"Because..." She took a deep breath, her arms crossing over her chest. "Who am I, you know? Here they are; these decorated veterans, wounded in battle and...I mean...at least you had street cred when you walked in. You had served in the military, had seen action in Afghanistan. I'm just some blonde Duchess who is stepping into their moment."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa..." Harry grew serious then, seeing the gravity in her eyes. "You are not just some blonde Duchess. And you are not stepping into their moment. They are inviting you in. They contacted you to take part in this. They didn't have to do that, they wanted to do that. And...Jesus Maddie, how many times do I have to point out the scar on your shoulder before you stop dismissing your service in Bendal?"

"I wasn't serving in the military, Harry. It's a wound but it's not a battle wound. It's different and you know that it is."

"Maddie..." He moved to stand in front of her, his hands planting firmly on her shoulders. "Look at me." Her eyes lifted to his and he was happy to see that glimmer of defiant nature still there. "Fine. You're right. You weren't in the military. That's...fair. But we can't do anything about that now. You want to join the army?"

"No," she fought the chuckle in her throat.

"No. Of course you don't. And that's good because even if I would let you, you would never make it through Basic Training."

"Hey!" Her eyes narrowed, her voice rising. "There were about three things wrong with that sentence."

"Yeah?" He countered.

"We can start with you letting me do anything."

"Yeah, I knew we would start there," his arms folded over his chest as he watched her stand tall.

"And I would never make it through Basic Training?" She took a few steps away from him, pivoting back on her heel.

"Ah come on, you know you hate to run," he defended. "Do you have any idea how much they make you run in Basic Training?"

"Psh," she puffed. "If I wanted to do it, I could."

"Well sure," he shrugged. "If you wanted to do anything, you could."

"I could." Her eyes met his.

"I know." And then she caught it; that flicker in his eye, that crooked, half smirk, and her armor melted.
"Damn you." She shook her head and sighed into a laugh. "Has it always been this easy for you to pull me off track? To push my buttons?"

"No," Harry grinned. "But it sure is getting fun."

"Yeah..." Maddie eased back to her spot, leaning against his desk. "Okay. Maybe I shouldn't be so nervous."

"You really shouldn't. It will be a little odd at first, the introductions and such. But you're great with people and I'm sure they are all excited to meet you and to get moving forward on this trip." He ran his hands over her arms. "It will be fine. You'll fade into the background, become part of the group. I promise."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely." He was certain. "And...if you get nervous...you can just look out at me in the audience."

"That's sweet."

"And picture me naked."

"Of course."

"Madeline?" Harry called into their bedroom as he stepped inside.

"Yes?" She called back, glancing over her shoulder at him as she stepped into her heels.

"Thomas called. He and Ms. Florence are at the gates." He stepped into the room, smoothing a hand over his hair. "Are you ready?"

"I am," she nodded and, taking a deep breath, turned her attention to him. "Wow. Look at you."

"Thanks," he laughed. "You look amazing, as always."

"And you're full of smarm. As always." Her lips met his with a quick kiss before they stepped from the room; moving with synchronicity.

"How are you feeling?" He watched her as they descended the stairs.

"Okay," she took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Still nervous?"

"Yes."

"I have something for you..." He nodded his head to the side, wanting her to join him in the living room where, on the table, there was a bottle of tequila and two shot glasses. Her eyes lifted to his, the memory passing between them with sweet smiles.

"Tequila?" She watched as he poured the caramel liquid into the glasses. "Before my first
"Before your first televised interview?" He reminded her with a wink as he passed a glass to her.

"Fair point," she smiled, clinking her glass to his. "To the Women."

"To the Women," he echoed with a grin and they tossed their shots back. Harry collected the glasses, sat them on the table. "You're going to kill this Madeline."

"Says you." She appreciated the sentiment.

"Damn right says me." He nodded and, with a hand to her back, followed her to the door.

It was time to go.

After all was said and done, even Maddie had to admit that Harry had been right—however much it pained her to do so. The women were incredibly welcoming and, in the time she spent with them before the reception began, before her big speech, they had all made her feel less like an outsider. Thankfully, she had been afforded some time behind the scenes to meet with the team that she would be traveling to the North Pole with; the wounded soldiers, the training team, the medics. Maddie met them all and they instantly eased her fears—so much so that she felt ridiculous for having ever been worried. They were interested in her; having read about her, knowing enough about her to be curious. And, to their delight, they found her to be easygoing, cheerful, with a bit of a stubborn, competitive streak. They watched as she traded barbs with her husband and liked that she didn't even flinch when asked to stand with them for a photo before it all began.

By the time the program began, Maddie, who sat next to Harry as she waited to be called up to speak, felt much more at ease. And that was a very good thing since Harry had every intention of continuing this seductive back and forth they had going; trying to get a rise out her. He looked down at her hands clasped in her lap, and leaned closer to her.

"Remember," he whispered in her ear, completely unnoticed by those around them. "If you get nervous, imagine me naked."

"Please," she rolled her eyes, not turning to look at him; knowing that if she did, she might lose focus. And she was bound and determined not to let him push her buttons like she knew he was hoping to. This newfound game was bound to get them both in trouble some time—but not tonight.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," the woman at the podium smiled wide at the crowd. "Please join me in welcoming our newest Patron..."

"I know I'll be imagining you naked..." He whispered in her ear. "And sitting on my..."

"Harry!" Her voice was a hushed whisper as she pulled away from him then. Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly as she pulled her smile wide; hoping it hid the way she wanted to smack him upside the head, hoping she had held on to enough of her game face that she seemed unfazed.

"Her Royal Highness, the Duchess of Sussex." As Libby slid her folded speech into her hands, Maddie rose from her seat and, steeling her reaction, smiled to her husband.
"Go get 'em Doc," Harry winked at her as she stepped away from him. Beaming with pride, he joined in on the applause and watched as a seemingly very confident Maddie stepped up to the podium.

"Is this how it's going to be now?" Maddie kept her smile on her face as she and Harry were lead to where the photographers were waiting for the photo call. "You trying to pull me off message?"

"Mmmm..." Harry smiled, his fingers tightening at her waist. "I think it might be."

"Well you had better bring your A-game, Captain because I intend on taking you down."

"I love it when you talk dirty."

"Right this way." Thomas stepped up to the two of them then, directing them just to the left. "Lovely speech tonight, Ma'am, it went very well."

"Really?" Maddie was genuinely excited as he nodded.

"Yes Ma'am. It was excellent."

"See," Harry narrowed his eyes at her. "I told her the same thing. I love how you take Thomas' word for it but mine...no way."

"Are you finished?" She raised her eyebrows as they stopped moving.

"Not even close," Harry squeezed her hand in his and took a step to the side.

This was her night. Not his. And he was happy, thrilled in fact, to stand aside and let her take the spotlight; her and the women she would be traveling with to the North Pole.

Following the Photo call, there was an informal reception; appetizers and drinks, a chance for Maddie to really speak with the team—to hear their stories. She moved through the crowd with ease; remembering names, listening to their history—to what brought them to this team, to this expedition.

There would be many things written about this night, not just about the content of the evening—the trip to the North Pole by a team of wounded women—but also the process pieces, the side notes. Like what a great fit this patronage seemed to be, how well the Duchess of Sussex spoke—clear and calm, inviting and humorous, how well the crowd took to her and she to them, how proud Harry looked as he stood back and watched his wife work. And, of course, how connected and in love the two of them seemed; how evident it was to the rest of the room.

Though there would be many, many speeches ahead of her, though there would be numerous other events for Walking With the Women, this particular night had been an unmitigated success. And, as they slid into the car, Maddie kept her smile in place, her eyes focused on some far off spot as she processed it all—from the speech to the women and their stories; the significance of it all settling over her.
And Harry, having been around long enough to notice a 'processing' gaze, sat quietly next to her, holding the space, as they traveled home. He even maintained his silence as they stepped from the car, as they entered their house—the door shutting behind them.

But once that lock clicked into place, he couldn't hold it in any longer. There, in the dark entryway, he called out to her. "Come on baby, I know you're going over it in your head again and again, but tonight was amazing. Admit it so we can celebrate."

"You're right," her voice waivered, the words catching; drawing Harry's attention. "Tonight was...amazing..."

"Baby...are you crying..." He was instantly soft as he moved through the darkness to her. "Madeline?" His head dipped so that he could see her.

"It's okay," she sniffed through her now evident tears. "It's okay. I'm okay. I..." She wiped at her eyes but the tears kept coming.

"Why are you crying?" His hands fell to her shoulders; soothing and comforting. "It went incredibly well and..."

"I'm..." She reached for a tissue and dabbed fruitlessly at her cheeks. Taking a long, deep breath, she tried to calm herself; tried to settle. "I'm not crying because of the speech, Harry." With a shaky smile, she met Harry's eyes. "Talking with them; the women..." She blew out a breath as tears welled again. "Their stories are just so..." She trailed off, the tears winning out.

And he got it. With a nod and a lump in his own throat, he pulled her into his arms; wrapping himself around her protectively. He understood completely; the weight of their experiences, of their triumphs. It was inspiring and heart-wrenching and only somebody hardened to all that was good in the world would be able to withstand the impact of hearing those stories for the first time. He kissed the top of her head as she tucked into his chest and let the tears come.

This wasn't the end of it. He knew that. His role, Maddie's role, brought them to people with stories to tell, people who had overcome great sufferings, people who were inspirational in the biggest sense of the word. It was his most favorite part of his duties—and sometimes the most difficult to breathe through.

"Okay..." She breathed deep, finally moving past the tears. "Okay. I'm good. I'm good..." She wiped at her cheeks and pulled away from him, relief in her eyes—contentment in her smile.

"You sure?" He looked her over with a sweet smile.

"Yes. Absolutely. Sorry about that. I don't know what came over me. It was a wonderful night. I just needed a moment to let it hit me. But I'm good now. I'm so, so happy that they asked me to be a part of this. I can't wait for the trip and..." Her voice lowered as she wrapped her arms around his waist. "And I'm not even as annoyed with the running part as I thought I would be."

"Ha!" Harry laughed. "Oh wow. That was some reception then."

"Yes it was." Maddie grinned, hugging him tight. "Thank you..."

"For?"

"The pep talk, the tequila, the support..." She tipped her lips up to his.
"Anytime baby, anytime." He kissed her.

"Now..." Her eyes narrowed. "About what you said to me just before they called my name..."

"Okay listen," Harry's hands went up, his defense mounting. "All I was trying to do was take your mind off the nervousness and I believe it was you who started this little back and forth and..."

"Shh." Maddie's fingers pressed to his lips; a tantalizing invitation in her eyes. "You're not in trouble."

"No?"

"No," she shook her head slowly. "In fact. I was thinking maybe we could go upstairs..." She stepped away from him then. "Dive into that imagination of yours..." She took a step towards the stairs. "And finish that sentence..." Her eyes swept over him appreciatively and, with a turn she was moving up the stairs; leaving Harry to stare after her dumbfounded.

Though not for long. It took him less than a beat to pull it together and follow her. And, as he bound up the stairs after her, he figured he always would—follow her. As much as these last two weeks had been about Maddie stepping into her new role, it had also been about him adjusting to these changes in his—the way he was called upon to be there for her, to show her the tricks, give her hints, and to sit back and watch her make it her own—standing next to her as she navigated it, there to love her when it was over. He knew there would be set backs, unforeseen bumps in the road, but so far—they were off to a great start.

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If the Trooping the Colour had been a nice way to ease Maddie into her royal duties, and the Walking With the Women reception had been a triumphant testament to the mind and spirit she brought with her, than the Royal Ascot was a well-dressed blending of the two. Though it began as it should; light and easy. She donned another beautiful dress, she sat while Tara pinned her hair up into another pristine creation topped by an Ascot-appropriate hat and she climbed into the carriage next to her husband—this time with Will and Kate as their mates. They smiled and waved and Maddie could feel the excitement in the air. It was abundantly clear to Maddie that the family, her new family, was a fiercely competitive bunch and that this particular event was more for them than for everyone else.

After they stepped from the carriages, Harry had taken her arm and led her off to the bar. This event required a few drinks and, as Maddie looked at the creation she was handed, she couldn't help but be swept up in how light and airy and carefree it felt. It was a beautiful day and the dresses, the hats, the suits...everything was so pretty. Including her dapper husband who stood tall at her side; guiding her back to the family box.

"The thing about you..." Maddie's voice was as warm as the summer air around them as they walked back to the family, drinks in hand. "Mmm..." She sipped from her glass with a pleased look on her face, not noticing that he was waiting for her to continue.

"Yes?" His eyes were sweet as he looked down to her.

"Hmm?" She lifted her eyebrows, causing Harry to chuckle.

"You were saying, the thing about you..."
"Ah yes," she nodded, her mind snapping back; her grin widening. "The thing about you is that I'm never entirely sure when you are your sexiest."

"Excuse me?" He perked up at that; his eyes glancing around at the crowds of people, some noticing them, some oblivious.

"I mean. There's the casual you in a soft worn t-shirt and your bare feet on your desk." She linked her hand through his arm as they walked. "Then there's you in a suit which...let's not face it...is pretty damn fabulous."

"Oh-kay," he wasn't entirely sure how he felt about this particular line of thought; wondering how much alcohol was in that drink he had just handed her.

"But you in a uniform..." Her voice grew low, gruff. She sucked in a breath and let out a sigh, her skin warming at the thought.

"I'm sorry, are you coming on to me right now?" His eyes flickered playfully as they rounded the corner; his family coming into view.

"No," she shook her head, her lips pressed into a sweet smile. "I'm just saying...you in a top hat...I wasn't sure how it would sit but..." She looked up at him with soft eyes. "It's really pretty great."

"You are coming onto me." His hand reached out to pinch her side slightly; causing her to jump and giggle.

"I'm not. I'm complimenting you."

"You know..." Harry's voice dropped as they grew closer to the royal box. "If you wanted to meet me in the stables and lose the top hat..."

"Keep the top hat," she interrupted with a smirk.

"Oh," he grinned. "Today is going to be an excellent day at the races."

Maddie's grin matched his as she nodded her agreement; her mind moving forward as they stepped through the doors that were opened for them, rejoining his family. Charles was the first to see them and, with a wide, beaming smile, he moved directly to Maddie, pulling her from her curtsy and into his arms.

"But..." Maddie held tight to Harry's arm as he went to move away from her. "I want to place the bet myself."

"No," he shook his head. It was much later and they had just finished their second round of drinks. Nobody was anywhere near drunk, but they were at ease; having fun.

"No?"

"Last time you went up, you put money on the wrong horse."

"It wasn't the wrong horse." Her eyes flashed with fire as she grinned up at him.
"It wasn't the horse I asked you to put money on." His lips twitched as he fought a matching grin.

"Nope." She shook her head. "I chose a different horse. A better horse."

"The wrong horse."

"And I won..." She waved her hand in the air as Zara and Mike laughed at the two of them. "I did you a favor. I don't know why you're still complaining."

"I'm not. But now, I want to place this money on a specific horse and I do not want my wife, as well intentioned as she is, changing that bet for me on her way to the counter."

"Fine," Maddie sighed with a dramatic roll of her eyes. "As you were..." She waved her hand towards the door.

"Thanks love," he leaned to kiss her lips amid the laughter from his cousins.

"Mmm Hmm..." She chuckled as he moved away from her then, her eyes shifting back out to the festivities. "You know...I think I'm going to go down to find some dessert."

"Oh!" Mike sat forward. "Let me come with you?"

"For dessert?" She looked back at him as Zara laughed.

"What?" He looked to his wife with a teasing glare. "I have a sweet tooth."

"Go ahead," Zara nodded to Maddie. "Go find dessert with Maddie."

"May I?" He looked to Maddie.

"Absolutely," she nodded and then, with her RPO not too far behind them, the two of them stepped from the box, off to find dessert.

"So listen..." Mike leaned a bit closer to her as they made it to the bottom of a slight hill. They had been walking, trading stories and laughs as they searched for something that drew their attention. When his voice dropped low, Maddie's laughter drew to a slow stop. "I don't want to alarm you but there is a man walking towards us who is eyeing you like he knows you."

"Oh?" Maddie blinked; surprised but calm, a trait she had been perfecting over the last three weeks. Very casually, she glanced over Mike's shoulder; recognizing the man in an instant. "Ah yes. Of course." Though her words spoke of irritation, her eyes never wavered, her smile never faded. She did stop walking though and moved off to the side; out of the middle of traffic and, she hoped, away from too many eyes. If he was coming over, she wanted to get it out of the way.

"Anyone we should warn security about?" Mike sipped from his drink as he followed.

"No, no," Maddie shook her head. "He's harmless."

"Do you want me to find Harry?" He offered, pulling his phone from his pocket.

"No," she felt her lips turn up slightly at the image that popped into her mind.
"You want me to..." He nodded his head, wondering if he should step away.

"No," her hand rested on his arm; her arms flashing concern for the briefest of moments. "Don't go. Stay?"

"Absolutely." He wouldn't move an inch unless she asked.

And then he was there, stepping up to the two of them. Mike looked him over, curious. He seemed nervous; his fingers fidgeting, his eyes a bit scattered as he glanced first at Mike and then to Maddie. But Maddie was cool as a cucumber; standing tall and steady as she turned her body to face his. There was a moment of silence, of a stunted, uncomfortable nature before the man swallowed and spoke.

"Your Royal Highness," his head dipped into a bit of a bow. It took everything Maddie had to keep the smirk from her face as she nodded hello.

"Wally." The name came from her lips with a bite to it. "You know Mike Tindall?" Maddie watched as the two men nodded; both sizing up the other as Maddie held court. Her eyes looked him over. He was dressed well, top hat and tails and she assumed this wasn't his first horse race. But she was confused; uncertain as to what exactly it was he was doing standing before her. "Is there...I'm sorry. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Actually..." He cleared his throat. "I was wondering if I might be able to speak to you alone?"

"Actually," Maddie glanced at Sampson who was watching her from a few yards away. "I'm not allowed to go many places alone—as I am sure you are well aware."

"Of course," he nodded, glancing to Mike. "I meant..."

"I would actually prefer it if Mike stayed," she lifted her glass to her lips and watched him shuffle his weight from one foot to the other. "We were just on a search for dessert. Now, what was it you needed?"

"Fine." he cleared his throat and looked down to his feet. Though no one would ever be able to tell by looking at her, Maddie was surprised—a bit thrown—by his nervousness. "I have been meaning to apologize to you for quite some time. And I saw that you were here today and thought I should take my chance."

"I see," Maddie nodded, noticing the way Mike's eyes moved to hers; clearly curious about what was happening.

"The way I...behaved the last time we met was..." His eyes shifted as he tried to maintain eye contact with her. "It was completely out of line. I was drunk and...and a little high and the things I said were not okay."

"No." Maddie agreed.

"No," he shook his head. "And I am sorry for those things."

"Okay," she nodded with a small, polite smile. "Well, thank you for coming over." Her eyes moved to Mike as she dismissed Wally and the conversation. "Let's find that dessert, shall we?"
"Absolutely." Mike agreed and Maddie took one step, one graceful stride just past Wally and, as she moved, she felt his hand on her arm.

"Hold on." His voice had more of an edge to it this time, his fingers warm on her skin. Maddie spun around as a shocked Mike reached his hand out. But Maddie had it all under control. Her voice was short and quiet as she leaned in.

"You should know that the last man to put his hands on me like that ended up face down on a table in a pile of glass." Though his hand dropped from her arm, his eyes were narrowed on her.

"I am trying to apologize to you and you're too much of a..."

"Hey..." Mike warned, his eyes flashing right to Sampson who had come to a stop, though much closer than before. "Who are you again?" He looked Wally over with obvious disdain.

"Who am I?" It was almost as though he couldn't help it; being his cocky arrogant self. Maddie felt sorry for him—unable to recognized how terribly outweighed he was—in mind and matter. "I'm a friend of Harry's."

"Really?" Mike raised his eyebrows. "Because the way you're talking to his wife right now makes it hard for me to believe that."

"Easy..." Maddie smiled, stepping into the mix just so. So far nobody was the wiser as to the nature of the conversation; it appeared to simply be three people catching up. And Maddie had every intention of leaving it that way. "What is it you need Wally?"

"I came to apologize. All I wanted was an acknowledgement of that..." He took a deep breath, trying to reign himself in. "I want the air to be clear."

"Consider it clear." Maddie agreed; wanting this over.

"Everything's okay between the two of us?"

"Wally..." She couldn't help the light chuckle that puffed through her lips. "We're...we're not a two of us. I...I didn't even know you before that night. And I haven't seen you since that night. We're...nothing."

"But..."

"But fine." She kept her eyes from rolling—barely. "Fine. We're fine. Air is cleared. Apology accepted. Now. If you'll excuse me..." Before she could finish her sentence, she saw him.

Harry; jaw set, eyes hardened and heading directly to them. Though there was a smile on his face, his cheeks were as red as his hair. He was livid. Of course, she thought. She could see it unfolding in her mind; a brawl at the Royal Ascot. Desperately hoping to avoid an escalation in the conversation, she stepped past the two men, wanting to be the first one Harry came in contact with.

Her hands rose to his chest as he slowed to a stop right before her; his eyes looking past her, focused intently on Wally. "Somebody want to fill me in on what exactly is happening right now?"

"Hey," Maddie tugged at his tie, her voice soft and sweet; forcing his eyes down to her. "Hey.
Everything's fine. It is. It's fine." She smiled up at him, seeing the concern in his gaze. "Look at you. You lost your top hat..." She glanced to his side as somebody stepped up behind him. "And you gained a Bishop. Hi there Bishop."

"Your Royal Highness," he allowed a glance in her direction before his eyes returned to Wally's with the same sort of menace that she saw in Harry's.

"Listen Wally..." Harry's hands were on Maddie's arms as though he wanted to move her out of his way, so that he could get to his long ago friend.

"He came to apologize," Maddie stepped further into Harry's path. "Mike and I were on our way for dessert and Wally noticed me walking and came over to apologize. For the last time we met." As she felt Harry's muscles relax a bit beneath her hands, she allowed her own tension to ease; flashing her smile at the group of men gathered around her. "And he did. And we're fine."

"Okay," Harry nodded; his hands loosening on her arms. "If you say everything's fine."

"It is," she smiled; her eyes traveling from Wally to Mike who nodded, meeting Harry's eyes. "He apologized. I accepted and now..." She looked to Wally then, hoping he had the sense to be the tiniest bit grateful for the way she was pulling this situation apart. "Now I would really like to find some dessert. Mike?"

"Ah yes," his smile widened as his eyes met hers; offering her his arm. "I'm in if you are."

"Excellent," Maddie turned to Harry and Bishop. "What do you say boys? Care to join us?"

"Sure..." Bishop shrugged, stepping to her side with more of a smile than he had carried when he first joined them. "I could do dessert." Maddie's eyes fell to Harry who still stood, smile in place, eyes fixed on his old friend for a long beat.

"Absolutely," he snapped his attention to his wife; a genuine smile spreading across his face as he took a breath. "As a matter of fact, I heard rumor of some red velvet mini cakes just around the way."

"Oh?" Despite all the commotion, Maddie really hoped he wasn't kidding.

"Yes Ma'am," and then, without acknowledging Wally with another glance, he stepped around him and moved to follow Mike, Maddie and Bishop.

"Harry. Come on man..." Wally's voice seemed desperate; sad and lonely as he called out to him. Harry's eyes met Maddie's and they shared a smile, a moment of understanding.

"Wally?" He spun around.

"Just like that, huh? One incident and you walk right past me." Harry took a deep breath and a step forward; leaving Maddie, Mike and Bishop a few feet away as he stepped into Wally's space, his voice lowered.

"The way that you spoke to my wife..."

"She wasn't your wife then," he defended; weakly. Harry's jaw hardened, the smirk on his face more menacing than it seemed to casual observers.
"The way you spoke to her was unacceptable."

"And I've apologized to her."

"Yes." Harry nodded. "Yes you have. Long overdue, but you have. And, from what I can tell, she's chosen to accept that."

"She has," Wally nodded, wanting a chance to explain, to make amends with Harry. "Now if I could just have a minute to..."

"Nah," Harry shook his head, his hand reaching out to land on Wally's shoulder, a friendly gesture that threw Wally off his game a bit. "You don't owe me an apology Wally."

"But..."

"Listen," Harry leaned in. "You and I, we've known each other a long time, right?"

"Yes." Wally nodded.

"We were friends for many, many years."

"Yes." He was beginning to feel more at ease.

"I mean, you've been around almost as long as Bishop, right? Through Eton and Sandhurst..."

"Yes. Yes...exactly." Wally allowed a hopeful smile. And Harry's eyes grew dark.

"Then it shouldn't surprise you in the least when I say this..." And then without another thought or care on the matter, Harry patted Wally's shoulder and released it; turning on his heel and stepping away.

That's how it was with him. Wally had been around long enough to know that; long enough to have witnessed it.

No discussion. No dramatics.

Over.

"Wait up!" Harry called out to the threesome. Maddie turned a bright smile to him, extending her hand as Harry started after them. Snatching her hand in his, he kissed the top of it and, with a clap of his hand on Mike's back, the four of them left Wally standing alone.

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"So..." Maddie slid into bed later that night, moving directly to his side and snuggling in. "Are you ever going to tell me what you said to Wally this afternoon?"

"Wally who?" Harry sighed, his arms moving around her as his lips pressed to her hair; damp and fresh from her shower.

"Ha, ha," Maddie kissed his t-shirt clad chest and moved to look up at him. "Really though. What did you say?"
"Nothing," he shrugged, his eyes growing heavy with sleep. It had been a long day; the sun, the races, the 'moment'. "I said nothing."

"Fine..." She sighed, her feet moving to twine into his legs. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"No I mean it," he chuckled. "I said nothing. There's nothing to say. Everything that needed to be said was said that night, in the bar, when he acted like a fool."

"He was drunk and high and..."

"Are you defending him right now?" Harry's forehead scrunched as he looked to her.

"No," she shook her head. "I'm not. I just don't want you to regret..."

"I won't," he was certain. "I promise you I won't." He kissed her then, firm and on the lips.

"It was surreal running into him though," Maddie relaxed in his arms. "And when he bowed and called me your royal highness..." Harry chuckled; wishing he could have been there to see that.

"You kind of loved it, didn't you?"

"I kind of did," Maddie snickered; barely able to admit it out loud. Her laughter faded into a sigh as her eyes blinked slower. It had been a long day, a long week, a long month. It was hard to believe that it had been a little over a month since she had married Harry, that it had only been three weeks since she had begun her royal life. "Hey Harry?"

"Hmmm?" His eyebrows lifted though his eyes remained closed.

"I'm doing..." She laughed sleepily at her own insecurities, at her need to ask. "This whole Duchess thing...I'm doing okay so far, right?"

"Wow..." Harry chuckled softly, his eyes peeling open so that he could look at her. Moving to his side, his lips bent to hers kissing her once, twice, three times. "You're doing remarkably well. Remarkably."

And he meant it. She could tell. Though they most certainly had their moments of playful ribbing, this wasn't one of them. He knew she was serious and so was he. Nodding her head, she moved back into the warm confines of his embrace. She closed her eyes as he kissed her forehead and didn't open them up again for the rest of the night.
One thing Maddie had learned very early on in her marriage to Harry was that his vows to her in no way hindered his appeal to other women. Though she had every faith in Harry's loyalty to her, she knew enough—especially after their honeymoon discussion on the matter—to know that to some women, the more committed he was to her, the more attractive he was.

And, now that they were married, nothing had changed. In fact, she was certain his appeal had only increased. One afternoon after lunch with Ella, she had walked past a magazine stand where one glossy cover posed the ever important question

"Is it possible that the Duke of Sussex is sexier WITH a wife?!"

The magazine's answer? Yes. The article that she embarrassingly read after she asked Ella to purchase it for her, offered up several photos of him with her—pointing out the way he looked at her, the way his hands always seemed to drift to her, the pride in his eyes, the smile on his face, the close proximity between them. It discussed how open he was about his attraction to her, how he seemed happier with her.

Was Harry sexier with a wife?

Maddie's answer? Yes. He was absolutely sexier to her now that he was married. Because he was married to her. It was the strangest sort of thing, having full conscious realization that women around you coveted your husband; lusted after him in many cases. But she had also learned very early on that to let it get to her was a complete waste of her time. Women were going to want him. That didn't mean they could have him.

He was very clearly all hers—even the "survey" in the magazine indicated that the women of England very clearly thought that Harry was hooked, that he would remain faithful to his wife.

But it didn't stop some from making assumptions, based on his family history, the "ways of aristocracy". There were people who had every expectation that Harry would stray—didn't all men (and quite a few women for that matter)? And it certainly didn't stop them from talking about it. Something Maddie was very abruptly introduced to at Harry's first match of the Polo season. She had planned on spending the match with Kate who wasn't feeling well and wanted to stay in the city; leaving Maddie on her own. And somehow, somehow she had been drawn into a crowd of society women who were drinking glass after glass of wine until they were laughing and raunchy and began to talk about a subject Maddie just assumed she would never be approached with; the acceptance and expectation of adultery among them and their peers. Maddie was amazed that the conversation was taking place, even more so that it was taking place in front of her...and when they turned to her for input, she about fell over.

By the time the match was over, she was stunned into silence; amused and shocked and not even sure what to do with all she had heard, all she had been told; all the wine she had inhaled second hand.

Harry was on fire after the match. He had won; had played hard and well and he had won. And that put him in a mood that was impossible to reign in, not that she would ever try. She loved him like this. They were heading up to Highgrove for the weekend with Charles and Camilla and the RPO's had decided to let him drive the Landrover while they followed behind in another. Maddie assumed that Jim wasn't in the mood to challenge His Royal Highness who was clearly flying
after such a win. She was happy and content in the passenger side, watching him enjoy this slice of life that he rarely inhabited. The windows were down and his foot was heavy as they bent through the twisted roads. Maddie watched him from her seat, amused and inexplicably turned on. He was flushed and sweaty and sexy as hell.

"Hey," he was smug, having caught her watching him.

"Hey," she didn't care one bit that he had caught her. "You rode well today."

"I really did," he agreed, unabashedly proud of his match.

"Ha!" Her head tipped back in laughter, the wind whipping her curls around her head. "You're so cocky."

"You know it," he winked and forced his eyes back to the road; one hand drifting from the wheel to her knee. "How were things on the sidelines?"

"You don't want to know." She shook her head, her eyes lighting up as she remembered.

"I do." He squeezed her knee.

"I promise. You don't."

"Tell me...." His mood was light, joking, his hand moving to her seat, just behind her shoulder as he steered the vehicle easily with one hand.

"Fine," she sighed. "You're never going to believe what somebody said to me today."

"Your Royal Highness..." He went for a guess with playful eyes, a voice change, and a cheeky grin. "You are far too stunning to be standing out here in the open. You'll distract all of the players..."

"No," Maddie laughed.

"There will be an accident; horses running into the other..." He continued, loving the way her laughter surrounded him in the car.

"Not even close," she shook her head.

"You're giving an unfair advantage to your husband who is oh so motivated by your presence..."

"Easy killer," she rolled her eyes at how thick he was laying it on.

"I am out of guesses then."

"A woman, a very intoxicated woman—mind you..." She took a breath, her eyes sliding to watch his reaction. "...asked me if I was going to be allowed wife approval of your mistresses." Even now, at least an hour later, Maddie still found it funny.

"Aw come on..." Harry's smile faded ever so slightly, his head shaking. "You're kidding."

"Not in the least." She couldn't help but laugh about it now, finding it so far past ridiculous. She watched Harry for a moment, latching on to his lighthearted spirit and teasing just a bit. "So...?"
"So?" His eyebrows lifted as he leaned forward, his forearms resting on the steering wheel.

"Do I?" She cracked a smirk. "Get wife approval of your mistress?"

"Please..." He rolled his eyes, shook his head; shifting in his seat.

"The ladies of London would like to know where to file their applications," her tone mimicked his, her fingers reaching out to tickle his side.

"Stop," he rolled his eyes; unsure about how this was sitting with him. He was happy to see that she was clearly not bothered by this, though not entirely sure he wanted her to be so comfortable that she could joke about it.

"Should they send them through me or directly to you?" She continued, sliding her feet from her sandals and pulling them up underneath her.

"You can stop it now." He shifted his eyes to hers, his jaw straining as though he couldn't decide if he wanted to grin or if he wanted to scowl. And Maddie noticed this bit of a struggle. But, finding it a bit humorous, she continued on.

"I do have some questions though. For instance...do you want to give me a list of prerequisites? Blonde? Or do you want a brunette instead? Should she be..."

"Madeline." His voice cut in on her teasing; his eyes narrowed, mood stern.

"Ah..." Maddie breathed her toe stretching out to poke his thigh. "So you're saying I don't have mistress approval?"

"This is ridiculous. We're moving on," he caught her eyes, his hand reaching out to slip up under the hem of her skirt, teasing at her knee. She held her breath, her skin tingling as his fingers inched higher and higher.

"You asked."

"And I regret that decision immensely." She giggled lightly; her eyes drifting out her open window, looking at the countryside as they flew by.

"I was also told that I would be wise to have my affairs with men who fit naturally into my life; a tennis coach...security detail..." She shook her head, still unable to believe that virtual strangers would find it appropriate to pass of advice and guidance in cheating on your husband.

"Okay." Harry's hand snapped out from underneath her skirt and moved back to the steering wheel with a smack. "You want to tell me who these women were?"

"I really don't," Maddie shook her head, turning to look at him.

"Well, maybe you're done at the polo field."

"Oh yeah?" She laughed.

"And I'm having Sampson reassigned."
"Oh honey..." Her fingers wrapped around his forearm, the muscles underneath taught. "You don't have to worry about Sampson."

"No?"

"No way..." She leaned closer to him then, her hand finding home on his thigh. "I'm much more attracted to the dashing, renegade, princely types."

Harry met her eyes for just a beat longer than he should have while driving—but he couldn't help it. Her hand on his thigh, the tone of her voice...

"So you're saying I should have Arthur reassigned." He didn't miss a beat; his humor, his wit, were top form.

"Exactly." Maddie's eyes danced as she moved to kiss his cheek, sighing back into her seat. "The sidelines were exhausting and full of the strangest sort of conversations; women in loveless marriages, accepting infidelity, asking questions of me that I would be hard pressed to hear from Ella..." She rolled her eyes and shrugged before she turned sexy eyes on him. "But my man won so..."

"Yes he did," Harry grinned; their brief detour coming to a close as his hand returned to her knee. "Yes. He. Did."

"Care to celebrate?" She arched an eyebrow; feeling frisky.

"What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, her bottom lip between her teeth as her fingers tugged the hem of her skirt higher; flashing her bare thighs.

"Oh-ho..." Harry bit his lip with a shake of his head; his mind shifting gears.

"We could...I don't know..." She inched her dress higher. "We could pull over onto a side road and..."

"Oh you think so?" His eyebrows flew up; his grin clearly indicating that he was considering it.

"I do," she adjusted just slightly in her seat, forcing his hand higher on her thigh.

"What if we're caught?"

"Well you would have to be fast," she pulled her lower lip between her teeth as her legs slipped apart.

"Jesus Madeline..." He sucked in his breath as his fingers began to stroke the soft skin underneath them.

"I'm your wife, Harry. If we were caught, how bad can sex with your wife be?"

"Sex with my wife in a car, in public?" He reminded her of their roles and positions with a shift in tone.

"Fine..." She sighed, her hand slipping into his lap. "How fast can you drive?"
"To my father's house?" He groaned as her fingers began to move, allowing only a moment of indulgence before his hand left her thigh and reached for her wrist; pulling it away from him.

"Ugh..." Maddie sighed heavily; wishing for a split second he was normal...normal enough to pull off the side of the road and shag his wife in broad daylight. "Fine..." Her head tipped away from him, her hands adjusting her skirt. "I'll back down."

"Fuck," Harry breathed through tight lips; regret flowing through him. "Maybe we need our own house in the country."

"For fresh from the polo field, spur of the moment sex?" Maddie laughed as she turned back to him.

"Yes." He nodded; adjusting in his seat. Maddie thought about it for a moment and then, with a shrug and a grin,

"I think you're on to something." She agreed.

"I'll start looking tomorrow." Harry took another glance at the way her dress draped over the curves of her body and with a heavy sigh, he focused on the road.

As ironic as it was, going to Highgrove was like going home. Maddie always felt the strangest mix of feelings when they pulled up. The differences between this home and the home she grew up in were vast and steep, but the feeling was the same.

Maybe it was the fresh air or the way both her home and this home produced so much life. She really didn't know. But she felt it again that day; as the gravel crunched underneath their tires and they pulled to a stop. It was like she could breathe a bit easier. Not waiting for anyone to open her door, Maddie stepped out of the car and stretched her arms up over her head with a wide lazy smile.

As Harry rounded the car towards her, as the RPOs pulled to a stop behind them, the front door opened and their host for the weekend stepped out.

"Harry," Charles' voice was rich with excitement. "Madeline." He flashed that famous smile. Truth be told, he was overjoyed to see them—thankful for the way Maddie's presence in his son's life meant more of his son in his own life.

"Father," Harry hugged his dad, pressing a kiss to his cheeks.

"Charles," Maddie was warm as she dipped into a slight curtsey before being pulled into his fatherly embrace. She sighed as he held her to him. "Thank you for inviting us out."

"Of course, darling," he stepped out of the hug but held tight to her hand as he turned to his son. "Did you ride off the field and straight here?"

"For the most part, yes," Harry grinned as the staff began unloading their bags for their stay. "I was hoping to shower here before dinner."

"Well why don't you go do that," Charles nodded to the house before turning to Maddie. "If you
don't mind, I would like to talk to you about a project I'm working on."

"Oh?" Maddie's interest was piqued.

"Mmm," he nodded. "Care to join me for a walk?"

"I would love that."

"Fantastic." Charles could not have been more in his element in that moment.

"Fantastic," Harry grinned, leaning to kiss Maddie's cheek. "I'll see you two in a bit."

As Harry bound up the stairs, disappearing into the house, Maddie turned to her father-in-law and smiled.

"Shall we?"

"Yes," he offered his arm which Maddie readily took and they began walking through the grounds.

"I saw that you added some new shrubbery up the main drive." Maddie loved walking the grounds with him. And Charles loved that he had somebody to share this with, somebody who loved it the way he felt she was going to love it after some time; after it settled in her bones.

"You noticed?" The way his voice lifted at the end was sweet; he was touched.

"Of course I noticed." She squeezed his arm.

"You do have a sharp eye."

"I do," she agreed. "When it comes to this sort of thing...I suppose that I do."

"Mmm," Charles nodded; his eyes shifting out over the land as his mind went to work. "That is what I wanted to speak with you about."

"My sharp eye?" She was a bit confused.

"Your love for the land, your appreciation for what it offers us and not just in what we can produce out of it, but in what is produced in us when we care for it and grow from it."

"Oh?" Her curiosity deepened. "I'm sorry. I'm not following you completely. Did you want me to plow a field?"

"No, no," he chuckled warmly. "I've been thinking of a new project for The Prince's Trust." He came to a stop and turned to her, business on his face. "I would like to begin an Urban Garden program in London. You are familiar with the work the Trust does with youth?"

"Absolutely," Maddie nodded; she had always had an admiration for the projects the Trust had taken on, for the way it had altered lives.

"I have read up on the work you did with the Community Center while you were in Bendal; the greenhouse you helped build, the garden..."
"You've read up on me?" Maddie’s eyes twinkled as they met his. He smiled and nodded.

"You understand how important community is, the sense of empowerment and ownership that comes with such projects, the confidence it builds, the accomplishment that comes with it. The pride."

"I do," she agreed.

"I would like to do that in London, with the young adults the Trust works with. I would like to establish Urban Gardens in the city; teach about agriculture, conservation, production, community building; things of that nature."

"Wow," Maddie breathed; impressed. "That sounds like a wonderful project."

"Well I am very happy you think so," he met her eyes. "Because I want you to spearhead it."

"I..." Maddie blinked; stunned. "I'm sorry. What?"

"Madeline, I want you to come aboard at The Prince’s Trust. I want you to direct this new program."

"I don't know what to say. I..." Her eyes were wide as she laughed. "You know I wasn't the lead on those projects in Bendal. I participated and worked with the children and..."

"You just said the magic words," he cut in, patting her hand. "I don't expect you to stay on and run it on a day to day basis with all of your other duties. You would hire a staff, a director, work with the city developers, lend your name to the project and oversee the vision." He took a deep breath and looked out at the land. "This is an important project to me and I cannot think of anyone with whom I would trust the creation and development of such a thing more than I would trust you."

"Charles..." Maddie felt her throat grow tight as he watched her process it all. "I am so unbelievably flattered that you would think that I could..."

"I know that you could," he cut in with a warm smile, a gentle hand to her shoulder. "You did it in Bendal. You have the leadership capabilities, you have the drive it takes, the vision. And you have a love and respect for this kind of work, for the populations The Trust works with...which is of paramount importance." His smile twitched just a bit as he took a breath. "And...And I was thinking we could call it The Delphinium Project."

And Maddie's eyes welled with tears.

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"So..." Harry’s voice was low as they stepped out of the house and into the night air.

"So?" Maddie smiled as she pulled on her helmet. They had enjoyed a long, conversation filled dinner with Charles and Camilla and now that the two of them had retired for after-dinner drinks, Harry and she were taking the motorcycle into town for their own.

"So are you going to tell me what you and dad talked about out there that's had him smiling like a hyena all night or..."
"I will," she nodded, blinking at the emotions that came with that discussion. "Can we ride for a bit first? I'm ready for some fresh air."

"Sure," Harry nodded, tugging his own helmet on over his head before he stepped onto the bike. He was curious. But it could wait.

"Thank you," she smiled, taking his hand and slipping onto the back of the bike behind him. His hand smoothed over her leg, making sure she was ready and then they were off; zooming down the main drive and out onto the roads. Though there was a trail car behind them with their security detail, they stayed a good distance away and Maddie loved the way it felt to be as free and alone as either of them could hope to feel in such a situation.

Wrapping her arms around his waist, she held tight and let the wind whip around her. Though they were headed into Tetbury for a drink at the bar he had taken her to on their first "official" date, Harry could sense she needed a bit more processing time and took the long way into town. By the time they arrived, Maddie felt renewed and ready to talk.

As was usual for this location, they went relatively unnoticed, slipping into the bar searching and finding a booth somewhat off to the side. They ordered drinks and sank into the well-worn leather. It took nearly no time for the drinks to arrive and, after a few long sips, Maddie sat her drink on the table and smiled up at her husband.

"Your father asked me to spearhead an urban garden initiative in London through The Prince's Trust." She smiled wide, her heart warm. Harry's face brightened at the thought, at his father's trust in Maddie, at the way she was warm on the idea. "Building community gardens and developing educational components around agriculture, conservation, esteem. He wants me to be creative director, to get it off the ground and then be the chief patron."

"Really?" His eyes were intent on her, seeing nothing but excitement and happiness as she let him in.

"He wants to call it The Delphinium Project." This time she laughed away the lump in her throat, smiled away the tears in her eyes.

"Maddie..." He went soft.

"Your father is amazing," she took another drink. "He is absolutely amazing."

"And he clearly thinks very highly of you," he took her hand in his. "So? Are you going to do it?"

"Absolutely." Maddie nodded; certain. "We already phoned Thomas to set up a visit with the trust; a walk through with your father and some meetings with the administrators." Maddie took a deep breath, squeezed his hand and relaxed back into the seat.

"Look at you," he nodded a smirk in her direction. "One month in and you have your very own project." Hi lifted his glass to her. "Well done Duchess."

"Ha!" She laughed, but clinked her glass to his. Her voice was soft, whispery as she repeated the name again, excitement in her eyes. "The Delphinium Project."
Chapter 112

If the first month of Maddie's marriage was designed to challenge her in her new public role, the second month was meant to press her personally. The next month was full of emotion for her; great sadness and good-byes, beautiful beginnings. She felt blessed to have so much, thankful to be surrounded by the people she had in her life.

And as she waited on their front stoop for Harry return from a week long training, she could feel the bliss pumping through her veins. Her hands were clasped in front of her, her arms resting on her knees as her feet bounced excitedly. And when his car finally pulled up, Harry stepped out with a confused grin already on his face.

"Are you locked out?" He called to her as he made his way up the walk.

"Nope," she grinned wide, jumping to her feet.

"Just couldn't wait to see me?"

"You got it," she kissed him warm and firm before waving for the driver to leave his bag in the trunk. "How was training?"

"Long and hot," he groaned, glancing around. "Any chance we can go inside? Have a drink?"

"No," she shook her head.

"No?" He laughed.

"No." She held out her hand. "Come with me."

"Mighty bossy today," he chuckled but took hold of her hand and followed.

"Mmm Hmm." She nodded, clasping his hand between hers with a great big grin. "It's good to have you home but there's something I want to show you."

"Oh?" He leaned in closer, kissing her lips. "Are you cashing in a rain check on that car sex from last week?"

"No," she laughed. "But I'll store that idea for later."

"Then what?" He glanced around the grounds, looking for a clue.

"Then..." Maddie slowed to a stop and turned his body in a specific direction. "That." Harry looked in the direction she was pointing, his eyes scanning out for a brief moment before snapping into focus. His head turned to look at her.

"The house?"

"The house." She nodded. She took a step forward, turning around to face him and reaching out her hands. His drifted into hers as his mind processed and she began to walk backwards towards it. "The house we're going to sleep in tonight."
"Wait," he pulled her to a stop. "What?"

"You heard me."

"But...they told me it was another month out."

"They lied."

"They lied?" His eyes went huge.

"Well, I asked them to," she smiled, tugging him forward. "I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Well it most definitely is a surprise." Harry was shocked, amazed, that she—and the renovation crew—had been able to keep such a secret from him. "Madeline..."

"Welcome home baby..." They came to a stop just outside. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Mind?! No," he laughed, pulling her into his arms. "I don't mind." He tipped his lips to hers.

"Want to go inside? Have a drink?"

"Yes. Absolutely yes," he nodded his head as she stepped away. But before she could open the door, he pulled her back to him. "Hold on." He smiled that wiry smile of his and bent down, scooping her up into his arms; her laughter ringing out into the air.

"Another threshold?" She wrapped her arm around his neck.

"The very last one," he tightened his hold on her and, with a turn of the knob, they were moving through door.

Harry sat her back on her feet there in the foyer—the foyer she had stood in months and months ago, debating colors and textures and now...now it was finished. And together they took it in, they looked it over. From that very moment, they were greeted with the work, effort, and love that had gone into the renovations. Harry took a deep, slow breath as he looked around.

"Wow..." Maddie grinned; amazed at the outcome.

"Want to see the rest?" Harry nudged her lightly and she nodded eagerly. Maddie's hand drifted into his as they began to move through their new home.

And it was all there. Everything.

The painting of Bendal.

The bright pink Kitchen Aid mixer

The vases with the marbles.

Everything from their previous lives, from their time together had been moved and placed, thoughtfully, in their new home.

It felt enormous to her. Even though she had been living in a Palace for months, this place felt enormous. The rooms were huge and there were so many of them. But as they traveled from room
to room, it wasn't overwhelming. It felt warm and cozy and...like home.

Harry grew more and more silent as they moved. He took in the colors, the fabrics, the placement of furniture and paintings and...and he really noticed the little things; the small touches that he missed whenever he would glance at the plans, inquire about the progress. The things that didn't show up in the blueprints, the things that were solely Maddie's doing.

Like the photos.

He, his brother, and his mother at the piano.

He and his mother on the lawn.

He in the playroom.

At first he thought nothing of it. When he found the one in the third room he thought it was an amazing coincidence. But by room five, when he started to really pay attention, it hit him. There were photos, in every room, of him and his mother, his brother; from their time together in this place.

It wasn't obvious or brash. It was subtle and sweet and it drew him to wordlessness.

"There's..." His voice cracked with emotion. "There's so much of her here." Maddie caught him staring at the photo she had put in the kitchen.

"I tried to find photos of you in the room you know? You in the kitchen for the kitchen..." She moved next to him, looking at the photo in his hands. "Some rooms were more difficult to match but it worked out for the most part..." Her words fell from her lips as he kissed her; soft and sweet and touchingly light.

"Thank you," he kissed her again. "I mean it. Thank you for doing that."

"Of course," she smiled, warm in the knowledge that there were even more strewn throughout the house; some he wouldn't find until further inspection. "This place holds a lot for you; the past, the future...I wouldn't have been able to toss it all out and start over. It wouldn't have felt right."

"You know..." Harry's voice was low as he returned the frame to its home. "You know I signed off on the first set of plans you put before me without really looking at them."

"I do know that..." She nodded, allowing him to pull her from the kitchen back towards the entryway and the main stairs.

"But," he chuckled. "I started to pay attention after that; sneaking over, glancing at your plans and Maddie..." He drew to a stop at the bottom of the stairs. "You kept so much history here..." He took a breath and smiled wide.

"History is important..." She met his eyes. His hand wrapped around hers tightly as they moved up the stairs, passing framed photos of the families; his and hers—theirs.

And it wasn't all history. It wasn't all memories. There were new elements too.

The enormous tub that Maddie had carefully selected.
The remote controlled sound system spread throughout the house; camouflaged into the décor.

The top of the line kitchen.

The framed photo Harry had given her of their wedding day. The one that still brought Maddie to happy tears.

And then there was the library.

"My library..." Her eyes were wide, her voice but a ghost. Yes, she had planned for it. Yes, she had signed off on it. But seeing it, standing in the middle of it—an entirely different set of feelings washed over her. "I've always wanted a library."

"I know," Harry chuckled lightly; crossing his arms and leaning back against a tall table that sat along the wall. "You told me that. On our first trip to Highgrove, you told me you had always wanted a library."

"I did," she smiled at the memory. "I did tell you that..." She moved to stand before him, her hands resting on his crossed arms, her eyes smiling at the ring on his finger; her heart warming. "Welcome home Captain."

"Welcome home, love."

"Hmmm..." She sighed. "I love that. I love you." Leaning in, she kissed his lips.

"What you've done here...how it all came together...It's perfect." He nodded to her with a smile. "Are you happy?"

"I'm happy." She grinned; cuddling closer, working her hands into his crossed arms; forcing them apart so she could step into them. "So...tell me...after a week of training and travel home...are you up for christening our new place? There are a lot of rooms and we're going to be very busy but we should get started..." Maddie's lips met his again; parted and warm and beckoning. Harry's train of thought wavered as he kissed her back, his arms moving around her. "Ella's Farewell party is tomorrow night..." She spoke against his lips. "And the premier is the next night..." Harry's arms tightened around her. "And we need to..."

"Shhh." He grinned, his eyes narrowing playfully. "Do you want to go over our weekly agenda or do you want to christen this place?"

"I wanna christen this place." Her eyes danced with excitement as his mouth moved over hers.

And, as he pushed away from the table he had been leaning against, as he moved her backwards—his hand slipping easily up under her shirt, they found one of the large, comfortable couches Maddie had selected for this room, as he pulled her down with him—a fit of laughter and a wealth of love.

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When Maddie emerged from her closet, dressed and primped and ready for their night out with Ella and their friends, Harry's eyes flashed wide and he let out a low whistle.

"Was that meant for me?" She laughed as she breezed past him.

"Absolutely..." Harry rose from his chair, following behind her towards the bathroom. "I am sorry
and...I know how much of a cad it makes me to say this but...Madeline...your ass looks..."

"Good?" She lifted her eyebrows with a confident smirk.

"Phenomenal." His eyes drifted away from hers with an appreciative grin.

"Yeah?"

"God yes." He shook his head and pulled his eyes to meet hers as she spun around to face him. "I love those shorts.

"You want to take them off of me, don't you." She wasn't asking as she stepped closer; pressing her chest to his as she smiled up at him.

"Yes." He nodded enthusiastically. "And..."

"And you want to leave them on," she giggled.

"It's a thin line I walk." He was smug and completely turned on; his arms wrapping around her.

"I feel the same way about you in..." Her mind drifted as he pulled her tight.

"The uniform?" His voice was low and rough.

"Mmmm." She nodded, her body tingling at the images, at the thoughts. "God yes." She leaned in and then, snapping back to the moment, she pulled away; controlling herself. "Okay. We can't do this now. I have one last thing to do and then I'll be ready to go."

"That's fine," he shrugged, holding his hands up in surrender. "But I am going to unashamedly watch you walk away."

"Knock yourself out Captain." She offered a cute wink and turned from him; leaving him groaning as she strutted out of the room.

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Ella had booked a private room at a great club in the city complete with food and drinks and dancing and some great conversations with favored coworkers and the friends she had made while in England. Maddie and Harry were in top form, shaking hands of those they hadn't met, exhibiting grace and humility when people were stunned by their presence—having been unaware of Ella's association with the couple until they saw her appear in the wedding procession. They hugged Ella, said hello to the room and when they made their way to the table already occupied by Kiki and Sean and a mildly drunk Bishop, they settled in for a night of fun and good-byes. About an hour into the night, Bishop turned his bright smile across the table and leaned forward.

"Your Royal Highness..." He drawled.

"Which one are you talking to?" Harry chuckled at his best friend; tipsy Bishop was always great fun.

"The more attractive of the two."

"Well that's you sunshine," Maddie nudged Harry and took a drink from her glass as the two men
laughed.

"No way was he talking about me," Harry shook his head.

"Not a chance," Bishop agreed.

"What can I do for you Bishop?" Maddie was happy. Though her best friend was leaving, though she knew that as soon as Ella finished making the rounds with her co-workers and settled in with her, the tears would come—she was having an enjoyable night.

"Dance with me Duchess." He held his hand out, his eyes sparkling. Maddie glanced to Harry who shrugged with a smile and held her hand out to take Bishop’s. As he pulled her towards the dance floor, Maddie tossed Harry a wide grin when she caught him watching her walk away from him.

And he did. He watched her until they reached the dance floor, until Bishop's ass blocked his view, and then he turned back to the table, reaching for his drink. It was then that Ella stepped up to their table, her eyes smiling at Maddie and Bishop as she lowered herself into the chair across from him.

"Ella," Harry grinned up at her.

"Harry," she smiled, her eyes shifting away from her best friend and the man she loved.

"How are you doing love?"

"Okay," she took a breath. "I'm really hoping not to cry tonight."

"Yeah?" He chuckled. "Is that why you haven't been to this table yet?"

"Yes," she admitted, appreciating his honesty, his upfront nature.

"Well good luck with that endeavor." He held a fresh bottle of beer out to her which she took and clinked to his before they both took sips.

"Listen..." Ella seemed a little shy as she sorted out the thoughts in her head. "This is going to sound crazy..."

"It's okay," Harry shrugged. "Go for it."

"Look after her for me?" Her smile wavered, her eyes tearing up as she met his. "I mean...really look after her for me. I know that you love her and I know that she's your wife but..." She took a shaky breath. "I loved her first and she's...she's the only family I have."

"I know." He did. He knew very well how much these two women loved each other.

"And..." Ella took a deep breath and leveled her eyes to his. "If it's ever you...that hurts her...I don't care who you are or what your title is, I will be across the Atlantic and I will come for you."

"I know that," Harry nodded; all jokes falling away as he grew very serious. His hand reached out to take hers. Ella sniffed and squeezed his hand.

"Sorry. I just had to..."
"I know," he cut in with a slight smile. "You want to make sure somebody is watching out for her. And I will. I promise."

"I know..." She sighed, blinking at her tears as her hand squeezed his again. "And him too."

"And him too," Harry agreed.

"I'm never going to make it through tonight, am I?" She wiped at her eyes with a chuckle.

"Without crying? No." Harry smiled then. "But you will make it through tonight."

"If you say so," she grinned at him and took a deep breath. "So really though...you're okay with the way Bishop's dancing with your wife?"

"Ha!" He glanced in that direction with a twisted smile. "I'm okay with what she's okay with."

"Sure you are," Ella knew better as she took a long drink from her bottle. "What do you say we go out there and split them up?"

"I'm in." He slapped a hand against the table and stood. They made their way to the dance floor where Maddie and Bishop were both happy to see them. Ella moved to her best friend, not losing the beat as she wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug. Harry looked to Bishop and shook his head; his voice raising as he spoke to Ella. "This is not at all what I had in mind when you said split them up."

"Aw come on..." Bishop smiled wide, opening up his arms. "Let's do this Wales."

And of course, Harry stepped in.

And of course, there was great laughter.

And of course, Maddie and Ella's tears were halted for the moment as they turned to the two men; ready to party.

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"This has been..." Ella tried to stifle a yawn as she smiled at her best friend; having finally gathered the strength to let it all settle over her. "The most wonderful going-away party a girl could ask for." It was late, shockingly late, and they had been at the club for hours. Though Ella's coworkers had long since bid her goodnight, her friends remained, drinking and dancing and telling tales about the other that made the entire group rumble with laughter.

"I'm glad you liked it," Maddie's head tipped to the side, resting on Ella's shoulder.

"I loved it," Ella's head did the same, resting on top of Maddie's. They sat that way for a long beat; their arms linked and twisted, hands clasped as they hugged the other close.

"It's almost over, isn't it." Maddie didn't ask. She knew.

"Yes," Ella nodded.

"I'm going to miss you," Maddie sighed, trying to control her alcohol assisted tears. "I'm going to
miss you so much."

"Me too," Ella didn't even move her hand to wipe at the tears in her eyes.

"I...it's just that you're the only thing in London that was just mine. You're my only tie to reality."

"I am not." She laughed lightly.

"You are. You are." Maddie was certain. In that moment, she was certain.

"What about Harry?" Ella nodded to Maddie's husband, sitting across from them with an amused smirk in place.

"Harry's a Duke," Maddie pointed out with a slight irritation that only succeeded in making Harry want to take her home to bed.

"You're a Duchess," Ella pointed out with a giggle.

"I am!" She exclaimed. "And I need somebody around who can ground me...even when people curtsey to me and call me Her Royal Highness."

"Well, you have Bishop." Ella winked at the man who sat to Harry's left; just as amused.

"Bishop?!" Maddie sat up straight, her face scrunching up. "No. Not Bishop." She shook her head, despite the laughter that moved around the table. "I'm sorry. I love Bishop...I love you..." She smiled at him, her hand reaching to slap his cheek lightly before she turned back to her best friend. "But he...last weekend he was building a time machine...Ella. He can't be my tie to reality."

Every single one of them laughed at that.

"Excellent point," Ella sighed. "You want me to stay here for you?" Though she knew the answer, she had to pose the question. Maddie was quick to shake her head.

"No." She smiled, leaning into her friend. "No of course not. I know you have to go. That doesn't mean I'm not going to pout about it." She stuck her lip out playfully.

"Fair enough," Ella smiled, turning to kiss the side of Maddie's head. "But you know...we'll see each other when you're in the states in a little over a month. I'll be back in September for a visit. We can cuddle and drink wine and it will be just like this..."

"Yeah?" Maddie sighed.

"Well except maybe we'll be in more comfortable clothes," she giggled slightly.

"And we can sit on a couch instead of these chairs?" Maddie laughed.

"Absolutely." Ella nodded. A quietness fell over them; loomed in the air like the reminder that this was it. It was time to go home, time to part ways.

"Well..." Bishop cut into the silence. "You can make fun all you want. But when that time machine comes together, you'll be wishing you could go back with me and I don't know...invent the iphone."

"The iphone?" Maddie laughed; Harry and Ella already chuckling around her.
"You'll see." Bishop eyed her pointedly. "I'll be huge. You'll all be fawning all over me, wanting to be me, wanting to be with me."

"Well I want that already," Harry winked with a laugh.

"He does," Maddie nodded, leaning forward, her hand moving to Ella's knee. "He talks about it almost every day."

"It's true," Harry met her eyes and shared a smile with his wife. "My darling..." His voice was tender and Maddie knew what it meant.

"You're about to tell me it's time to go, aren't you?"

"No," he shook his head. "But they are going to kick us out. But we can go wherever you want..."

"Actually," Ella spoke up; her voice soft as she reached for Maddie's hand. "I'm going to tell you it's time to go." She met her best friend's eyes. "It's time for sleep Madeline. I'll see you in the morning. We can cry on the way to the airport."

"Yeah?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, tears rushing forward.

"Yeah," Ella nodded, sniffing and blinking and forcing her smile. "Come on Sussex," she rose to her feet, tugging Maddie's hand with her. "Let's get these boys home, to bed."

"Oh?" Bishop's entire face smiled as he looked up to her. "Did I just hear boys?"

"You did," Ella smiled down at him; her features softening in a way that was usually reserved for their most private of moments. "But only if you're up for it." Her eyes were dark with tears, her heart hopeful and slightly nervous.

"You know..." His voice cracked just slightly as he reached out to take her hand in his. And suddenly, Maddie felt like she was eavesdropping. He took a deep breath and turned to Maddie and Harry. "You heard what she said...let's get these boys home. To a bed."

The drive to Ella's place the next morning was clouded with sadness. Maddie's sunglasses were in place, despite the overcast day. Harry held her hand in his; calm, quiet and supportive. And, when they arrived, neither of them were surprised to see Bishop emerge with her; rumpled suit and all. Though Ella held tight to Bishop's hand as they made their way to the car, the moment she slipped in, she dropped it in favor of Maddie's.

There wasn't much said on that drive to the airport. There wasn't much to say. It had all been said before. Though there would be distance between them, nothing was going to shift their sisterhood. They made quiet reaffirmations that they would keep in excellent touch with the other; texts, emails, plenty of phone calls. Maddie reminded Ella to be careful in New York and Ella reminded Maddie to not even think about climbing in any sort of time machine Bishop may concoct. Maddie gave her a list of her favorite places in the city from her college days and Ella gave Maddie a card that she was to open later—one that would only bring on more tears.

And then they were there. Walking through the airport unnoticed was a luxury that Maddie and
Harry weren't usually able to entertain. But with the assistance of ball caps and sunglasses, they were able to get all the way to the security check point with relatively little commotion.

There were hugs and kisses, whispers of promises to call, words of love. And then, with one shaky breath in, Ella let her fingers slip from Maddie's and with a warm look to the group, she turned away from them. For her own sanity, she refused to look back; knowing it might change her mind.

And the three of them stood there; Harry, Maddie, and Bishop; and watched her until she stepped out of their line of site. And they stood there for a minute or so, staring out into the airport, managing tears, letting sobs fade out. Harry was the first to speak, his hand falling on Maddie's shoulder as he stood tall behind her.

"You okay?" He asked; voice low and full of concern.

"Yeah." Bishop sighed; tossing a smile back to his best friend. "I think I'm going to be." Bishop's eyes caught Harry's then, who nodded to Maddie who was still wiping at her eyes, taking deep breaths. "Ahhh..." He understood. Harry wasn't talking to him. "Come on love," Bishop wrapped his arm around her. "Let's get you out of this airport."

"Okay," she nodded, allowing Bishop to turn her around; away from the terminal. Harry's hand reached out to take hers as the three of them began to walk back towards the waiting car. Bishop, his arm still around her shoulders, pressed a kiss to her head.

"I'll be your Ella." He squeezed her shoulder. "I'll come over. We'll drink wine, we'll talk about how cute Harry is...I'll braid your hair."

"What?" Maddie couldn't control the laughter that burst through her lips. "In your mind are Ella and I teenagers at a sleepover?"

"Sometimes," he admitted with a smirk and a shrug. "Sometimes you are." And Bishop was rewarded with what he had desired; laughter all around.

This was going to be hard, for all of them in their own way. But, as they made their way further and further from the airport, the clarity that comes with distance and understanding washed over them. Ella was doing what she needed to do for her. And at least they had each other; Maddie and Bishop...and even Harry.

When Ella called them later that night, after arriving and settling into her apartment, they were all still together; enjoying a bottle of champagne, toasting her and her new adventure.
"Come on..." Harry's grip on her fingers tightened in his attempt to pull her from her chair. "Come with me."

"No," she shook her head, her other hand holding tight to the plush fabric of the chair. "Not a chance."

"You know you want to." He leaned over, snuggling into the crook of her neck.

"I know I don't." She giggled lightly, pushing at him just enough so as not to move him. She loved him in the morning, before his shower; stubbly and scruffy and warm.

"You're going to have to eventually," he eyed her, allowing his hold on her to falter as he reached for his running shoes; falling into the chair next to her to put them on.

"Eventually," she made a sour face, pulling her limbs back into her oversized chair; tucking into herself. "When the trainer comes...But not today."

"So...you'll run for the trainer, but not for me...your husband." His eyebrow arched jokingly; enjoying the light ribbing he could hand her, the way she played with him while she sipped her coffee. This was the best part...when people asked him what his favorite thing about being married was, this was it. The back and forth between them, the stuff that happened long before they were presentable, the gentle way they knew each other.

"Oh baby..." She sighed, moving towards him. Still wrapped in her blanket, she deposited herself in his lap, smiling down at his face as her fingers played with his ears. "Don't be that way..." She tapped his nose with her finger as his hands moved around her; abandoning his shoes in order to wrap around her waist. "When I married you, I took on all that you were...a Prince, a soldier, a playboy..." They both chuckled at that. "And you...you took on all that I am."

"Oh yeah?" He smiled up at her, his fingers stretching out over her thighs. "And what's that?"

"Not a runner." With a cheeky grin, she leaned to kiss him. "Now you go. Run. I'm going to go soak in a hot tub and have some tea. We have the premier tonight, remember?"

"James Bond?" Harry laughed as she slipped from his lap and he bent to grab his shoes. "Yes. I remember."

Immediately following the premiere of the film, Maddie and Harry were whisked away, along with their group of friends, to the after party. Maddie was amused to find the photographers still waiting outside, not content with the photo they had of the Duke and Duchess holding hands and laughing together from earlier that night—they always wanted more.

After ordering a round of drinks at the bar, the group moved towards their designated booth to the back; laughing lightly as they recapped the movie.

"So..." Bishop asked as they slid into the booth. "Did you like the film, Madeline?"
"I did," Maddie sighed, leaning back against the seat as Harry slid in next to her. "I really did."

"She liked Daniel Craig," Harry rolled his eyes; stuck somewhere between amusement and jealousy as he handed a drink to his wife.

"I did," Maddie giggled slightly, her eyes turning playful on him. "I really did."

"Okay," Harry shook his head. Jack and Eugenie slid in next to Bishop as Sean and Kiki pulled up a few chairs to round the table out.

"We're going to grab some drinks, you two good?" Kiki waved her hand to the two of them.

"We're good," Maddie smiled up at her. "Thank you." And then, Maddie's voice dipped low as she turned to Harry, her finger running up his arm. "Is somebody a little jealous?"

"Please," he huffed, trying to reign it all in.

"Of James Bond?" She inched closer, her face turning into his neck; drawing him into their own conversation.

"Psh..." He huffed, lifting his glass to his lips for a sip; his eyes sliding to the side to meet hers. A moment passed between them, silence and sass tossing back and forth. Maddie smiled, content, and let her hand travel to his thigh. Harry finished a few swallows of his drink before he sat it on the table and spoke to her, soft but strong. "You know. I could be James Bond."

Maddie turned a wide, bright smile to her husband. "Sure you could baby." Her voice kept low, her smirk just for him.

"I could," His eyes narrowed at her though his lips stayed smiling, his hand traveling to her knee; slightly exposed as her skirt inched higher. "I DO serve Her Majesty The Queen."

"You do," Maddie nodded, choosing not to remind him that she was his grandmother.

"And I can wear a suit," he waved his hand.

"You're sure wearing that suit now," she looked him over appreciatively, knowing she was laying it on thick—and not caring in the least.

"I am," He nodded.

"You just need a license to kill."

"I'm a Captain with the Blues and Royals, a wartime Apache Pilot. Baby, I got a license to kill."

"What about the fancy car?"

"Please." He laughed, lifting the glass to his lips again. "My father..."

"Then that would make your father James Bond," Maddie loved messing with him.

"Hey, hey," Bishop spoke up, turning his attention back to them as he slid closer to Maddie. "Tell me, what are you two yacking about over here?"
"Well..." Maddie turned her bright smile to Bishop, squeezing Harry's thigh in her hand. "I was just telling Harry that I think I would make an excellent Bond girl."

"Oh ho..." Bishop exhaled, shaking his head with a wide grin. "In interest of self-preservation, I am going to decline all comment on that one."

"Smart man," Harry met his eyes over his glass with a smug grin.

"I would," Maddie's voice was low, her hand slipping higher on his thigh. "I would make an excellent Bond girl."

"Yes you would," he agreed wholeheartedly, his thumb circling on her knee as he leaned in to kiss her cheek. The conversation and the party around them moved forward into the night.

"I have a question for you..." Harry's voice was rough, hot against Maddie's neck, as they pushed into their place. It was late, they were tipsy, and the back and forth she had drawn him into had done nothing but rile him up.

"Yes?" Maddie gasped, the door shutting behind them with a slam. She turned around to face him and he was right there, dropping keys to the floor as his arms moved around her.

"You have a killer body..." His hands ran over her waist; stepping closer.

"Yeah?" She giggled, taking a shaky step backwards as he moved forward.

"Yes," he nodded; eyes wide and certain. "Yes. Your body is..." He shook his head, his hands running down her back to her backside. "And your ass is..." Maddie giggled as his hands tugged her forward, pressing her into him. She got a kick out of him like this. He had always adored her; her mind and her body; but in these moments, when his hormones got the best of him, sending his body colliding into hers—she loved the high that came with it.

"You said you had a question for me?" She wrapped her arms around his neck, loving the way his hands felt on her body.

"I do..." He nodded, moving her back against the wall, leaning his weight into her. Maddie inhaled at the contact, her smile growing hazy when she felt how hard he was, how ready.

"Well?" She pulled her bottom lip into her teeth, her fingers working up and over the collar to his suit coat, pushing it from his broad shoulders.

"How..." His hands moved down her legs, just the tiniest bit rough as he pulled at her skirt; jerking it higher. "How did you get this ass..." His hands moved higher. "When you flat out refuse to run?"

"Hmm..." Maddie giggled. "Good genes, I guess."

"Oh?" His hand slid up her leg, along the silkiness of her stockings and he about keeled over when he reached the lacy top of her thigh highs and the garter belt she wore to keep them in place. His skin met her skin under her skirt and they both let out the tiniest of moans.

"Fuck..." He exhaled.
"Please..." Maddie looked up to him through lowered lashes, her chest pressed flush against his. Her hands moved to his waist, tugging him closer; her hips adjusting to make room for him.

Harry's face tipped to hers, his lips brushing against hers; softly at first. His hands were smooth over her skin as he kissed her once, twice, and on the third time, his want set in. His hands became greedy, his lips pushed hers open, tongues tangling instantly.

"Harry..." Her voice was hoarse as she pushed against him, just as worked up as he was. Maybe it was the movie, the sex infused, adrenaline laced film. Maybe it was the drinks that had been passed around the group all night. Maybe it was the way he really did wear that suit...Maddie didn't know. But she wanted him. She wanted him like she used to want him when they first started; like there was nothing else she wanted on her body more than Harry's hands.

"Mmm..." He moaned into her neck, his mouth sucking at the sensitive skin there. While one hand stayed at her back, pressing her to him, the other moved down her thigh, hiking her knee up and around his hip. Maddie gasped as he moved closer, her hands moving to the top of his pants; ready to step this play up a notch.

Maddie pushed at the blue fabric of his pants, her hands moving instantly to his boxers; slipping inside to take him in her hand. The groan that pushed from his lungs only spurred Maddie on, her lips pulling into a smug grin.

Harry, not one to be outdone, moved his hands up and under her skirt, tugging at the small slip of panties that were there. With a little help from her, he slid them from one leg and let them fall to the bottom of the other. His fingers slid against her core, slick and warm and ready for him.

"Harry..." She sounded a tad frustrated as he teased at her.

"Mmm?" He grinned, his fingers pushing further.

"I would give anything if you would just..." She arched her hips against him, encouraging further action.

"Anything?" He arched his eyebrows, barely hanging onto his control as it was. His thumb circled her as he moved closer, his lips tickling her neck. "Come running with me tomorrow?"

"Fuck!" She groaned, her fists hitting against his shoulders as a wicked laugh escaped her pressed lips. "You and the running!"

"Come on..." He encouraged with his voice and a stroke of his finger. Her eyes met his in a tension filled stand off before she let out a long breath and surrendered.

"Fine!" His fingers moved to her hips, holding her steady as he grinned wildly with victory and moved to enter her. "Oh!" Maddie's head dipped back against the wall, her fingers clutching at his arms as he did.

Maddie had the small presence of mind, somewhere inside of her, to take note of the moment; to be happily perplexed at their predicament. Logic did not dictate that they should be more into each other once they were married, more in love, more lustful. Logic did not dictate that she should want him more after he was hers. But there they were, taking each other in the foyer...not having it in them to wait the short trip up the stairs to their bedroom. There they were, loving the other with all they had—after a night out with friends and rounds of drinks.
More in love. More lustful. Though she had a small presence of mind to note it, she didn't let it pull her from this; this moment with her husband.

"Ugh..." Maddie groaned as she stepped into the dining room the next morning. The night out had caught up with her, just as the reality of her late night surrender hit her.

"Good Morning," Harry smiled up at her from his spot, drinking coffee, flipping through the paper. "Ready for your run?"

"I cannot believe I agreed to this," she narrowed her eyes as she dipped to kiss him.

"Well, I was pretty convincing," he held her to him for another kiss before releasing her.

"You were," she grinned, nudging his nose with hers. "I'm going to put on my shoes..."

"Your running shoes," he chuckled.

"So we can go running," she eyed him as she slipped from the room, intent on maintaining her grumpy mood for just a beat longer. She could hear Harry laugh as she moved away from him, headed for the front door for her shoes.

In about five minutes, Harry was joining her, already dressed and ready to run as he watched her; humor in his eyes.

"Madeline..." He stopped in the doorway, leaning up against it, the newspaper still in his hand.

"Yes, oh husband of mine?" Maddie looked up at him from her seat; finishing up with her shoes.

"There's a quote from you in the Daily Mirror..."

"Since when do we read the Daily Mirror?" She chuckled, glancing at the paper in his hand. He shrugged and kept his eyes on her. "So there's a quote? Is it about how smart and sexy I think you are?"

"Ha!" He rolled his eyes, pushing away from the doorway. "No." He pulled the paper forward, scanning it over. "Did you tell somebody at the premier last night that you have always wanted to meet James Bond?"

"What?" Maddie laughed, rising to her feet to begin stretching. "I don't know. I may have said that to somebody in passing but..."

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "James Bond wants to meet you."

"What?!" Her eyes flashed wide as she spun around to him.

"Ahem," he cleared his throat and read from the paper. "When told of the Duchess's lifelong dream of...lifelong, really Maddie?" He eyed her and continued. "When told of the Duchess's lifelong dream of meeting James Bond, Mr. Craig commented, 'I would be honored to meet the Duchess; anytime, anyplace.'"
"Oh my GOD!" Maddie clapped her hands together, moving to look at the paper in his hands. "Did you say that to somebody?" Harry was amused at her excitement.

"James Bond wants to meet me?!" She pulled the paper from his hands. "Daniel Craig wants to meet you," he corrected, watching as she walked away from him. "Same thing!" She called after him, stepping out the door.

"Yeah..." Harry shook his head, following after her. "Wonderful."

"Come on Harry..." She moved down the walk, her sunglasses in place, as their security detail stepped out to join them. "Let me meet James Bond."

"You know he's just an actor," Harry rolled his eyes. "He's not actually James..."

"Shush." Her fingers covered his mouth. "Don't you ruin this for me. Let me meet him? Please?"

"It's totally up to you love," he pulled her fingers from his mouth and kissed her. "If you want to meet him, have Thomas set it up." He kissed her again and nodded his head towards the ground. "But now...we run." His hand pulled around her waist, tugging her into him. As her lips met his once more, a slight buzzing rang out.

"What's that?" Maddie pulled back from him.

"Phone," Harry's hand slipped from her waist and into his pocket, pulling his phone out to answer. "This is Harry..." He took two steps away from her as he took the call. Smiling after him, Maddie opened up the paper, rereading the alleged comment from Daniel Craig. She knew enough to take anything she read with a grain of salt, but she couldn't help the way her mind wandered just slightly as the thought crossed her mind. And then Harry was back at her side; giddy. "Guess what, love. It's your lucky day. We're not going for a run."

"Oh?" She laughed lightly, her eyes scanning his beaming smile as his hand tugged at hers. "And why is that?"

"Because..." He moved in closer, his voice lowering. "That was my brother."

"Yeah?"

"At this moment he and Kate are on their way to the hospital."

"Oh!" Maddie gasped, her hands moving to her mouth. "You mean..."

"Shhh..." He grinned wide, his head nodding. "Come on. Let's change. We're going to the hospital."

"Oh my God!" Maddie clapped her hands as they began back towards the house.

"Honestly, I don't know if your excitement is more about the baby or about the fact that you don't have to go for a run." His mood was light, joking, as they stepped inside.

"Please," Maddie rolled her eyes, kissing him firmly before she kicked off her shoes. "This is all
about the baby!" She hurried up the first few stairs. "Come on slow poke. Let's change out of these running clothes and get to the hospital...."

"See, when you say things like that..." Harry laughed, following behind her.

"You're going to be an uncle." She stopped in her tracks, turning to meet his eyes. "Uncle Harry."

"Now..." He grew soft, his hands moving to her sides. "When you say things like that..."

"Come on," she reached for his hand. "Let's change. We have a baby to meet."
Chapter 114

Taking little time to change, Harry and Maddie were very soon being shown to a private waiting area where the family was to be escorted. Will and Kate were already there, checking in and settling paperwork. Charles and Camilla were on their way from Clarence and the Middletons were en route.

"We beat the press," Maddie smiled as they situated in the private waiting room; referring to their camera-free entrance.

"Barely," Harry nodded towards the window, noticing a few photographers that were now stationed across the street.

"Well..." She sighed. "At least they made it in before they made it here."

"True," Harry smiled to his wife just as the door to the room opened. "Hey!" Harry's smile widened as his brother stepped in.

"Hey there," Will hugged Harry first, their eyes meeting in excitement before he turned to hug and kiss Maddie. "You two made it here fast."

"Well, it was either hang out here or go for a run and Maddie's avoiding that like the plague," Harry winked at Maddie as she scowled at him.

"Fair enough," Will shrugged. "Do you want to come back? Kate's in the room and nothing's really happening yet." Maddie smiled wide with a bit of a timid nod.

"Is that okay with her?" She asked, not wanting to intrude.

"Of course," Will motioned for them to follow him. "She sent me out to find you." Maddie followed Will through the doors, Harry right behind her with his hand at her waist. It was a short walk from the waiting room to the room where Kate would labor and deliver the newest addition to the family—but Maddie couldn't count the security personnel that lined the hallways on both of her hands.

Will nodded at the protection officer standing just outside the door to Kate's room and the three of them passed by with small smiles.

"There she is," Harry grinned wide at his sister, dressed in a long gown and socks; looking stunning as usual.

"Hi," Kate looked up from her spot on the bed with a beaming smile as she waved them in. "Come in, come in."

"You look beautiful," Maddie leaned to kiss her and Kate squeezed her hand.

"Ugh, thank you," her eyes flashed with a bit of nervousness, a dose of anticipation.

"How are you doing?" Harry leaned to kiss her, hugging her close for a moment.

"Good," she nodded, smiling up at her husband. "We're still pretty early on in it, but your brother
wanted to come over."

"Well you can't be too careful, right?" Harry shrugged, siding with his brother on this one; knowing that were it his wife, they just might have checked in weeks ago.

"Actually..." Kate laughed lightly, letting it go.

"Is there anything we can do for you? Anything you want?" Maddie couldn't help but watch the glow that passed from Kate to Will. "A magazine or a treat or..."

"No," Kate shook her head, her hand moving over her round stomach. "But thank you. That's very sweet." And then Kate moved, her brow furrowing and her hand tensing against her stomach; her breath changing. She reached for Will's ready hand and met his eyes.

Harry took a complete step back as a contraction washed over her. Maddie smiled lightly at the concern that was etched across her husband's face and, quite subconsciously, held her breath until Kate relaxed in the bed.

"Okay..." She exhaled slowly, her hand massaging her stomach. "Okay. How far apart was that?"

"Six minutes," Will answered quickly, his eyes glancing at his watch.

"Okay," she nodded, a small smile pulling at her lips. "Well, we're getting closer."

"Please tell me..." Harry sank into the chair next to Maddie, across from his father, with a crooked grin. "That the two of you aren't talking about work."

"We're not talking about work," Maddie turned a straight face to him before tossing a wink at Charles.

"You're talking about work," he sighed heavily, bringing his hands together in front of him.

"We are," she smiled, her hand reaching out to rub his back. "We've been here for three hours and Kate's still in there. So we're talking about work."

The private waiting room was much fuller than when the two of them arrived. Charles and Camilla, having gone in to see the soon-to-be parents, were now sitting across from Maddie, relaxed and at ease. The Middletons were also there. Though the entire group had cycled into the room to see the expectant parents, as things progressed, they were keeping to the waiting room; with the exception of Carole and Pippa who were in with Will and Kate, presumably keeping her company and assisting as the labor wore on. And the crowd outside was growing by the hour.

"We're talking about Madeline's first visit to The Trust next week," Charles spoke up, his voice low as he smiled to his son. "We have meetings lined up, a bit of an exhibition for you and the cameras. And then the work begins."

"We're launching The Delphinium Project sometime in September," Maddie brought her husband up to speed. "Starting with the layouts, the building so that we're prepared to plant in the spring."

"Yeah?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, his pride overtaking any bit of irritation he might have brought with him. "The launch will be your first solo?"
"Yes," she nodded and smirked. "Does that make you nervous?"

"For you?" He laughed. "No. Not at all. You could do the US tour all on your own and be fine."

"Ha!" Maddie's eyes flashed wide as she laughed. "You're losing your mind."

"A little bit, yes," he pinched his fingers together and took a deep breath; glancing around the room. "I think I'm going to see if they have a deck of cards around here and talk James and Mike into a little action."

"Have fun," Maddie patted his back as he rose to his feet.

"You're going to stay here and do business?"

"I am," she smiled at her father-in-law who watched the two of them with amusement.

"Enjoy," Harry leaned to kiss her cheek and spun towards the male Middletons; his hands clapping together as he went about his mission.

How is she doing?" Maddie smiled sweetly as she took a seat next to Pippa. They were moving into hour six and Pippa had just come back into the waiting room, leaving her mother with Will and Kate. Maddie hadn't really seen Kate's younger sister since her wedding to Harry a little over a month ago, but she found her sweet and soft-spoken.

"She's..." Pippa thought for a moment, her concern for her sister clear on her face. "She's tired. Things are not progressing quite as quickly as they would like."

"Charles did say that Diana was in labor with Will for sixteen hours."

"Wow," Pippa smiled and shook her head. "He was always a stubborn one, no?"

"Exactly," Maddie grinned.

"Anyhow, I think they are going to break her water soon."

"Ah," Maddie nodded, knowing enough from Ella to understand what she was telling her. "Poor thing."

"Yeah," Pippa sighed back into her chair. "But Will's doing great, very helpful. So that's nice."

"Yes," Maddie agreed. "Listen, we're sending out for food, would you like something?"

"Oh thank you!" She brightened at the offer. "A salad would be lovely."

"Great." Maddie smiled and nodded towards the staffer who was taking orders. "Let's get you taken care of."

Not too long after they finished lunch, just after Maddie had taken Harry and James down at their
made up card game, their slow, monotonous day took a sharp turn.

Pippa had come back from Kate's room five minutes earlier with a nurse who explained that they were monitoring both mom and baby and, because of some of the numbers they were getting, they wanted to try to move things along with assistance.

They were prepping to break Kate's water and begin an IV of Pitocin—a drug designed to speed up and intensify contractions. She explained that it was a routine procedure and that they should all be meeting the new member of the family fairly soon. The nurse smiled and returned to the labor suite while Pippa slipped into easy conversation with her father. Harry exhaled as he turned back to the cards, back to Maddie and James. Shuffling the deck in his hands, he adjusted in his seat and began to deal them out.

When the door to the room opened again, Maddie's eyes scanned the cards in her hand quickly before turning to see who it was. And when she saw Carole with wide eyes and a frantic sort of expression, Maddie nudged Harry and nodded towards the door. He turned to look just as Mike rose to his feet.

"What is it?" He made his way to his wife.

"She...They..." She took a deep breath, turning to her husband, taking his hands. "They broke her water and when they did, something happened." The room came to a halt at Carole's words; faces turning, conversations halting.

"What happened?" Pippa moved towards them.

"The umbilical cord, it..." Carole gulped back a breath as she looked from her husband to her daughter and back again. "It moved into the birth canal and..." She was cut off as the nurse, the same from before but with a much more serious expression, stepped into the room, the door closing sharply behind her.

"What on earth is going on?" Charles's voice was heavy as he addressed the nurse, moving to join the other two grandparents in their concern. She was quick to offer a comforting expression and an explanation.

"She has a prolapsed umbilical cord," she looked from Charles to Mike to Carole. "What that means is that, when breaking the water, the umbilical cord slid down into the birth canal before the baby could. This is something that occasionally happens during labor and is not incredibly uncommon." Maddie took a breath and reached for Harry's hand as he stood from his chair.

"However, because any pressure against the umbilical cord would cut off life support to the baby, we are no longer going to be able to delivery him vaginally."

"Oh," Carole gasped slightly, her hand moving to her lips as she took it all in; balancing concern and relief.

"They are prepping her for an emergency Cesarean Section right now. The aim is to get the baby out as quickly as we can so that we don't see a dip in his vitals." Harry's hand squeezed Maddie's. "I'm going to head back there now and I'll be out with any additional information."

And just like that, she was gone; concerned family members of all ranks and files left watching as the door closed behind her.

As the minutes clicked by, the wall clock keeping an ominous tone, the room remained
considerably more tense than it had been before. While Mike kept his eyes trained on the door, Carole paced back and forth in front of him. All Maddie could do in the moment was sit with her family, remain calm, and hold a place for their worry. Though Charles remained cool and collected on the outside, his younger son was not as graceful with his uneasiness. He leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, with his hands clasped together in front of him, occasionally bringing a finger to his mouth to bite at a nail. Maddie's hand ran lovingly up and down his back, trying her best to sooth the tension from him. When her hand ran over his shoulder, he turned his face towards it, catching it in his hand and kissing her palm. He was still with her, even though his thoughts were with his brother and his family. Maddie smiled warmly and looked to Charles and Camilla who sat across from them.

"So..." She spoke to Charles. "What is it you would like to be called?"

"Sorry?" He raised his eyebrows to her.

"Do you want to be called grandpa? Or Papa? Or Papi?"

"Well," he leaned in a bit, his face softening at the thought. "Camilla's grandchildren call me Grandpa Charles." His hand reached for his wife's. "But I've always been quite fond of Papa."

"Papa it is," Maddie's smile warmed and the mood was light for the briefest of moments.

And then the door swung open, drawing all attention forward and Will stepped through, still dressed in scrubs. There was a collective, audible swoosh as the room turned to him, searching for the kind of news he was bringing. Maddie's heart jumped in her throat at the look in his eyes; knowing instantly that his presence was not to bring good news.

There were tears in his eyes and defeat etched across his brow and he seemed lost. The room came alive in commotion. Carole was on her feet, Charles right behind her and Maddie's hand dropped to the seat next to her as Harry moved to his brother in three quick strides.

"What is it?" Harry was the first to speak.

"They kicked me out," Will turned his eyes to his brother, his hand grasping to Harry's arm; a desperate need to lock onto something stable. "Something...I don't know. Something happened and they pushed me out..." Maddie felt tears well in her eyes as she moved closer, her fingers clutching at her throat. She felt Camilla's hand on her arm; comforting, concerned.

The same nurse returned to the room in much the same state as Will; completely solemn as she stepped into the room. She nodded to Charles, to Carole and then turned her body so that she was speaking mostly to Will, but including the rest of the family. With a deep breath, she began to explain Kate's condition.

"During the Cesarean Section the surgeon noticed an inordinate amount of bleeding. He very quickly, and correctly, identified a clotting disorder we know as DIC," she took a breath. "While it is incredibly serious, it was caught immediately and they are now taking steps to counteract it. I'm not going to lie to you, Sir, your wife is in critical condition right now. They may have to perform some procedures in order to save her. I know that the two of you met with the Doctor's before and went over some paperwork..."

"We did," he nodded, his eyes wide as his voice took on a pleading tone. "Please. Do whatever you need to do. I..." His eyes shifted to Kate's mother who was clutching to her father with desperation. She nodded, unable to find words, and Will turned to the nurse. "Do whatever you
"Yes Sir, of course," she nodded. "If you would please, I need you to come with me to sign a few documents and then..." She allowed the tiniest of cracks in her armor. "And then if you would like, I would like to take you back to meet your son."

"My son?" Will's eyes flashed wide and Maddie wanted to cry at the way the emotions kept knocking into the people in the room.

"The baby is..." Carole couldn't finish her sentence, a sob in her throat.

"The baby is fine," the nurse nodded to the room. "He's healthy and happy and the nurses are taking excellent care of him while the surgeons take care of his mother." She turned to Will then, her hand falling to his arm. "There is nothing you can do for your wife right now. We are doing everything that needs to be done. I will keep everyone in this room apprised of their progress and I will find you in the nursery the instant there is any news. You can't help her right now. But what you can do, what you should do is come with me and see your new baby. His mother cannot hold him and comfort him right now, but his father can."

Will nodded, tears building in his eyes, and sniffed. "Okay. Yes. I can do that. I...Carole?" He looked to his mother-in-law who stepped forward to kiss his cheek.

"You go meet your son. I'll stay here and meet him when Kate does." Her voice broke and Maddie saw Kate's brother James turn away from the group.

"Okay," Will wiped at his eyes with his sleeve and turned to Harry, his eyebrows lifting in question. Harry nodded in answer; neither of them able to leave the other until their entire family was safe and out of harm's way.

Maddie watched as Will hugged Mike, as he kissed Carole, as he stepped into his father's arms and then, with a shuddering intake of breath, he followed the nurse from the waiting room. Harry kissed Maddie's cheek, unable to meet her eyes for fear of cracking, and followed behind his brother. He would be at William's side when he heard the news; whatever it was.

Harry didn't say a word to William as they were escorted through the corridors; that wasn't why he came along. William had signed the papers and now they were being led to the nursery. Harry couldn't even begin to find words to meet the gravity of this situation, but then again they had never really needed words in moments such as these. Despite their rivalries—sibling, military, royal—nobody understood one like the other. And right now, in this moment, Harry understood that William needed him there, not necessarily his words.

And that was good, because Harry was at an absolute loss. Every time his mind would get close to wrapping around what was happening, what could potentially happen, it pulled back; seeking protection. He couldn't begin to imagine what was going on in his brother's head and he couldn't keep Maddie's image from popping into his own.

The nurse came to a stop outside two big doors and swiped her card through the reader and for the first time in a long time, Harry noticed the security that walked with them. And he thanked God that they were forced to be covered so much. He couldn't imagine the disaster that might unfold if the press somehow managed to get into this moment. It made his heart clench angrily in his chest just thinking about it.
"Right this way," the nurse smiled sweetly and motioned towards a corner to a small private room. And when they stepped through the door both men stopped in their tracks. "Here he is, Baby Boy Cambridge. Your son."

"My son," Will repeated the words, in absolute awe of the thought, the reality, the tiny little boy that was bundled up in the tiny little bed in front of him. Harry's hand moved to his brother's shoulder, squeezing it tight. The older turned to the younger and for just a moment they were grinning, they were celebrating, they were giving this moment the due gravity, the amplification it deserved.

William was meeting his son.

"Can I just..." He waved towards the sleeping little boy, suddenly completely unsure about his role, about his allowances.

"Yes," she smiled knowingly. He was most certainly not the first father who suddenly didn't know what to do. "He's your son, Sir. You can just pick him up." She waved both men closer and they went, watching the tiniest one as they moved. "Have you held a baby before?"

"Yes," he nodded. Hundreds, he guessed.

"You know, studies have shown that skin to skin contact is really good for them right after birth," she smiled as he moved closer, his fingers reaching down to stroke the baby's cheek. "When we can, we lift the babies straight to mommy's chest but we've found that daddies are starting to get in on it and reaping the benefits."

"I should take off my shirt?" Will's eyebrows lifted, waiting for a snarky comment from his brother that never came.

"I'll pull the curtains on the window," she moved to secure the space, wanting to allow this famous father the same respects, the same moments as all other fathers.

Harry's eyes stayed on the sleeping little boy, his nephew, with instant adoration. Will unbuttoned his shirt, moving to the rocking chair in the corner of the room as the nurse scooped the baby up with expert ease.

"Here we go..." She moved to the chair, pulling the blankets back from the baby, who stirred awake at the cold. And then, with a smile she put one future King into the arms of another. "You should talk to him. He'll recognize your voice," she nodded encouragingly and then stepped away. "I'll just give you some time. If you need anything, I'll be right outside this door."

"Thank you," Will met her eyes with sincerity and a smile. And then she was gone. And his focus shifted entirely. "Hello there," he cooed, amused that his voice altered so naturally; soft and soothing. The baby stretched his arms out, his little fist wrapping around William's long, outstretched finger. And both men melted. William kissed his little round cheeks, the top of his head. "I know it's been a long day but you're here now." Harry pulled up a chair and sat next to his brother, entranced with the baby in his arms; already in love with the little guy.

"He's a tiny little nipper, isn't he?" He grinned wide, leaning closer.

"He is," William nodded. "He looks just like her..." He drifted; his voice, his mind.
"And there was great joy to be had in the Kingdom," Harry joked, pulling Will back to this moment, the moment he could control.

"Yes," he chuckled; snuggling his son closer and inhaling. He rocked him, cuddled him; silently checking toes, counting fingers. "Now this slightly scary man is your Uncle Harry."

"Hello little man," he waved, his fingers wiggling in the air. "I'm not nearly as scary as I look."

"There are all kinds of people waiting to meet you," Will's voice caught in his throat, the day catching up with him; his eyes welled with tears. He was exhausted; emotionally and physically. "Your mum especially..." His voice faded and a heavy silence settled over the room as he gulped at the lump in his throat. "She's had a long day too but she'll be so happy to finally hold you and..." He pulled his eyes from his son, seeking his brother and Harry could see the crack, the break in his resolve. "I don't know what I'll do if..."

"Don't." Harry shook his head once; firm.

"If something happens..."

"Stop." Harry's hand fell on Will's arm, taking the authoritative role usually reserved for the older brother. His eyes narrowed and he commanded. "You can't do this now, here." His eyes shifted to the baby, his lips curling up as he looked to him. "He can hear you. You're his dad."

William nodded, sucking his breath in and blinking a few times. Harry was right; absolutely right. He took a deep breath, gathered himself, and turned his entire focus back to the baby. "I was wrong. Your Uncle Harry really isn't all that scary."

"Thanks," Harry huffed with a grin; relaxing slightly.

"Do you want to hold him?" William offered.

"No," Harry smiled wide, clearly lying. Of course he wanted to hold the baby. "He should bond with his mother before he bonds with me. And he will." His hand squeezed Will's arm as Harry moved in closer, speaking to the baby then. "You and I will have plenty of time to bond when I'm teaching you how to drive your parents nutty."

"Wonderful," William shook his head, smile in place as he pulled the baby up to him, kissing him and holding him tighter, before settling him back against his chest. At least they had this, at least there was this little bundle there to draw all of the angst from the brothers. Harry relaxed his hold on Will and sat back in his chair; the tick of the clock becoming more noticeable.

Harry and William were still with the baby when the news came. He had fallen asleep against his father and both were afraid to move for fear of waking him so they sat in a quiet room, both of them reflecting on this moment, this significant, wonderful moment and all that always came to mind with such things—their roles, their life, their mother. And when the nurse stepped into the room, Harry held his breath; his entire body on alert. And then she gave them the news that allowed him to breathe again.

Kate was out of surgery and headed to recovery. Kate was on the mend. With transfusions and a hysterectomy, her life had been spared and, as long as there was no infection, no side effects, she would be able to go home in about a week with her wonderful, perfect little boy. She had some
harsh realities to face when she woke; the inability to have children, a bit of an extended hospital stay, some long term effects that were only yet to come to light. But she was on the mend.

Though there would be great sadness that would come as a result of this day, though there would be sorrow to be felt, grieving to be done, in that moment, with that announcement, there was great joy to be had. And it could be felt between the two brothers, seen on their faces as they chose to step past the sad news and rejoice that their family was still whole, that they weren't holding onto a son who would have to face life without a mother.

The nurse took the baby from Will, wrapping him up as Will pulled his shirt on. She was taking the two of them to Kate's side where they would wait until she woke up. She offered to keep the baby in the nursery, but Will wanted to take him with. And there was no way she would deny him that in this moment.

As Will was lead off in one direction, Harry made quick work in the other. With a hug and kisses to the new father, Harry was off. He knew he was no longer needed in this moment of Will's life. Though Will thanked him in that quiet way he had, Harry was needed elsewhere.

The waiting room was alive with relief at the news and when Harry stepped through the door, all he could see were smiling faces. But his eyes locked with hers. The room swarmed around him, wanting news about the baby. What could he say?

He was perfect. He was sleeping. He was doing well. He was on his way to wait for his mom to wake up.

And when the questions had been answered, the curiosity swayed for a moment. Harry stepped from the group and moved right to her. Even during this last hour, when Kate had held court with his concerns, Maddie's face, her voice, her warmth, had been ingrained in him.

"Uncle Harry..." Maddie held her arms out to him, ready to hug him close, to reconnect. But Harry wouldn't be content with that. He stepped right into her arms and, cupping her face in his palms, he kissed her; deep and intense and drawing a blush to Maddie's cheeks. He wrapped his arms tight around her and kept her close, even when his lips moved from hers, kissing her forehead and Maddie could see it in his eyes; everything he had felt over the last few hours.

He had been worried. He had been terrified. He had been strong.

And he had thought of her the entire time; what it would have been like to be in his brother's position—worrying about Maddie like Will had worried about Kate, holding their baby while his mother fought for her life. He had gone there in his brain for only a moment, but the moment was enough. And all he wanted to do was to hold her near to him, even now that the crisis had passed.

As a group, they had decided to wait for Kate to wake up before anything else happened; before an announcement was made about the baby's birth, before anyone else met him. They all wanted her to be awake, to be able to hug her mother and hold her son before they moved forward.

It only felt right.

It wasn't terribly long, relatively speaking, before she was waking, before she was able to meet her son. Within an hour, she was smiling at her new bundle of joy. She was in pain, exhausted, but so thankful for her precious little gift.

Because it was late, because it had been such a long, hard fought day, the family cycled in to see
the baby, to see Kate, in pairs. Mike and Carole, Charles and Camilla, James and Pippa, and finally Harry and Maddie. They all cycled through, spending only a bit of time before they left; wanting to allow the new parents and the new baby a chance to rest and begin recovery. And of course they would be returning after everyone had some sleep, after Will had told Kate the news, after they had grieved, after they had rejoiced their new addition.

As Maddie and Harry finally slipped out of the hospital, hand in hand and completely in love, the announcement had been made. They smiled sleepily and offered waves to the crowds of people, taking the flashes from the cameras as they slipped into the car. The peals of bells were tumbling from The Abbey, the sound of a 41 gun salute thundered into the air for the baby boy.

And the fascination with Arthur Charles Michael Spencer had begun.

The sun was beginning to peek over the horizon by the time they made it home from the hospital. They were too tired to speak much, too tired to reflect on their day, on all that occurred. But they were too shaken to let go of the other. He held her hand in the car, she slipped her hand into his pocket as they walked, and as they made their way up the stairs, his hand rested on her shoulder. They needed the contact, the strength.

Once in their room, they tugged off their clothes, dropping them to the floor and pulling on pajamas. They brushed teeth; sloppy and quickly. While Maddie washed her face, Harry drew the drapes and slipped into the crisp sheets, ready to sleep till noon—with plans to return to the hospital sometime the next day. When Maddie emerged from the bathroom, he was settled into bed; mere minutes from slumber. Stalling in the doorway, she watched him, her heart and her smile warm. It had been such a long, emotion-filled day for both of them and, in being there for other members of their family, she wasn't sure she had really processed all that had occurred, all the emotions it had evoked. And watching him, her husband, as he laid so peacefully—waiting for her—it drew so much to the surface.

As though he could sense her, he peeled his eyes open, lifting his eyebrows to her with a smirk. "What are you waiting for?" He patted her pillow next to him.

"I don't know," she shook her head, her voice filling with emotion; tears tugging at her throat. "I really don't know why I'm waiting anymore."

He realized instantly that she wasn't talking about climbing into bed and going to sleep. "Madeline..." Forcing his eyes open wider, he made great work of pulling his brain closer to awake. "Are you okay?"

Blinking back tears born of sleepiness and a chaotic day, Maddie nodded and met his eyes. Her eyebrows lifted with hope, with an innocent sweetness. But it was her words that hit him in the gut. "Tell me again why we're waiting two years..."

He caught him. His face softened, eyes sweet on her. With a slow shake of his head, he held her gaze. "I don't know." Their reasons seemed to be eluding him in that moment.

"Me neither," She whispered. Their eyes held, their hearts thumping, breath heavy and the room was saturated with sentiment. Maddie didn't know if she wanted to cry or if she wanted to crawl into bed and make love to him until the sun was directly overhead.

Harry was the first to blink, the first to pull it together and snap out of the daydream his mind had
drifted to. "Madeline...come here. Come to bed." He sat up and tugged at the blankets.

Maddie pushed from the doorway, climbing into bed next to her husband who instantly pulled her to him. His hand linked with hers as he kissed her. It was so soft and sweet and slow that Maddie thought he might be trying to lure her to sleep. When he pulled back, his fingers caressed her face, tucking back hair, tracing her lips. And with a great big breath, with a resolve he was surprised he had, he moved back a few inches.

"The North Pole." He squeezed her hand in his as he exhaled.

"Sorry?" She breathed; caught up in her sleeplessness, his kisses.

"The reason we're waiting..." He smiled, dropping a kiss to the top of her hand. "The North Pole."

"The North Pole," she repeated, sniffing as she nodded—saddened.

"And..." He moved back to his pillow, pulling her with him as he laid down. "And we wanted to give you some time, to grow accustomed to this life." He waved his hand out at their room as Maddie cuddled close to him; tucking up under his arm and resting her head on his shoulder.

"But what if I don't want to wait anymore. What if I tell you I'm accustomed. I'm comfortable and situated and I don't need two years to..." She leaned up, turning to look at him, her eyes wide with excitement.

Harry took her face in his hands and pulled her mouth to his; passion and love pouring from him to her. The way his lips moved against hers, the way his tongue tangled into her mouth, pulling her into him, the way his hands wrapped around her and held her to him...it was so firmly planted in a place of desire and adoration.

"Wow..." Maddie breathed when he pulled away from him; her gut clenching when she saw the dark seriousness in his eyes.

"There is no one on the planet that wants a baby more than I do...A baby with you..." His hands moved to her hair as his eyes searched her face, his emotions unsteady in his heart. "And tonight after all that happened..." His voice cracked. "Baby if you want a baby, I...fuck, I'll give you a baby." His thumbs stroked her cheeks. "You know that. You know that." He held her eyes for a beat, a moment before he broke, pulling her head to his chest in a hug; his lips pressing to the top of her head. "I know you're doing well. I know you're strong and resilient and confident and...I know you're comfortable." He kissed her again, his hands stroking down over her arms, her shoulders. "But Maddie it gets worse. It gets...ugly. And what happens if you're pregnant when it does? What happens to you? What happens to me? When the press turns on my pregnant wife? Jesus Christ. I don't even know what I'll..." He shook his head. "We don't have to wait two years. I'll do this now if you really want to. If you really want to. But you're tired and emotionally spent and...I..." He looked down at her, at her sweet smile, her kind eyes as she stretched to look up at him and his eyes welled up.

"I what?" She whispered.

"I love you," he let out a shaky breath. "That's it. That's..."

"I love you too," she placed a kiss on his chest before she twisted in his arms and moved to look down at him; her fingers rubbing lovingly at the scruff on his face. "Thank you. For looking out for me and protecting me and wanting everything to be..." She smiled, dropping a kiss to his lips.
"Thank you for doing that."

"It's the very least I can do," his hands ran into her hair, massaging her scalp. Their eyes met and held and Maddie let out a sigh born of resignation and realization and...exhaustion.

"The North Pole?" She asked.

Harry's lips turned up slightly as he nodded. "The North Pole."

"Okay," she sighed again, settling back into bed, tucked next to him. They situated against each other; his arm around her, her leg thrown over his. And they finally closed their eyes, letting their bodies take over and push their minds to slumber.

Just before they drifted off completely, Maddie grinned wide and, without opening her eyes, she called out to him. "Harry?"

"Hmmm?" His eyebrow arched softly over closed lids.

"Do you want to go for a run?" She couldn't help the snort that came with her giggle—anymore than he could help the way his entire body chest shook as he laughed; loud and wide.

And when the laughter finally faded, Harry kissed her upturned lips once more and they both fell asleep; tangled up in each other.
Chapter 115

US Tour Itinerary
Harry and Maddie are on their way to their first US Tour. The itinerary pretty closely matches the one Harry had on his last big tour of the US. I took some liberties of course.

US Tour Itinerary for TRH The Duke and Duchess of Sussex
US Tour Schedule

Day 1: Washington DC
Capitol Hill for an exhibition by the HALO Trust
Reception/Dinner at the residence of the British Ambassador. Speech.
Spend night in DC

Day 2: Arlington, VA
Arlington National Cemetery/Wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown
Walter Reed National Military Medical Center/Meet with wounded service men and women
Dinner at the White House with the Obamas and Service Men and Women
Overnight at TWH

Day 3: New York NY
Arrive in Manhattan from Arlington
Wreath at Ground Zero. Visit Firehouse in NY.
Down time.

Day 4: NYC
Manhattan/Event supporting GREAT campaign/Baseball training session with young players
Reception and Dinner benefitting the American Friends of the Royal Foundation for TRH The Duke and Duchess of Sussex

Day 5: Greenwich, CT
Fourth annual Sentebale Polo Cup/Harry plays and gives speech

Day 6: Fly to Denver, CO
Visit to Children's Hospital
Lunch and visit to Judi's House "Hope and Healing for Grieving Children"
Attend production at Denver Center for the Performing Arts/Reception after

Day 7: Denver, CO
Attend Rockies Game/HRH throws out First Pitch
Reception hosted by the Consul-General/Olympic athletes
Spends night in Colorado Springs

Day 8: Colorado Springs
Warrior Games at the National Training Center of the US Olympic Team

Day 9: Colorado Springs
USAFA-Warrior Games

Day 10-13: Time off with family

Fly back to UK
When Maddie left London for her first Royal Tour, she felt prepared. She had studied briefing memos, she had checked and double checked the speeches she had written. Along with her stylist Rosie Tellington, she had meticulously planned her wardrobe for the entire trip. She was taking great care to include British designers exclusively while highlighting a few great pieces from Ms. Winifred Ellis, the now infamous designer of her wedding dress.

Harry had watched in mild amusement as their luggage was loaded into their car and he had resisted, quite successfully, every urge he had to comment on the sheer amount of it. This was the first time he had done something like this with a partner, with a woman—with his wife. He knew it was a scene he would see repeated, something he should simply become accustomed too. And he knew, his eyes flickering as he watched her gather her bag, that he was going to love this new, heavily packed, addition to his tours abroad.

"What?" Maddie's eyes narrowed when she caught him watching.

"Nothing," he shook his head, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Not nothing," she shook her head. "I can see you biting back the sass, Captain."

Harry chuckled into himself and shrugged his shoulders. "It's a lot of stuff."

"We're going to be there for two weeks."

"Yes," he nodded.

"And I need to be prepared for anything." She moved closer to him, her hands moving to his waist as she stepped into him. "What if it rains? What if something is damaged in travel? What if I spill ink all over a blouse? What if..."

"What if we need to clothe a small village?" Harry offered, his arms wrapping around her.

"Ha, ha," she rolled her eyes and grew a bit shy; showing the tiniest bit of nervousness. "This is my first trip. I want to be prepared."

"Fair enough," he surrendered, dipping his head to capture her lips. "Nervous?"

"Excited," she took a breath. "I'm almost entirely excited. Maybe five percent nervous." She hugged tighter to him. "Do you know what I'm most excited about?"

"Well..." He squinted his eyes, pretending to think it over. "It would make sense if it were seeing your family at the end...but I don't think that's it." Maddie laughed. "And I wouldn't be surprised if it were the stop in at Ella's while we're in New York..."

"Nope," Maddie shook her head, the humor of the moment passing between them; knowing this was maybe the hundredth time they had talked about it.

"But I'm going to go ahead and go with..." He bit his lip for dramatics and lifted his eyebrows. "The first pitch at the Rockies Game?"
"The first pitch at the Rockies Game!" She called out, raising her arms in the air in victory. Harry laughed, finding his wife simultaneously adorable and incorrigible. "You know...I knew there were perks that came with marrying you."

"Sure." He smirked.

"That dry wit, your ability to have fun almost anywhere..." She ran her hands over his forearms, up his biceps. "These fucking sexy arms."

"Okay," he narrowed his eyes, his arms flexing involuntarily under her hands.

"But I had no idea it would come with something as cool as throwing out the first pitch..." She smiled up at him. "And of course....you know...seeing the family and Ella and..."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry laughed with a slight eye roll. "Them too."

They had spent the night before with the Cambridges not far from where they stood now. Kate and little Arthur had finally returned home, both safe and healthy and happy to be home. Maddie was enthralled with the tiny little bundle; so sweet and quiet and chubby. Though she could tell that Harry felt the tiniest bit guilty that they were leaving so quickly after his arrival, he managed to pull himself away from him and said his good-byes. They had kissed their nephew, they had hugged their sister and with a nod to the father in charge, they had set out to complete their royal duties. Kate was recovering and happy and when Maddie had voiced concern with leaving so quickly after all that had occurred, Kate rolled her eyes and waved her off. This was how their lives worked. She was doing fine and was actually hopeful that their trip would take the spotlight off of them—if even for a moment.

And that is exactly what was about to happen. After a quick trip to the airport, they boarded a commercial flight along with Thomas Smith, Libby Florence, Maddie's hair stylist Tara Wharton, who was more than happy to take up the trip with the new Duchess, their extensive security team, and they left for the United States.

And Maddie had felt prepared; ready.

What she hadn't thought of, what hadn't even crossed her mind to prepare for was what greeted her on the other side of the pond. They had arrived at the airport relatively unnoticed. Though they had quite the entourage, the people they passed seemed to be mostly uninterested. They even managed to make it to the hotel without much fuss. They checked into the lavish three bedroom suite they were staying in, with a few members of the security team taking over a room. And, after Tara worked her magic on Maddie's hair and she and Harry changed their clothes, they were off; swept into what Maddie would describe as a motorcade and on their way to Capitol Hill.

Maddie smiled at Thomas and Libby, who sat opposite of her and Harry as they drove through the streets of DC. It was quite something to watch as they passed the historical monuments of her first country while she was being taken to represent her second. She took a deep breath, letting the nostalgia wash over her for just a moment before she would be called to duty.

"We should stop at the Smithsonian American History Museum," her voice was soft as she spoke to Harry; though turning from the window back to him. "They have these little teddy bears that were designed after Teddy Roosevelt's. Maybe Arthur would like one."

"Yeah?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, a small smile on his lips. "Maybe we can do that." He glanced over to Thomas, the mastermind of the trip.
"I'll see what we can do," he nodded, making a quick note in his binder.

"Thank you," Maddie smiled to him, her eyes shifting back out her window. "Wow...would you look at all of these people. Is there something going on here later today? A parade of some kind?" Maddie turned just in time to see the other three people in the car pass glances around, light laughter forming on their lips.

Harry squeezed her hand in his, the irony of this moment alive in his eyes. "Darling," he took a deep breath. "We are what's happening here today."

Maddie was speechless; completely without words as her eyes snapped back to the people lined up on the streets leading to the Capitol. She was stunned. In her two short months as his wife, she had seen crowds—big crowds—but nothing quite like this. At least not just for the two of them. And here they were, moving through the streets of The District while people gathered on their route to catch a glimpse, to offer a wave. Harry watched as she took it in.

He debated for a moment, wondering if he should offer words of encouragement or a pearl of wisdom. It was a lot to take in. But, knowing her as he did, he smiled and waited as her mind processed it all. She would be fine, he knew she would be fine. When they turned up the last long stretch of road, he pulled her hand to his lips and planted a kiss there and she squeezed his fingers in response.

"Okay," Thomas spoke up, pulling up a sheet of paper. "When we arrive we have Guy Willoughby and Cindy McCain, Senator John McCain's wife." He could see both Maddie and Harry nodding, taking in the information. "They are going to be the ones leading us through the exhibit. Do either of you have any questions?"

"Madeline," Harry called to her; his voice drawing her eyes to his. She met his gaze and nodded, her lips pulling into a smile.

"Sorry. No. No questions. I'm good." And she was. It was almost time to go and she kicked in to business mode. Glancing down at her ensemble, she checked her blouse for loose buttons, her skirt for a tuck. "I'm...Oh God!" Her voice came out in a gasp and all three of them turned sharply to her as her hand ran down her leg.

"Maddie?" Harry looked her over; head to toe.

"A run," she stayed calm and cool as she slipped off her shoe and rose steady eyes to Libby. "One of my stockings has a run in it." Libby nodded and quickly opened her purse.

"I don't even know what that..." Harry shook his head as he looked between the two women.

"Here we are," Libby handed a stocking across the car to Maddie.

"Thank you," her voice was heavy with gratitude, her hands working fast as they slid up her skirt.

"What are you doing?" Harry's eyes went wide for a flash of a second.

"Changing my stocking," Maddie chuckled at his expression. "Avert your eyes."

"Avert my..." He trailed off, watching as she slid a thigh high stocking down her long leg before he cleared his throat and, without moving his eyes from his wife, he commanded. "Thomas—avert
your eyes."

"Already averted, Sir," Thomas couldn't help the light chuckle that came with his response; the addition of Maddie to their tours was bound to make his life more comical.

"Here you go..." Maddie passed the torn stocking over to Libby and quickly slid the new, fresh one onto her leg. With a quick adjustment, she smoothed out her skirt and slipped on her shoe. "See that," she eyed her husband. "Prepared for anything."

"God I love you," he grinned wide and the car came to a stop. "You okay?"

"Yes," she nodded; glancing over herself once more before smiling wide and nodding again. "I'm okay."

"Great."

"Are we ready?" Thomas looked from Maddie to Harry and, seeing no dissent, no discussion, he nodded to the driver and in seconds, their doors were open and Maddie was stepping from the car.

"Thank you," she smiled to the driver and, as she looked to the crowd gathered outside, she could hear the excitement, the applause, the murmur of activity and conversation. It reminded her of her wedding day and brought a new air of liveliness to the day. With a wide smile, she lifted her hand in a wave and the crowd roared in response. She turned to look at Harry over the top of the car and he was watching her with a proud grin as he waited for her to join him. Maddie offered another quick wave before she moved around the car to his side.

His hand slid around her to the small of her back and only when she was right by his side did he take the first step, with her, towards the people who were waiting for them; towards their first of many events on this whirlwind trip they were just now beginning.

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"Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us today," Maddie smiled at the tall, strikingly beautiful woman who had accompanied them through the exhibit. Her hand slid into Cindy McCain's with a warm, firm shake.

"It was my pleasure," Cindy smiled in return.

"Mr. Willoughby," Maddie turned to the gentleman.

"Your Royal Highness," he smiled warmly as he shook her hand, just a bit enamored with the young Duchess—a reaction that would become quite common as the days progressed.

And then, as Harry stepped away from Mrs. McCain, his eyes fell on his wife; proud and awed and Thomas stepped forward, leading them back down the stairs and towards the car.

"Maddie?" Harry's voice was soft, his hand supportive as it pressed to her back.

"I'm great," she answered the question she knew he was answering, her eyes smiling up at him before drifting to the crowds of people still waiting behind the lines. "Wow. I cannot believe they are still here."

"We do have a few minutes if you wanted to walk the rope line and say hello," Thomas spoke up
as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

Maddie looked up to Harry with hopeful eyes. "Can we?"

"Absolutely." He nodded, thrilled that she wanted to, happy that she wasn't put off by it all. With one hand still at her back, he waved his other forward; gesturing for her to lead the way. With a wide smile, Maddie took a step towards the crowd.

And they went wild. There was applause, there was cheering and, from Harry who stood rooted in awe for a moment, there was a great deal of pride and an inordinate amount of happiness swelling in his chest. He watched her for a beat and then took a step to follow, their security team, Thomas, Libby—all close behind. They had all done this before, but this was Maddie's first time.

"I'll be just to your right, Ma'am," Libby spoke softly to Maddie as she followed inconspicuously behind her. "If you need to hand anything off to me."

"Thank you," Maddie smiled, thankful that Thomas had hired somebody as great as Libby was proving to be; full of knowledge about these things Maddie never considered and sweet enough, kind enough to help Maddie along in this journey.

"Maddie!!" A group of young women chorused as she stepped up to the rope line.

"Hi!" Maddie waved with a wide smile, looking them over. She guessed they were college age and they were all wearing 'Team Maddie' shirts along with tiaras and feather boas. "Look at you!" She exclaimed. "My husband has that shirt!"

"We know!" They laughed as they took their turns shaking her hand.

"Can you take a picture with us?" One of the women asked, her nerves shaking her voice just so.

"Absolutely!" Maddie turned quickly as one of the women caught the moment on her cell phone.

"Thank you!"

"You're welcome," Maddie nodded, continuing to move down the line; Libby leading the way so as to take the pressure off Maddie.

The smile on her face stayed strong, her hands firm as she continued to shake hand after hand; smiling and nodding and greeting face after face.

"Welcome back to the states, Ma'am."

"Oh thank you so much," Maddie smiled at the older gentleman who took her hand in both of his.

"We're very proud of all you've done over there."

"That's very kind of you but I haven't done too much just yet," her heart tugged just so; finding his words unnecessarily sweet.

"Enjoy your trip," he nodded to her as he released her hand and she continued.

And though she certainly hadn't expected it, people were handing her things; flowers, cards, notes. And she remained gracious, thanking them as she looked it over, holding it in her hands for a few
more steps before passing things back to a smiling Libby.

She was truly overwhelmed by the reaction, by how many people were there on the off chance that they would have time, that their security team would allow them to make the detour over to greet people. And when she spoke with them, even that two second moment where she said good morning and shook their hand, they seemed so thrilled, so happy to have had that all-too-brief moment. It was so touching and humbling that Maddie had to refrain from thinking about it for fear of her emotions getting the best of her.

As she turned back to Libby for the second time, handing off some flowers and a card, something caught her attention. Her ears perked up at the sound, something familiar, something she recognized but—out of context. Smiling at Libby, she turned towards the sound and quickly found the source.

About ten feet from where she stood was a little boy. He was hugging one of the posts that held up the line and crying great big tears. He seemed to be completely lost in the crowd, in the excitement. As the last of the flowers slipped from her hand to Libby's, Maddie scanned the crowd, looking for somebody who might be with the kiddo and then, acting in on instinct, reflex, she moved to him. Libby and Arthur were right on her heels as she stopped in front of him and dipped down to his level.

"Hey there," even she could hear her voice change over—the way it had when she had worked with children before. Her hand reached out carefully to rest on his arm. "You seem a little lost, buddy. Why don't you open your eyes and talk to me for a minute." She could hear his crying catch, he had heard her. She was patient; calm and at ease as he let out a few more sobs and then opened his eyes. Her smile widened. "Well hello." Oblivious to the crowd around her, to the attention she was garnering, Maddie held out her hand to him. "My name is Maddie."

"I..." His bottom lip quivered and he sniffed. "I know."

"You do?" She smiled. "How do you know that?"

"My...my mom says..." He dragged his sleeve across his nose and took a breath. "My mom says you're a princess."

"She does?" Maddie laughed softly and he nodded. "Did you come here with your mom today?"

"Y-y-yes..." His eyes welled up. "But I lost her."

"Yeah, I see that," her lips turned down in a frown. "You know what, I think we might be able to help you with that," Maddie glanced up, her eyes scanning quickly to one of the Park's Police Officers that was on duty patrolling the areas. She waved her hand at him and then turned back to the boy. "Now...I told you my name but I don't know yours."

"Bergen," he whispered.

"Bergen," she smiled, holding her hand out to his. Cautiously, he put one of his hands in hers. "It's nice to meet you Bergen."

"My mom told me not to talk to strangers."

"I bet she did," Maddie grinned. "And you know what, she's right. You shouldn't talk to strangers. But what did your mom tell you about the police? Can you talk to them?"
"Yes," he nodded, his little fingers still holding tight to her hand.

"Well good because my friend here..." Maddie smiled up at the man who stood just above them. "He is a policeman, Officer..."

"Matt," the young man supplied with a smile.

"Officer Matt," Maddie turned back to the little boy, her eyes catching, for the first time, how many people were watching her. "And Officer Matt, one of his jobs is helping people find their lost mommies. Do you think it would be okay for you and me to talk to him?"

He adjusted his grip on her hand and nodded; struggling because he was scared and unsure but desperately wanted to find his mother.

"Okay," Maddie nodded and, remembering, reached into her pocket of her skirt. "Also..." She pulled out a small toy, a plastic Koala Bear with arms that moved; something she might have had in her office for her child clients—at another time, in another life. "I have been trying to find a good home for this little guy. Do you think you might like to hold onto this for me?" The tiniest of smiles cracked on his lips and he nodded. "Great!" Maddie handed him the toy, watching his expression ease slightly as his other hand wrapped around the plastic toy. Looking up to the officer, she smiled. "His name is Bergen. He said that he was here with his mother and that he lost her."

The officer nodded along, turning to speak into the radio at his shoulder as Maddie turned back to the little boy. "Okay Bergen, let's come on over and follow Officer Matt so he and his friends can start looking for your mother." Maddie led the little boy a few steps away from the line towards where the officer had gestured. She and Bergen were quickly becoming the focus of attention as her Security Team watched her, as the other spectators snapped photos, as they took mental notes. Maddie even noticed Harry glancing her way curiously from further down the line.

"Now Bergen," Maddie looked down to the little boy. "Can you tell me what your mother's name is?" Though his eyes stayed focused on the small toy in his hand, he nodded. But before he could answer, before he could give Maddie or the Officer any information about his mother, the situation resolved itself—with a loud, worried voice from the crowd.

"Bergen!" Maddie turned towards the voice just in time to see a tall, brunette woman bound towards them, moving to cross the line. Security stiffened, turning towards the excitement, moving closer to her. As things quickly grew a bit jumbled around her; her PPO's stepping up, Officer Jorgensen taking a step towards the woman, Maddie looked down at Bergen. And he instantly brightened.

This was his mother.

"Momma!" He dropped Maddie's hand and ran to her.

"Oh my God! Bergen!" With eyes welled up, she scooped the little boy into her arms; holding him tightly to her body. Her eyes closed in relief. "I told you to stay right with me! I told you not to move because you could get lost but you..." She blinked at the tears in her eyes, taking in the scene around her. "He just wanders off," she began to explain. "He finds a butterfly or a bee or..." She shook her head, pulling back so she could look at him, her fingers stroking his hair. "You cannot wander off buddy."
"I'm sorry," Bergen sniffed. "I didn't mean to."

"I know," she hugged him tight and, finally feeling safe and in control, her eyes drifted around; to Maddie. "Oh my God. I...I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," Maddie shook her head, her smile sweet, eyes kind. "I was just making new friends with your handsome son here," Maddie smiled at Bergen, her hand landing comfortingly on his mother's arm. "He was very brave and smart. He remembered not to talk to strangers..."

"But it's okay to talk to police," Bergen repeated with a smile. Maddie shared a small laugh with his mother. "The Princess gave me a toy." He held it up with pride as he had moved completely past the incident—as children do.

"She did!" His mother smiled wide. "That was awfully nice of her. Did you say thank you?"

"Thank you," he turned a smile to Maddie.

"You're welcome," she patted his back and turned towards Libby who stepped forward with a smile and a nod.

"Ma'am," her eyes met Maddie's and Maddie nodded. It was time to go.

"Well Bergen, it was wonderful to meet you today," she caught a glance from Officer Matt and spoke to the relieved young mother. "I think the Officer is going to want to verify a few things with you..."

"Of course," the woman nodded. "And thank you. Thank you very much."

"Think nothing of it," Maddie smiled and held her hand out. "It was nice to meet you..."

"Harriet," her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"Harriet," Maddie shook her hand. "I'm Maddie."

"Yes," Harriet's eyes were wide with gratitude. "Yes I know. Thank you for being so great with him."

"Of course," Maddie smiled, her hand slipping from hers as she took a step away. She was right, the officers still had a few questions for Harriet and Bergen, but Maddie's time in that moment was over. "Good-bye Bergen."

"Good-bye Maddie," he waved, his head leaning against his mother.

And then, with a glance towards the rest of the crowd, towards the group that had gathered around them, Maddie turned and stepped completely out of the moment. As the officers moved in, Maddie followed Libby towards where Harry and Thomas were waiting for them before they moved back to the car. Meeting Harry's eyes for a split second, the two of them turned to the crowd, waved, and turned towards their awaiting car.

"Wow..." Harry shook his head, his hand slipping around her waist as they walked.

"Ha!" She laughed, leaning into him; her mind processing it. "I'm sorry I stepped off script and put us behind or..." She glanced to the two staff members with them.
"Oh no," Thomas shook his head with a chuckle. "That was very well done." His voice was low as they reached the car; doors pulled open.

"Thank you," Maddie smiled, feeling relief, and a reassuring squeeze of her hip from Harry before he released her to step around the car.

"I had no idea you had toys in your pockets," Libby shook her head, slipping into the car before her boss.

"Well I am full of surprises," Maddie grinned at her, waving once more at the crowd before she stepped in too.

"Why exactly is it that you have toys in your pockets?" Harry questioned as he settled in, straightening his tie as he sat. Without missing a beat, Maddie turned a smirk to her husband and answered.

"In case you got bored."

"Of course," Harry's eyes narrowed at her while the corners of his mouth turned up in amusement. And not one of them could hold back the laughter that traveled around the car as it moved forward.

They were going back to the hotel for another change of clothes and off to the Ambassador's Residence for a black tie reception.

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It was late. Dinner had been served, eaten. Speeches had been made, toasts received. And Maddie and Harry had made round after round through the room; shaking hands, smiling wide. It had been a long day of work and it was late in The District—later at home in London.

Maddie knew she needed to be "on" for at least a bit longer and, having just smiled as Susan, the Ambassador's wife, excused herself, she was standing alone. She quickly scanned the room for anyone who might be watching and she slipped out the large, beautiful doors and onto the patio. The fresh air filled her lungs, perking her up in a few, deep breaths. Though it was a warm August night on the East coast, there was a bit of a breeze brushing against her one bare shoulder and it gave her just a bit of a chill. The red chiffon of her dress floated in the breeze and she felt, for a moment, as elegant as she looked. She moved closer to the edge, looking out at the expansive lawn, at the meticulously groomed shrubs and hedges and, beyond that, the dark sky speckled with stars.

She felt him before she heard him; a sixth sense that she had acquired throughout her years with him. Her hair stood up, her blood ran warm and her lips tugged up in a grin. She could hear his walk, confident and proud—his shoes shuffling against the stone patio—as he moved to stand just behind her and to the left.

"Doctor Forrester," she could hear the smug in his voice.

"Captain Wales," she grinned, taking a sip from her glass. He bit his lip with a shake of his head, trying to stifle the laughter in his mouth; he loved it when she called him that.

"Taking a break?" His fingers reached out to her one bare shoulder, dropping heat to her skin.
"Just a breath of air," Maddie smiled, her body drawing to him reflexively. "A moment to gather my wits before I return to the Westmacotts and their guests."

"Hmmm..." Harry nodded, his fingers fanning out as his palm rested on her shoulder. "Are you enjoying yourself at least?"

"I am," Maddie nodded. "The Ambassador is quite funny and his wife Susan is incredibly beautiful."

"My wife is incredibly beautiful," he countered, his hand sliding down her arm as he stepped closer behind her.

"Thank you for saying so," her head tilted to the side, in his direction as a wayward yawn escaped her lips.

"You've had a long day," concern and love mixed in his voice as he dropped a kiss to her bare shoulder.

"We have had a long day," she turned towards him then, his hand catching hold of her hip and pulling her closer.

"I can't help but notice that you're not at all nervous anymore." His eyes were bright as he smiled down at her.

"Not at all," she shook her head, grinning up at him; her hands taking hold of the lapels of his tuxedo jacket. "Do you know why?"

"You have tiny bottles of Tequila stashed somewhere." He took a glance down at the beautiful dress, his mind wandering for just a moment as he contemplated that notion.

"No," she smirked, eyes mischievous. Harry arched his eyebrows, waiting. With a quick glance over his shoulder, she stepped closer and lowered her voice. "All day, I've been picturing you naked..."

"Oh." He groaned through a wide smile.

"And me..." She whispered. "Sitting on your..."

"Oh!" He laughed out loud, pulling her tighter in his arms as he lowered his lips to hers. The kiss began sweet and soft and much more restrained than he wanted. And though his mind sent up a warning, telling him it was time step back, everything else in him had a different idea.

And he pressed forward. To be fair, Maddie showed no protest. Her lips parted under his, her hands tugging him closer to her. His were around her in an instant, greedy, as he held onto her; kissing his wife as though they weren't working, as though they weren't standing on the patio at The Ambassador's residence.

"Wow..." Maddie breathed when their mouths parted. Her cheeks were flushed, her body alive and it was just exactly what she had needed to revive her for the remainder of the party.

Harry chuckled, proud and pleased. "Okay love. Are you ready to go back in?"
"I am," Maddie sighed; smoothing her hands over his lapels before she surrendered to their reality and took a step back.

"I have something for you," his hand slipped into his pocket.

"A toy?" She joked.

"Better," he grinned and held out his hand.

"My candy..." Maddie's eyes went soft. "You're the best husband in the world."

"Yeah, yeah," he rolled his eyes but his smile was genuine as she took the candy from him and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

"You know, not only are you sweet, but you look damn good in a tux, Captain." She patted his chest lightly and moved around him, returning to the party.

"Madeline," his voice pulled her attention and she spun around to face him; her skirt billowing about her as she moved. For the rest of his life, he would remember the way she looked in that moment; the light from the doorway framing her, her blonde hair wispy in the breeze and her smile so bright and wide that it hit him in the gut.

"Yes?" She arched an eyebrow, candy in her fingers.

"You're amazing," his hand rested over his heart in his chest as he spoke. "Today at the event, with the little boy, tonight..." He swallowed and shook his head; pride emanating from his eyes. "You are amazing."

"Yeah?" She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying at the intense way he was looking at her, the passion in his voice.

"Yeah," he breathed. And then, wanting to help her slip back into work mode, wanting to help her finish up this night with success so that they could go back to their hotel...

And make love...

And fall asleep...

And prepare for the next day...

Harry cleared his throat and moved towards her, his hand stretched out to fall on the small of her back; following her back inside the opulent home, back to the party, back to the conclusion of their first day of their first tour. A success by all standards
Chapter 117

Day 2: Arlington, VA

The feeling in the car was serious. A somber sort of humility had settled over them as they drove through the streets of The District. And when they passed through the gates to Arlington National Cemetery, Maddie could already feel the lump building in her throat. Her eyes watched as the meticulously planned rows of white stone sprawled out before them. She took a deep breath and focused on the Robert E Lee Mansion—flag at half-staff.

And she surrendered to the truth she had known since she had dressed that morning. Her hands shook slightly as they smoothed over her skirt, tugged at the hem to the jacket she wore over her blouse. This day was lining up to be the most emotional of the trip and it was only the beginning.

They were still in the car.

Maddie looked to Harry who was looking away, out his window; though his mind was focused well beyond that. He hadn't spoken since they had all loaded into the car. He had been simple all morning, pressing kisses to her lips as he wished her good morning; offering her compliments once she was dressed. But once the business part of their day had begun, once Thomas brought in the uniform, once they began to prepare, he had grown quiet.

It was with the same stoic reflection that he now sat; next to her but much further away.

He had wanted to be there for her today. This was her first tour, her second day standing next to him in their representation of Her Majesty. He had wanted to be able to offer wisdom and guidance and hold her hand as she walked through a day he knew would only evoke feeling after feeling from the both of them.

But he couldn't. His mind was somewhere else entirely. And Maddie understood; without words, without thought. She understood.

Harry was a soldier. Above all else, he was a soldier.


And today, they were honoring the hundreds of thousands just like him who had taken up arms and taken a stand. Throughout the course of the day, they would come in contact with many of these men and women; having served time in a war, just like him. But they would also spend part of their day honoring those who were unlike him, those who hadn't returned to their loved ones or if they had it had been not nearly as whole as they were when they left. This was going to be a day full of soldiers; The Tomb of the Unknowns, Walter Reed, the reception that evening at The White House. The entire day was devoted to service men and women; those still standing and those who had fallen.

And as she watched Harry next to her in full military dress, she felt waves of that reality wash over her.

Tearing her eyes away from him, a purely self-preservational move, she took a deep breath and drew from her pool of emotional strength. She sniffed defiantly at the tears and tried to distract
herself; making a mental note to thank Ms. Libby Florence for knowing her well enough that she had wordlessly handed her a hanky before they left the room that morning and Ms. Winnifred Ellis who had the foresight to put pockets in everything she had designed for the trip.

And then she made a mental note to pull it together, to think of something light and cheery; something that would keep her from losing it. But she knew that it was truly in vain. They were driving up the small, winding roads, passing headstone after headstone and already she was teary, already her chest was heavy.

And they were still in the car.

As the car began to slow, the people inside moved to duty; Libby adjusting in her seat, Thomas checking over his notes once more before sliding his folio to the side and scanning over the two of them.

"Ma'am," Thomas' voice was quiet as he cut into the silence. Maddie looked up to him. "Is there anything you need?"

"No," she smiled at him with a soft shake of her head. "Thank you, I'm fine." It was the crack in her voice at the end, the nearly undetectable waver that drew Harry's attention. His gloved hand reached for hers and Maddie's eyes snapped to his.

Those long white fingers wrapped around hers and he squeezed and she saw it all in his eyes; deep and blue. With the tiniest turn of her lips, she offered a smile and she squeezed in return. He had asked in the best way he could. And she was answering. "I'm fine." She whispered to him.

The car came to a stop and Harry turned away from her—a self-preservational move on his part—and their doors were being pulled open. Stepping out into the sunny, summer day, Maddie thanked the driver and stood tall and proud as her soldier rounded the car to join her; their entourage joining them. And just like that, they were on; no waiting, no hemming. They were what everyone else was waiting for.

They were greeted by Staff Sgt. Kevin Brandt, the 1st Relief Commander at The Tomb. He was younger than she was, Maddie guessed. He stood tall, alert, and at the ready; a military man all around. He offered a salute to Harry and a warm smile, a strong handshake and nod to Maddie before he turned to lead them up the walk to where they would be starting. Harry smiled at his wife, his own nerves settling now that they were out in the air, in the sun and together, they fell in step with the Staff Sergeant as he escorted them through the massive crowd that had gathered. Though the numbers had certainly increased when compared to the day before, the spirit was drastically different. There were no signs, no feather boas. This was hallowed ground, this was a sacred place. Everyone stood in a muted silence; hats removed as they passed, as the flags that walked with them passed.

They had gone over the course of events numerous times; once in London before the trip, once on the flight over, and once that morning. Maddie knew exactly how it was going to unfold. Even still, her feet fell into step with the natural cadence the soldiers around her walked with. Her back straightened, wanting to walk tall and proud in this moment—when they honored the fallen.

And as they took their place next to the Staff Sergeant, overlooking the Tomb of the Unknowns, overlooking Arlington, The District, all eyes turned in their direction—all except for the Tomb Guards who never wavered in their duties. Maddie had read up on them long ago, and again refreshing her mind before the trip, and she had been awed and humbled by the amount of time and training it took to take this revered position. And she had been drawn to tears when she read
personal accounts from Tomb Guards who viewed this as such an amazing honor.

And it was. It was an honor to pay respects to all that these men and women had laid down in battle. Though she had expected the announcement, the loud, powerful voice of the Staff Sergeant at the bottom of the stairs startled her and she snapped to his attention.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, may I have your attention please!" Maddie was certain even the chirping birds quieted at his request. "The ceremony you are about to witness is the Army Wreath Laying Ceremony to be conducted by Their Royal Highnesses The Duke and Duchess of Sussex. In keeping with the dignity of this ceremony, it is requested that everyone remain silent and standing. All military personnel in uniform will render the hand salute. It is appropriate for all others to put their hands over their hearts upon the command 'Present Arms'. Thank you."

And with that perfected, poignant click of his heels, he was moving. With her hands folded in front of her, Maddie stood next to Harry who stood at attention next to Staff Sergeant Brandt and not one of them was looking anywhere but at the bright, white marble that stood before them. Upon the Sergeant's command, all three stepped forward; left foot first. And they were walking down the stairs.

Though she wasn't a soldier, far from it in fact, she fell into their steps quite easily. She fell into the moment quite easily. Though there were cameras everywhere, video and photo, documenting this moment for the world to see, Maddie felt none of that, she saw none of it.

Because before she had any time to register any of that, they were standing at the bottom of the stairs, the wreath before them.

The moment was like nothing Maddie had felt before. She was standing next to her husband, a wartime solider. And together they were standing before the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; a monument to the faceless men and women who had given not only their lives, their identity in order to preserve something so precious.

What she wanted to do was hold on to Harry.

At the direction of the Tomb Guard, she and Harry moved forward with the wreath, with a stunning silence and then they turned and took their positions.

And there they were; Harry standing at attention and offering a salute. Maddie gulping back the surge of emotion as her hand rested over her heart. As the bugle sounded out with the distinct notes from "Taps", Harry's heart clenched and Maddie lost her battle; a few small tears slipped from her eyes; silent and simply. It was always the music that did her in.

He knew she was crying. He knew she was crying the same way she knew that the cousins in London would most definitely poke gentle fun at her for another round of tears.

But she didn't care. And he couldn't hold her hand. He was a soldier in formation. He couldn't hold her hand.

And she understood. She understood better than Harry could expect her to, better than most civilians did. This moment wasn't about her tears, any more than it was about Harry's salute. It was about something so much bigger than them both; an ultimate sacrifice that was paid, the men and women that had come before them, those that would come after them.

And she understood; she really did. As the breeze whipped around them, Maddie sucked in a
breath and let it out. She understood why he put up such a fight to stay in the Army when everyone pressured him to step out. She understood why he would take whatever kind of bullshit was printed about him; a toy soldier, making up for his wrongs, trying to sway the press back in his favor.

It wasn't about that. It had never been about that. This had nothing to do with The Duke, nothing to do with The Prince.

He was a soldier. A soldier.

This was the side that gave when every other hand gave to him. Taps came to an end and Harry's hand returned to his side and, at the direction of Staff Sergeant Brandt, they turned away from the Tomb and moved back up the stairs; the same cadence, the same reverence.

After they made their way through the group, shaking hands and posing for pictures, Harry and Maddie were being escorted back to their car. And they were both walking with significantly more ease than they had when they arrived. Though Maddie had hoped they would be able to see more of the cemetery, they were on a tight schedule that morning and were expected at Walter Reed National Medical Center.

Once they were settled back in their seats, once the car began to move, Harry's white gloved hand reached out to her; taking her hand into his—pulling it into his lap. With a wide smile, he met her eyes and squeezed. With the slightest of winks, she squeezed back. They had made it through the morning.

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If their morning at Arlington was about Maddie watching Harry with admiration, their afternoon at Walter Reed was the reverse. Harry watched with a pride that was evident to anyone who saw as Maddie stepped up and moved with great ease. Having shed her jacket in the car, she looked lighter, more springy, as they were greeted by Hospital personnel and escorted up the stairs.

There was something about her that afternoon; something about the way she moved among the injured and the staff, the way she included the family members in the moment. Her smile was completely genuine, her interest in the people was full of authenticity. As he watched her, he remembered. He remembered where she was when he first met her, he remembered those first days, weeks, months of their courtship; how she had spent hours upon hours serving the people of Bendal. He remembered the night she had lost two clients, the two little boys who had died in the violence that surrounded them. He remembered the sorrow she had felt, the way it had taken over her heart.

He remembered with a vivid detail the night she had been shot.

He had told her before that her time in Bendal could often be likened to that of a tour of duty. Just because she wasn't fighting, just because she wasn't bearing arms, didn't mean it wasn't a warzone. It didn't mean there weren't casualties; physically, emotionally and mentally. And now, as she walked among injured soldiers and their families, she seemed so at ease; at home. She smiled for photo after photo after photo; she listened to story after story. And then, when she met a man who told her he had heard they shared similar injuries, she grew quiet and moved closer; taking a seat next to him as they began to share stories of recovery.

It was clear to Harry that she was a natural at this, that if he had purposefully gone through life looking for a partner better equipped with the kinds of qualities one needed to be successful in this
role, he would not have found a better fit than Maddie. But even he was surprised when she pulled up her sleeve just so, showing her own scar to the bed ridden soldier who shared the same injury.

"Oh wow," the young man sighed. "That looks fantastic. It healed up very nicely."

"It did," Maddie smiled, letting her sleeve fall loose, and moved in to share something with only him. Her hand rested on his good arm as her words drew a smile to his face. And when she stepped back, he squeezed her hand.

She wished him great luck in his recovery and was quickly ushered away. As she stepped in line with Harry as they were escorted down a corridor, she could feel his hand rest low on her back; warming at the contact. When she turned her face to his, he was smiling wide.

"Doctor," his voice was barely above a whisper as he took her in.

"Captain," she whispered in return, sharing the briefest moment of eye lust for the other before they were shown into another room where more people were waiting for them.

Harry's hand fell from her back as he was introduced to another patient. And Maddie's smiled pulled higher as she stepped up to his side. And so they were for the remainder of their time there that day.

In truth, they had blown their itinerary. They had stayed an hour and fifteen minutes longer than had been scheduled. Thomas had only allowed it as it ate into their down time before the reception at the White House. But, when he finally stepped forward and gave the two of them the nod, they regrettably said their good-byes and stepped away.

"May I tell you how great you were today?" Harry's arm moved around her as they descended the stairs. "How impressed I am?"

"You absolutely may," Maddie nodded with a grin, her fingers reaching for the black fabric of his uniform; stepping closer to him.

"Or better yet," he flashed a smug smirk, his hand glinting over her backside ever so quickly.

"Maybe I can show you?"

"Ooooh. I doubt we have time for that but at least you're speaking my language," she laughed lightly, offering a wave to the crowds that had gathered as they slipped into the open and waiting car.

"Well, well, well," Maddie let out a low whistle as she stepped from their private bathroom, joining Harry in their bedroom. "Look at you." Her lips curved up in a wide smile and she could barely help the flush to her skin that came every time she saw him in his tux; especially after he spent an entire day in his uniform. It was, regrettably, a great weakness of hers.

"You know, if you're going to keep looking at me like that..." He caught the pink in her cheeks and took advantage of the moment, moving in on her. "You look stunning." His eyes sparkled as they raked over her long gown; his fingers moving to stroke the soft bare skin of her shoulder.

"Yeah?" She bit at her bottom lip, trying to hide her automatic excitement to his touch; her eyes
sweeping over him lustfully. His hands clasped at her waist, tugging her close.

"Yes," he nodded. "It makes me want to send my regrets to the President and..." His head dipped down, his lips pressing to her neck.

"You'll hear no complaints from me..." She leaned into him, her chest pressing to his in an act that was shamefully flirtatious. "Captain." Her voice dipped and she lowered her lashes.

"Ha!" His head tipped back in laughter. "You're working too hard there Madeline. Are you nervous? Trying to get out of that speech?"

"No," she shook her head, her hands pressing into his shoulders; holding him close. "My speech is ready. My nerves are...okay..." She admitted to a slight flutter in her stomach as she thought of how she would soon be addressing a roomful of soldiers and their families—not to mention the President and First Lady.

"Well...just in case..." He stepped away from her then, crossing the room to an ornate table that ran the length of the room where there sat a tray with glasses and decanters and as Maddie giggled, he flipped over two shot glasses and reached for the crystal decanter with the honey colored liquid in it.

"Tequila?" She raised her eyebrows, moving across the room to join him; her skirt flowing behind her as she walked.

"Why mess with a good thing?" He shrugged, handing a glass to her and lifting his own. "I know of no reason to doubt you're going to blow them away tonight."

"Yeah?" She lifted her glass to clink against his.

"You have this." He was absolutely certain that Maddie was going to do wonderfully; and absolutely certain it was going to make him want her even more than he already did.

"How much tequila have you had?" She countered, smirk in place; eyebrow arched.

"I speak the truth," he nodded to her and tipped his glass back. With a soft chuckle, she did the same; the liquid burning down her throat. Taking the glass from her hand, he sat them both down on the table and reached for her hands. "You were amazing today, Madeline. At the Tomb..."

"I cried at the Tomb," she cut in, feeling slightly embarrassed at the memory.

"You're supposed to cry at the Tomb," he countered; eyes serious. "It's supposed to hit you in the gut; the monument, the music. It's supposed to make you feel that way."

"It worked," she whispered. He pulled her closer to him.

"And at the Hospital, with the wounded," he grew soft as he looked down at her wrapped up in his arms. "They loved you there."

"You think so?" She snuggled into him, wishing for just a moment that it was the end of their day, that she could step out of the gown, wash off the makeup and just be with him.

"I know so," he ran his hands over the fabric of her dress. "You know, you never told me what it was you said to that man...with the same injury as you..." His fingers traced the scar on her
"I know," she smiled.

"Well?" He lifted his eyebrows and she laughed.

"If it had been meant to be heard, I would have said it aloud," she leaned up on her toes to kiss him then, tasting the tequila on his lips. "Come on Captain. We have a date at the hottest club in town."

"With the hottest woman in town," he looked her over appreciatively as she stepped away from him.

"Now look who's working too hard," she reached for his hand, pulling him along with her towards the main rooms of their suite. She could feel Harry's hands smooth over the curves of her body, falling free just as they stepped from their room.

And everyone was there; ready and waiting. Thomas, Libby, their Security detail—all dressed in black tie. Maddie couldn't help the bit of laughter that bubble inside of her. She wondered if she would ever get used to having masses of people standing around meticulously dressed and waiting—for her. She wondered if it would ever go to her head but had very little time to think it over as the room sprang right into motion. Thomas was with Harry, scanning him from head to toe, handing him note cards that Harry slid into his jacket pocket. Libby was quick to Madeline, assuring her she had her speech and an extra set of stockings tucked away in her own bag. She glanced over her hair, checked her makeup and with a nod from Thomas, the room was moving.

They looked amazing, really, to the people that they passed. Harry was striking in a tuxedo and Maddie stood tall and statuesque in her long, flowing gown—her bubbly personality topping it off magnificently. And without shame, people stopped and stared. Without reservation, they pulled out cameras and phones and tried to snap a photo of the couple as they moved through the hotel and out to the awaiting motorcade.

"Well would you look at that," Harry nodded to the slew of people gathered outside their hotel with cameras and signs. "It appears as though somebody has become quite the celebrity."

"Are you talking about me?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, amazed at how the crowds continued to grow with every stop.

"Well I certainly wasn't talking about Thomas." Harry snickered as he stood to the side, allowing Maddie to slide into the car before him.

"WE LOVE YOU!!" Chorused from a group of girls as Harry stepped in next to her.

"See," he nodded to his wife. "They love you."

"Please," she rolled her eyes as everyone else sat into place. "They were talking to you."

"Actually," Thomas spoke up; his expression stone serious. "That one was about me." As the car set into motion, laughter followed—circling around each of them.
many weekends at Highgrove, she had enjoyed tea at Windsor Castle, she had run barefoot through the halls of Buckingham Palace. But even still, pulling up to The White House that night drew a chill to her skin. Though she had given up her citizenship and most claims to the United States, there was something about stepping from the car that night, something about standing on those white marble stairs with the President and the First Lady that made that young history buff inside of her simply giddy.

There were a few moments for pictures; bright smiles and stunning gowns; before they were escorted inside to the relatively small reception for Service men and women and their families. Though the President and Mrs. Obama had attended their wedding, this really was the first time Maddie had spent any time speaking to them. The President was personable; at ease and funny. The First Lady shared the same sort of passion for her work that Maddie had and was ecstatic to be sharing this night, this cause with the two of them—both so clearly devoted to the effort to serve the men and women who had served both of their countries.

Maddie's hand slipped easily into Harry's as they approached the East Room. She could hear the sounds of the reception; light music, conversation. She could see the soft lighting, she could smell the food that was being served. They came to a pause behind the President and Mrs. Obama, waiting to be announced no doubt. Leaning close to Harry, her hand tucked into his elbow and her voice dropped.

"Every time we do this, line up to go in, I feel like we're on a football team."

"When you say football..." His eyes flickered in the soft light.

"I mean American football." She rolled her eyes slightly.

"Ah," he nodded with a grin. "We're going to convert you to a Brit yet, I swear to it."

"Anyway," she nudged him. "It reminds me of how they line up and get revved up before they are announced to the field. It makes me feel like I should slap you on the ass and wish you a good game," the corner of her mouth twisted up, knowing his reaction.

"Well I'm all for the ass slapping," his voice held a hint of snark as his hand slipped behind her, offering the slightest of taps on her ass. Maddie stifled a gasp and shook her head, her lip pulling into her mouth. Of course—even when they were being serious, when they were doing their duty, visiting the White House, honoring soldiers, they had to be them. And nobody really expected any less.

But before she could retaliate, before she had the chance to match him with a tap of her own, the announcement was made and they were moving into the East Room with the President and the First Lady. They smiled and walked through the room to their seats and were immediately served. There was light music playing while they ate and conversed with those around them; happy to be meeting more people, happy they were able to have actual conversations.

But they weren't there to simply converse, there was a greater purpose to the evening and before Maddie knew it, the President was rising to the podium. Under the table, she could feel Harry's hand on her knee. This was it, she was up. As the President introduced her and told her story, she couldn't help but be amazed, again, at where she was in her life. When Libby had told her that they had asked that she give a speech on this night, she had been surprised. And then it all began to come together—her ties to the US, her affiliation with and respect for the military, her new royal role. She had discovered that she and the First Lady stood for a lot of the same things when it came to serving their service men and women and their families.
"Ladies and Gentlemen," the President's voice cut into her thoughts and then faded out as the moment washed over her. For a flash of a second, it was too unreal, too crazy. "Her Royal Highness, the Duchess of Sussex." But, as she heard her name called out, she snapped right back to the moment. She turned to smile at Harry, seeing in his eyes that he had the slightest desire to try to throw her. But instead, he squeezed her leg quickly and brought his hands together; joining in the applause around them. Maddie took a deep breath, pulled her speech into her fingers, and smiled wide as she joined the President at the podium.

Maddie reminded herself to breathe as she joined the President in the center of attention. He hugged her close, pressing a kiss to her cheek and turning her over to the room; rejoining their table as she stepped up to the plate. Her fingers twisted around the edge of the podium, hoping to quell the slight tremble she felt at addressing such an audience. "Good Evening, Mr. President, Mrs. Obama," she nodded in the direction of their hosts. "Honored guests, Ladies and Gentlemen," she took one last look at her notes and smiled out at the crowd. "On behalf of my husband and I, I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you for allowing us to be here tonight, with this amazing collection of people in order to celebrate something dear to all of our hearts—and that's the men and women who serve our countries." Maddie took a breath and smiled. "As President Obama so eloquently pointed out, I am a former American," a light chuckle traveled around the room. "I was raised on a farm in Colorado and my family remains there today. Since then I have spent a great deal of my professional life working with people who have experienced trauma, more recently with men and women transitioning back home after a combat tour. But the role from which I wish to speak to you tonight is one I would imagine I share with a great many of you in this room tonight. A military wife. As you may or may not know, my husband is a Captain in the British Army, a first class combat Apache Pilot." Maddie beamed as Harry blushed; a smattering of applause crossing the room.

"During our time together, he and I have been through one tour of duty. Though we weren't married at the time, those four months, for me, came with sadness and fear, some incredibly difficult moments and, as I am sure you aware, an immense amount of pride." Maddie paused for just a beat, swallowing back the way her heart lurched when she remembered. "On our mantle at home, I have two vases of marbles. When Harry was deployed, I was working at St. Joseph's in England with returning service men and women and their families. In a spouse group one evening a husband of a deployed soldier told me that he and his daughter had used vases of marbles as a visual representation of how long his wife would be away. And I thought it was a great idea, I liked what it symbolized. So I purchased two vases and a bag of marbles. I put one marble for every day that he was going to be gone in one vase and at the end of every day, I would move one marble to another vase. Eventually, the amount of marbles in each vase was even and much quicker than it felt, the days he had been away outnumbered the days he had left." She paused for a breath. "I will never forget the day he came home," she looked down to her notes, swallowing back the undeniable urge she had to cry and blinking back tears as she looked back up. "I will never forget the day I stopped moving the marbles. He was home. He was safe. I know that there are many of you in this room tonight who know what that moment felt like; seeing him or her after all of those days. Or for those of you who served, returning home after all of that time. I know that you're probably feeling it now; that urge to laugh and cry all at once." She smiled softly, gathering herself. "And I know that there are those of you in this room who don't know that feeling, who will never know that feeling. Because when your marbles stopped moving, it was because they weren't coming home." Her head bowed and her heart sank. "I won't begin to pretend that I know how you feel, what it's like to sit in your shoes tonight; while we pour out gratitude and pay homage to your loved ones who truly did pay the ultimate price, while we laud them as heroes when in reality they were your heroes; your husbands and wives, your sons and daughters, your mothers, your fathers...I want you to know that my husband and I will never be able to find the words to appropriately express the emotions that come with your stories, will never be able to put
voice to the kinds of gratitude we feel, the way our hearts hurt for your loss....I want you to know
that those vases of marbles that sit, stilled on our mantle, sit there not because I need a reminder
that he came home to me, they sit there as a reminder that there was a chance that he wouldn't.
They sit there to honor those that didn't and those that may have, but with pieces of them missing;
mentally, physically, and emotionally. They sit there for your sons, your daughters, your partners,
your soldiers." She met Harry's eyes. "And for mine. Because the moment we forget them, the
moment we forget all of the sacrifices that you in this room have made and continue to make, the
moment we stop working to take care of our soldiers, those who have come back to us and those
who never will, that is the moment we no longer deserve the amazing gifts and freedoms they
have fought to secure for us." Maddie sniffed and smiled wide. "It is my sincerest hope that the
partnerships that have been forged between our two nations will continue to grow and strengthen
and that the ways in which we honor our military men and women, those home with us now and
those standing a post, will do justice to the magnitude of the ways in which they honor and serve
us—the ways in which you serve us." Maddie's eyes fell on Harry's and she felt her voice waver.
Blinking back the threat of tears, she smiled. "I look forward to meeting many more of you this
evening and to the conversations we're going to have. Thank you for sharing this evening with us
and thank you for your service."

As applause thundered through the room, Maddie folded up her speech and stepped away from
the podium. A deep, clarifying breath calmed her nerves and the smiles from the people she
passed warmed her heart. And, when she returned to her table, the look on Harry's face made her
knees weak. He rose to his feet to receive her, debating his next move. He wanted to take her in
his arms, kiss her senseless but he thought it best to refrain from that. Instead, he leaned in to hug
her and pressed a soft, chaste kiss to her cheek—taking considerable restraint on his part—and
whispered into her ear, "Good Game."

His eyes were twinkling as they pulled apart, his hand pulling hers up to his lips and they shared
just a flash of a second between them before they turned to the rest of the room.

"Thank you," she smiled back at him and then, following the lead of their hosts, she slipped back
into her chair, back into her role.

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As the evening continued, Maddie's hopes were met. They spent a great deal of time rounding the
room, meeting soldier after soldier; family after family. And they never wavered. They smiled
wide, they shook hands, they posed for photos and, more than once, they would sit for minutes
intrigued in conversation, engrossed in the multitude of stories that filled up the room.

As the music drifted over the room, Maddie took advantage of a brief break in the conversation
and snuck back to her table for a drink. As she sipped at the glass of champagne that had been
sitting there, she watched Harry speak animatedly with a small group of soldiers; though they
were talking about combat, they were all laughing and swapping stories. She smiled into her glass
and, when she looked up, the President and First lady had joined her.

"They seem to be doing quite well over there," Michelle nodded to where Harry was with the

"Yes," Maddie smiled. "He really loves stuff like this. And he's amazing at it, so that's good."

"You're not so bad yourself," The President smiled warmly at her.

"Oh wow, thank you." Maddie smiled sheepishly. "I'm incredibly new to the speaking part, to the
public part but I do enjoy meeting people, hearing their stories."

"Me too," Michelle agreed and took a breath, pulling the focus from Harry back to the table. "So. I wanted to ask a favor of you, a favor which you should not feel obligated to meet."

"Okay," Maddie grinned, unable to imagine what sort of favor she wouldn't do for the First Lady.

"Our daughter Sasha went through a bit of a Princess obsession phase."

"A bit?" The President chuckled into his hand.

"She reads everything she can about you," Michelle laughed. "She woke up at four to watch your wedding, was furious we wouldn't let her come with us."

"Oh wow!" Maddie thought it was sweet.

"Anyway," Michelle nudged her still laughing husband, "she would love to meet you and..."

"Absolutely," Maddie nodded quickly. "I would be happy to."

"It's just...in all honesty, I would much rather her look up to you, with all of your education and service, than a Disney version, you know?" Michelle leaned in conspiringly.

"I am so incredibly flattered by that..." Humbled, really. "And I would love to meet her. Is she here right now?"

"She's upstairs in the residence," Michelle nodded. "I can take you up, if you're sure."

"I am absolutely sure," Maddie smiled and glanced around the room; waving to where Libby stood with Thomas, watching the action. She nodded quickly and hurried right over. "I am going to head up to the Residence with Mrs. Obama to meet her daughters."

"Yes Ma'am," Libby nodded. "Did you need me to do anything?"

"No, not at all," Maddie shook her head. "I just didn't want to interrupt the story-teller over there."

"Yes Ma'am," she smiled and moved to rejoin Thomas. The two women said good-bye to the President and slipped, relatively unnoticed, out the door towards the Residence.

^^^Are you still with me?" Harry's voice was soft, amused, as he called out to her from his side of the car. She turned her head towards him, resting back on the seat.

"I am," she smiled, though her eyes felt heavy and her body was exhausted. "Barely."

Their second day of their tour had finally come to an end. After spending time with both of the Obama daughters, sharing tales of Africa and laughing about similar experiences with the press, after shaking a few more hands and smiling for a few more photos, Maddie and Harry had said good-bye to their gracious hosts and had slipped back into the car. The sky was deep black with a handful of stars scattered about and both of them were feeling the effects of their long day.

"I'll trade you what's in my pocket for what's in yours," Harry's lips pulled up in a tired smile; their
connection, their intimacy, more than clear to Thomas and Libby who sat quietly opposite them. Though they were both trained and versed in blending into the background in moments like these, neither of them failed to see the love that was shared.

"How do you know I have something in my pocket?" Maddie's lips pulled higher as Harry played with her fingers.

"It's a leap of faith I'm willing to take," he winked, his other hand stretching towards her pocket. "Come on...take a leap with me."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, swatting at his hand. "Easy Handsy." Her hand slid into the hidden pockets of her dress. She held out one closed fist and one open palm. "Okay. Let's see what you've got. Give it up Captain Handsy."

"Handsy..." He shook his head with a smirk, his fingers slipping into his pocket. Retrieving his item for trade, he held his hands out like hers. "On three?"

"One."

"Two."

"Three." Hands opened and smiles widened.

"Look at that!" Harry laughed. "A plastic toy soldier...with a parachute."

"Mmmm..." Maddie sighed, happy with her switch. "My candy." Her fingers were quick with the wrapper. "I figured as much but it's still so good..." She plopped the minty treat into her mouth and leaned back against the seats, watching Harry unwrap the parachute that was twisted around the toy.

"I can't believe you thought to put something in your pocket for the kids."

"Who said they were for the kids?" Maddie winked. "I see how excited you are over there."

"Please," his eyes narrowed slightly at her reference from the day before. "How did you even know to do something like that? Carry toys in your pocket, just in case."

"Come on, Wales." Maddie nudged him lightly. "I've worked with children for a very long time. You remember the first thing you noticed in my office in Bendal?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"You." He was smug and completely unashamed. And Maddie was instantly reeled in. Her eyelids lowered as she looked to him across the backseat of the car. The stars and the lights from outside cast patterns over them as they moved. It had been a long day, an emotional day, and though Maddie was exhausted in all definitions of the word, the way he was looking at her, the way his hand held her fingers...something inside of her stirred awake.

"Wow..." She sighed, shuffling just a bit closer. "You're really on tonight."

"You were really on today," he pulled her fingers to his lips; kissing them lightly.
"Hmm..." She turned her fingers to stroke his cheek, his jaw; tugging him closer. But before she could bring his lips to hers, before she could completely forget about the other two people in the car with them, they were pulling to a stop outside of their hotel.

"Care to come up for a nightcap?" Harry's eyes twinkled as he flirted with his wife who sighed and pulled away from him.

"I would love to." They parted ways then, only to move from the backseat. Maddie stood on the sidewalk, waiting for him to round the car. The day had caught up with them both and they moved slowly, lazily.

Harry stepped up to her side, his tux coat draped over his arm. His sleeves were rolled up, his tie loose and he just wanted to be next to her, to be close to her at the end of this long day. The time for protocol and propriety was over so his arm wrapped around her easily. He warmed her shoulders and tucked her close; under his arm, next to his side.

She felt so good there, walking next to him through the doors, across the lobby to the bank of elevators. They had half a dozen people with them; security, staff—but they felt alone, together, close. They had expended so much that day that now that it was coming to a close, they were pulling into the other; blocking others out.

As they waited for the elevator, Harry shifted, wrapping his arms around her and hugging her close to him. Maddie sighed and leaned into him, her forehead pressing into his broad chest. She could feel his lips kiss the top of her head, she could feel his hands tight against her body; sliding over her waist, down over her ass and pulling her tighter.

"You're amazing," his voice was low.

"Thank you," she pushed her hands up his back, loving the way he felt against her.

"It's like you were born to do this..." The way he was looking at her was nearly too much to take.

"I was." She grinned.

"Yeah?" He snickered, not entirely sure if he had heard her correctly. "You were born to be a Duchess?"

"Oh!" She laughed out loud, shaking her head. "No, no. Not that. I thought we were talking about loving you..." Her smile tipped to the side. "I was born to do that. Love you."

"Come here," he jerked his head, beckoning her closer. And she went. Her arms tight around his waist, she lifted up on her toes tilting her lips to his.

The photos would run the next day; the ones of Prince Harry in a passionate lip lock with his wife. They were a bit grainy, a bit dark, as they were taken by a cell phone from a bit of a distance. But they were clear enough to show what was happening—clear enough to show how tightly together they were, clear enough to show his hands clutching at her body, her arms wrapped around him. They were clear enough to show a young couple clearly enamored with each other.

They ran with much better photos from their time in Washington DC and a story about how the
city seemed to welcome them with open arms—and about how well the Duke and Duchess had fit in with the people with whom they visited. The district had enjoyed the Royals and wished them luck in their journey to New York—the next stop in their travels.
Chapter 118

Day 3: New York NY

Arrive in Manhattan from Arlington
Wreath at Ground Zero
Visit Firehouse in NY
Down Time.

The flight to New York was early but quick and before they knew it, Maddie and Harry were being ushered into another opulent hotel suite overlooking another amazing city.

"Look at this view," Maddie let out a breath as she gazed out the window. "God I love this city."

"I forget that you lived here," Harry stepped up next to her as the staff moved around them; unpacking, settling, assigning duties and rooms.

"I did," she grinned, remembering her doctoral work with fondness and the hint of stress that always came along when she remembered the rigor of the work she had done here. "The city's been good to me."

"Do you have anyone you would like to meet up with tonight? Anyone from back then?"

"Other than Ella?" Maddie grew excited as she thought of her best friend. "Not really. We could go for a walk on campus later. Maybe I could show you an old pub or two?"

"I'm in." He loved the idea of seeing where she had been when she finished her education; even more so if it meant he was going to get some time alone with his wife in a dimly lit bar and a few drinks. The trip, the few days they had been on, was going magnificently but so far all of their time had been accounted for. This was going to be their first night on their own for any significant amount of time. And he was ready for that.

"Great," Maddie turned from the window as Thomas and Libby stepped closer, Thomas clearing his throat. "Libby! I'm so excited I get to wear pants today!"

"Yes Ma'am," the young woman smiled with a nod. "You have the obstacle course race this morning at the Fire Station."

"Ah yes," Maddie grinned, remembering that the Fire Fighters were going to pit her and Harry against each other in an obstacle course they traditionally used to haze new inductees. Her face lit up as she turned her competitive nature to her husband. "The obstacle course. You're going down Captain." Her voice dropped in warning.

Harry returned a smirk and leaned closer to her, "well not right now. We have something we have to do. But if you're up for it later..." His eyebrows waggled on his forehead and Maddie rolled her eyes.

"Nice." Though there was definitely something about the upcoming challenge that made her want to jump on him.

But first, it was time for work.
"Oh come on!" Maddie groaned into a chuckle when, hours later, they returned back to the room. "I beat you fair and square." Her eyes flickered with the joy of victory as she kicked off her heels and everyone filed in around them.

"Please," Harry rolled his eyes. They had laid a wreath at One World Trade Center, they had met with people there for a bit of time before they had continued onto the Fire Station where they had raced. "It was not fair."

"Such a sore loser, Captain." Maddie loved the look in his eyes; the bite in his voice. It was twisted how turned on she was.

"Not at all," he shook his head. "The match simply wasn't fair."

"What are you even talking about?"

"We were in a Fire Station full of men...by the way..." Harry turned to the staff who were watching their back and forth with amusement. "I would like to thank whoever came up with the genius idea of taking my wife to a Fire Station full of male firefighters." Maddie laughed at him as he swung a pointed finger around the room. "Thank you for that. As if I don't have enough problems around here." The group around them chuckled.

"What are you even saying?"

"I'm saying..." He pulled his shoes from his feet, dropping them to the floor. "That they must have weighted my suit down or something because there is no way you beat me today."

"No way?"

"You don't even run!"

"I swear, when we get back to London, I'm going to run laps around your ass."

"Please," he laughed at her; loving how easily she slipped from work mode to relax mode.

"Excuse me," Thomas took the pause as his chance to step forward. "Is there anything else you need?"

"Oh, no," Harry shook his head, looking to the staff with less of an accusation. "Thank you. We're on tomorrow for the Baseball Training Clinic?"

"Yes Sir," Thomas nodded. "We'll be here at eight, car by ten."

"Great. Thank you."

"Yes," Maddie slid to Harry's side, smiling to the staffers as they began to file out. "Thank you." And when it was just them and a few Security officers, Maddie turned soft eyes to Harry—who she continued to fall for more and more with every event they attended, with the way he was so amazing with people.

"What do you say love," he wrapped an arm around her shoulder, smiling down at her. "Want to take that walk across campus and go meet Ella at the pub?"
"I don't know," she grinned. "Think you can stop crying about losing long enough to have a drink? Or do we need to give you a few more minutes to grieve?"

"Wow," he shook his head, biting the side of his cheek, pulling her into a tight hug; both of his arms strong around her. Through screams of laughter, he brought his lips to hers.

"I didn't lose!" Harry exclaimed; Maddie was quick to roll her eyes as Ella laughed into her glass. They had finished their walk and were so far inconspicuous in a back booth of a bar Maddie used to frequent when she was a student in the city. With their security detail in the booth next to them, they all seemed casual enough to blend in to the normal crowd. Ella had met up with them and the reunion was everything they had thought it would be; hilarious. They had ordered food and a Big Bucket of Beers and they were relaxed in a way they hadn't been since the trip began; catching up and poking fun.

"Oh here we go again," Maddie shook her head.

"You did lose," Ella reassured him with a grin. "I saw it on the news before I met up with you."

"Lovely," Harry groaned into his bottle with a slight upturn of his lips. He was certain the media was having a great time with the pics and blips he and Maddie were handing them.

"You know what else I saw on the news? You with your hands...all over her ass," Ella pointed from Harry to Maddie.

"What?" Maddie laughed.

"Yes! They have like...five different shots, from DC and even today in the city, of his hands on your ass." She winked across the booth to Harry. "Apparently you're quite the ass man."

"See, all I heard just then was you talking about my wife's ass." He grinned back.

"Of course that's all you heard," Ella laughed.

"Maybe you need to watch where you put your hands," Maddie nudged Harry under the table.

"No way," he shook his head. "I am your husband. I am a loyal husband. I am doing my royal duty and I have served my country in a war. Twice. If I want to put my hands on my wife's ass, I will put my hands on my wife's ass."

A moment of paused silence filled the booth before all three of them burst into laughter. Maddie's side hurt as she giggled for what felt like the hundredth time that night.

"Too much?" Harry asked with a naughty grin, finishing off his bottle and reaching for another from the bucket full that sat between them on the table.

"Little bit," Ella held her fingers apart about an inch.

"It was the war part," Maddie sighed, wiping at her eyes and taking the bottle Harry was offering her.
"Yeah, I thought maybe it might be," he winked at her and offered a bottle to Ella.

"Oh no," she shook her head and nudged her glass of ginger ale. "I'm good."

"What?" Harry's lips twitched higher. "You haven't had a drink all night. What's the problem, love? Are we expecting?" He smirked across the table and took a drink.

"Actually...Yes." She nodded; head high as she brought the table to a standstill. "Yes. I'm pregnant."

"Wha..." Maddie's eyes grew wide and Harry's bottle stilled at his lips.

"And..." Ella took a deep breath; diving in. "It's Bishop's."

Harry nearly choked; beer sputtering from his mouth and nose.

"Jesus," Maddie snapped out of her trance, reaching for napkins to mop up the beer Harry had spilled. Her eyes flashed from her husband to her best friend. "Ella..."

"You can't tell him," Ella spoke to Harry who was trying to gather himself as he wiped the front of his shirt, his chin.

"Are you sure?" Maddie spoke up. "You're really pregnant?"

"Yes," Ella smiled, her eyes growing soft. "I took a test and...yes. I'm sure." She turned slightly wet eyes to Harry. "You can't tell him before I tell him. I know he's your best friend but...this is something he should hear from me, don't you think?"

"I..." Harry's hand rubbed at the back of his neck. "Yes. Of course he should hear it from you...Jesus." He shook his head; amazed at the news he had just been handed. "When exactly is that going to happen?"

"I'll be in London in less than two weeks," she spoke softer as everyone relaxed back into their seats. "I know it's been a long time but...I don't know," she shrugged, seeming shy. "I could have called but I thought it was better to do this face to face. You would want to be told face to face, right? If you were going to be a father..."

"Wow." Her words hit Harry in the gut; the mere thought of that kind of news pulsed his heart. "Yes. Yes. I would want to be told...Wow..." He sighed; settling back further into the seat.

"Bishop's going to be a dad."

"He is," Ella nodded and then Maddie watched as her friend—once cold to the idea of this kind of forever—grew teary and smiled wide.

"You're going to be a mother," Harry couldn't help the smile that tugged at his lips; God he wanted babies so badly.

"I am," Ella's eyes welled up even more and Maddie could see; she was happy, settled.

"How are you?" Maddie's hand reached out to Ella's pulling it into her own. "Are you doing okay? Feeling okay and..."

"Yes," Ella nodded, squeezing Maddie's hand. "I'm feeling really well actually. I was...nervous at
first but God...the more time that passes, the more I just..." She swallowed and laughed and shrugged lightly. "I really want this. With Bishop." They all shared a light laugh at the thought, at the reality. "Can you believe that?"

"Yes," Maddie smiled wide, shaking her head as she did. "Yes. I can absolutely believe that."

"Yeah?" Ella raised her eyebrows.

"Of course," Maddie patted her hand.

"You would have a baby with Bishop?"

"Oh no," Maddie shook her head with a giggle. "Harry would never allow me to do that."

"Damn right," Harry sat up, his hand patting her thigh under the table as he smiled at the two of them. "But you," he pointed to Ella with a wide grin. "You can have as many of Bishop's babies as you want."

"Well thank you, Your Royal Highness," Ella smiled at him; relieved that they knew, relieved that they were okay. She had been nervous about telling them but just as the news had made her happy, just as the news had brought unexpected resolution to her life; it brought smiles and excitement to them. And the mood shifted to celebration; disbelief, but celebration.

Eventually the night gave way to early morning and eventually the Royal couple was no longer incognito. Harry could tell when they had been discovered; cell phones had been pulled, people were pointing in what they thought was an inconspicuous manner. But people were respectful, giving them their space. There were a few Graduate students who were at a table not too far from where they sat and, when they spotted Maddie they very politely asked if she would take a picture with them; as an Alum. Feeling giddy from the drinks and from the celebration, Maddie agreed. One of the men let her wear his Columbia hat and she posed for a photo.

The next morning when the photos from their night out were all over the internet, they would see this particular photo and one very similar to it—with Harry off to the side snapping away on his own phone. They would also find, thanks to Harry's inebriated cheekiness, another shot of Harry's hand sneaking across Maddie's ass as they left the bar. Just for fun. Just to mess with them.

They slipped into the car and saw Ella home with plans to see her at the Polo Match in Connecticut and one more time before they would be leaving her. But she would be in London soon, bringing Bishop in on this great big, wonderful secret. And then, who knew how things would shake out. By the time Maddie and Harry made it back to their room, it was late—or early—and they were both just shy of delirious.

"You know I was thinking..." Maddie was a bit giggly as she and Harry slipped into their room; drunk from the beer, from Ella's news. "Remember today when we were at the Fire Station?"

"Oh bloody..." Harry groaned. "What do you want from me Madeline? You beat me. There. I said it. You won, fair and square." He grinned down at her as she pressed her body close to his; his arms wrapping around her. "My beautiful, sexy, crazy wife kicked my ass in the obstacle course today..." He kissed her lips. "I admit it."

"Well..." Maddie sighed, running her hands up his arms, to his shoulders. "There's that but...I was
actually going to make a suggestion."

"A suggestion?"

"Mmm," she nodded, biting at her bottom lip.

"What kind of suggestion?" He watched her cautiously.

"That maybe..." Her fingers ran along the collar of his shirt in what he knew to be a move she pulled out when she wanted something. "I don't know, maybe we could get you your own uniform."

"My own..." His eyes narrowed curiously for a split second before it registered; and a cocky grin spread across his face. "You want me to get a Fire Fighter's uniform?"

"Hmm..." She warmed at the mere thought of it. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" He arched an eyebrow; his hand tightening on her body. He leaned in closer, his stubbly chin rubbing against the skin in her neck as she squealed. "You want me to dress up as a Fire Fighter, storm into the house..." He kissed up her neck to her ear. "Swing you over my shoulders and take you..." He kissed along her jaw. "To my bed?" He grinned wickedly as he pulled back.

"Well," Maddie took a deep breath, turned on more than she would ever care to admit. "It is almost my birthday."

"Yes it is," he nodded.

"Yes it is," she grinned.

"Well, I'll see what I can do." And with that, Harry lifted her from the ground, into his arms and turned towards their bed. It had been a long day and they had yet another ahead of them.

"Also..." She looked down at him. "I told you I would take you down on that obstacle course."

"Oh for Heaven's sake," Harry groaned; dropping both of them onto the mattress. He was quite certain he was never going to hear the end of it.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ Day 4: NYC Manhattan/GREAT campaign/Baseball training session with young players Reception and Dinner benefitting the American Friends of the Royal Foundation

"Will says hello," Harry called out to Maddie as he ended his phone call with his brother; handing his phone to Thomas as the four of them stepped into the awaiting cars on their way to the Youth Baseball Training Clinic.

"Yeah?" Maddie smiled brightly, slipping in next to him. "How's Arthur?"

"Perfect," Harry's hand found home on her knee, the car pulling into motion with Libby and Thomas in the car behind them.
"Man," Maddie laughed, laying her hand over his. "There are just babies everywhere right now..."

"I know," Harry agreed, his thumb rubbing over one of her fingers.

"You want one don't you," her voice was low as she turned her head to him.

"You know that I do," he pulled her hand to his lips; pressing a kiss to the top. "I just can't believe that Bishop is going to be a dad before I am. I mean...I married first. I grew up first."

"Is it some kind of race you two are having?" Maddie smirked, watching the competitive side of her husband emerge.

"A race I'm losing," Harry sighed dramatically, turning sweet, puppy dog eyes to Maddie.

"Aw come on, don't look at me like that." She narrowed her eyes and her tone. "She's nearly two months along. There's no way for you to beat him now."

"Maybe there is," he shrugged, enjoying the light banter on their short trip to the clinic.

"Ha!" Maddie's laughter rang out in the car. "Harry!"

"I'm not sure you know how powerful my Windsor..." Maddie's hand clamped over his mouth in effort to save the driver and security from the rest of that sentence.

"Henry Charles," she warned with a smile. He met her eyes, kissed her hand, and eased up.

"I cannot believe you did that!" They had spent the morning with the kids who worked with the Youth Baseball Clinic. They had participated in the trainings, in the drills, and then they had stepped up to hit a few pitches. And then it had happened. Though Harry had recovered in the moment, to the outside world, from what Maddie had done, in truth he had held it all in until this moment when they were back in the car, away from the ears of the press.

Maddie giggled and Harry shook his head.

"I cannot believe you bloody did that. Are you trying to make me look bad?"

"How does that make you look bad?" She rolled her eyes, her smirk never fading.

"You stepped up to the plate and pointed..." He held his arm out, acting out the moment for her. "You pointed off in the distance like that baseball player..."

"Babe Ruth," Maddie offered. "You're talking about Babe Ruth. We are in New York! I had to do it!"

"And then you bloody hit it there!" His eyes went wide, his voice high.

"Well if you don't hit where you point, you just look ridiculous," Maddie shrugged, loving the effect this was having on him.

"I can't believe you."
"I grew up with boys, in the country. We played. What did you want me to do? Pretend I don't know how to play baseball?" Her shoulders shuddered at the idea. "I don't even know how to be that woman. And you should know that."

"I know," he sighed, his head tipping back against the seat. "I'm just never, ever going to hear the end of this. First the obstacle course, then this. I can see it now; Mike, Will...fuck. Even Dave's going to have something to say."

"Ah come on Captain," Maddie's eyes turned sweet as she reached out to ruffle his hair. "The kids loved it."

"Of course they loved it," Harry sighed, smiling despite himself. "It was fucking amazing."

"It really was," Maddie agreed, leaning to kiss his lips before they settled back in their seats. Though Harry was making a fuss, though his ego was slightly roughed up, he loved it. She was right; the kids had come out of their seats, cheering for her when she did it. She had smiled wide and tossed her bat to the side and high fived all of them as she rounded the bases. Harry could already see it playing out in the media; the news, the press. Yes, it meant some teasing for him back home, but he would be a liar if he said that watching Maddie that afternoon hadn't turned him on.

"You look beautiful tonight," Harry leaned to Maddie's ear, telling her for at least the tenth time that night.

"I'm starting to think you want something from me," Maddie whispered into her water glass, trying to remain inconspicuous as the speaker geared up to introduce her husband. They had finished dinner at the Reception for the Friends To the Royal Foundation. They had eaten their meals and had spent time meeting contributor after contributor and now Harry was preparing to make a speech.

"A man can't tell his wife she's beautiful without there being a hidden agenda?" His lips tipped into a smile.

"I suppose a man can," she shrugged, still not entirely convinced.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," the speaker's voice cut into their moment. "His Royal Highness, the Duke of Sussex." As the clapping began, Harry pulled Maddie's hand to his lips for a quick kiss before he smiled wide and turned his attention to the crowd. Maddie joined in on the applause, pride beaming from her eyes like the sun.

"Good Evening," Harry smiled out at the crowd, looking sharp and polished and making Maddie's body warm. "I would like to first thank you all for the generous welcome you have bestowed upon my wife and I. Though my reception in the United States has always been a great one, this trip in particular has been especially warm and welcoming. I can truly only contribute that to the addition of my wife, Madeline." Harry's eyes sought her out and his grin stretched. "As I am sure you have all seen, she has been taking me to school in the Great American Pastime as well as, what I still believe was a fixed match in an obstacle course at Ladder Fifteen yesterday morning." A round of chuckles and a smattering of applause rang out into the crowd. "The late President Kennedy once said, on a State visit to Paris, 'I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I have enjoyed it.'" The crowd warmed even further. "And in that spirit, after witnessing the outpouring of affection we have seen in these few short days, and the way she has
stepped out in front of me on more than one occasion, I do not think it entirely inappropriate to
introduce myself." His left eye twitched in the slightest of winks as his grin spread. "My name is
Harry and I have been fortunate enough to accompany Madeline to the United States—and so far
I have thoroughly enjoyed it."

Maddie was beaming up at him, no doubt; fighting the blush that wanted to rise to her cheeks, the
way her eyes wanted to roll at the way he was speaking about her. In one, brief opening
statement, he had managed to charm a roomful of people—his wife included. Harry was
goood. And he was all hers.

And suddenly, quite unexpectedly, all she wanted to do was get him back to their fancy hotel suite
and out of that expensive tuxedo. Harry went on to thank the room for all of the support they had
shown The Foundation. He told a few stories about the people that The Foundation had reached,
those it had supported. He invited everyone to continue on in the amazing partnerships that had
been forged and then, with that winning style he owned with ease, he thanked them and
surrendered the stage.

But Maddie's fascination with him continued. She watched as he returned to her side, leaning in to
accept his kiss to her cheek. She inhaled as his skin roughed against hers and squeezed his arm
gently as he slipped away. But she never stopped watching him.

It was only a little over an hour longer before they were back in the car and leaving the event.
They had met so many people, shaken so many hands and though they were tired, they were
smiling. It had been a great day. Harry had been right, their time in the US thus far had been
exceptional—both professionally and personally. The response to the new Duke and Duchess had
been wonderful and both Harry and Maddie delighted in watching the other flourish in their roles,
in their duty.

And that had always been the case between them. Since day one, Harry had been drawn in by the
amazing work Maddie did in Bendal; impressed with how smart she was, how dedicated, how
connected she was to the people. And it would have been a massive understatement if Maddie
said she was anything less than flat out turned on by the way Harry could work a room, by the
way his words brought the crowd to warmth, by his devotion to the military families he worked so
hard for.

And it didn't hurt that he could wear a tux like nobody else she knew.

Maddie really didn't know what time it was when they returned to their hotel but the lobby was
quiet, asleep. She stifled a yawn and tucked her arm into Harry's, moving closer to him;
connecting at the end of their day—something that would come to be habit for them. The
shedding of the day, the drawing closer together; tuning the world out. They took the elevator ride
to their floor in silence; Harry's lips pressing to her head a few times before the bell rang out and
they were there.

As Thomas gave them a few notes and reminded them of their departure time the next day,
Maddie stood off to the side, leaning against a long table in the living space and listened with a
small smile. With polite nods and words of thanks, she watched as the staff filed out of their suite;
leaving only a few security officers who, reading the feel in the room, retired to their own space.

And then it was just Harry and Maddie.

He stood midway across the room from her, watching as the last door closed on them before he
turned his steady gaze to his wife. He tugged at his cuffs; rolling his shirtsleeves up as he took a
"Is everything okay?" He raised his eyebrows. He could tell the mood had altered just slightly, the way her features were soft, the way she was watching him move. He could tell there was something different though he couldn't quite place it. He had no idea what she was currently resolving in her mind.

"Yes," she sighed into a smile. "Everything is..." She trailed off and met his eyes. "Yes. Everything is okay."

"You're not mad about the speech are you?" He tugged at his tie, slipping it off his neck. "You know I was just teasing about the fixed obstacle course," he stepped up to her then; his arms moving to her waist, lips to her neck. "And I love that you hit where you aim."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, her head tossing back, giving him easier access. "No, no. Of course I'm not mad."

"What is it then?" He pulled back just so, smiling up at her from the kiss he had just left on her collar bone.

"Nothing," she shook her head; fingers moving into the spike red hair as she stared down at him with adoration. "I was just...thinking."

"Do you want to let me in?" His lips whispered up her neck to her lips where he pressed one soft kiss before pulling back. "On what you were thinking?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie's lips pressed together and her eyes set into his and she was flushed with a yearning; a desire that choked her up. She took a deep, clarifying breath and nodded; her eyes sparkling with a sort of anticipation. "Yes. Yes, I think I do."

"Excellent," he grinned, his hands tightening at her waist.

"Do you think you could..." Maddie cleared her throat, trying to reign in her sudden rush of excitement before she gave too much away. "Do you think you could pour a few drinks and meet me in our room in a minute?"

"Sure," he agreed quickly; his eyes scanning her face for a clue. "I can do that."

"Thank you," she leaned in, kissed him softly and then slipped from his grasp. Harry watched as she swooshed away from him and then, with a curiosity he couldn't shake, he went to fetch the drinks she had requested.

When Harry stepped into their room, glasses in hand, he kicked the door shut behind him and quickly looked for his wife.

"Maddie?" He called out with a chuckle.

"I'm in here!" She called through the open bathroom door. "I'm just unpinning my hair. I'll be right out."

"Here..." He moved towards the sound of her voice, stepping into the bathroom and finding her with a grin. Maddie stood with her back to him, still in her dress, but without the heels. She looked shorter, fabric pooled slightly at her feet. She met his eyes in the mirror and grinned in return.
"Can I help?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Sure," she nodded as he stepped up behind her, taking the drink he offered. Harry took a long sip and sat his glass on the counter around her before his hands moved to her hair. She loved it when he did this; when he stood behind her and helped with such a slow, methodical, mundane task. She loved having his hands in her hair, his focus on her.

There were only a few pins left when Maddie let her own hands fall from her head, watching as Harry ran his fingers through her locks; checking to make sure they had them all. And when he was sure, his eyes shifted to meet hers in the mirror and he leaned forward to kiss her shoulder; his hands resting on either side of her on the counter. Maddie's smile stretched even further and with a small nod that he barely noticed, a small nod that was meant for her, to steel her own nerves, she turned around, still in the gate of his arms.

"Hi," she smiled up at him; loving his size in comparison to hers—his height, his broad shoulders. She felt protected, she felt feminine.

"Hi," he grinned and she could tell he was impatient, she could tell that the seed she had dropped in his ear was blossoming—but he waited for her. And for that, she fell even deeper in love with him.

"So..." She took a breath, feeling suddenly nervous—in the best way possible. "There's something I want to talk to you about, something I want to...give you." She seemed unsure of her word choice as she spoke and that only piqued his curiosity even further.

"Something you want to give me?" His forehead crinkled up.

"Mmm..." She nodded and then, without moving from her spot, she reached across his arm and into her toiletry case that sat on the counter.

And when her hand returned, she held out to him a small, slim, flat pink case. And for a second, he was probably the most confused he had ever been, for a second he wondered what kind of something for him she would have kept in her toiletry bag; for a second he didn't know how to respond.

And then, with a loud, pounding beat of his heart; that second passed. And he knew.

"That's..." He pointed down at the box, his eyes flashing to hers.

"My birth control pills," she finished for him with a small smile.

"What are you..." His voice was hoarse, his heart thumping wildly.

"I'm supposed to start this new pack tomorrow." She took a deep breath. "And I was thinking that maybe...maybe you should decide if I take them or if I don't."

"Maddie..." Harry's eyes grew wide as his body moved reflexively towards her.

"And if I don't, then we..."

"Have a baby," he finished for her; completely unable to stop the way his entire body lifted; the way his smile pulled nervously at his lips.
"Mmm Hmm," Maddie nodded, slightly nervous in her own resolution. "At least we would not be trying to...not."

"Wow..." Harry let out a deep breath, his hand moving to his chest, over his heart. "Jesus Madeline, you really know how to hit a guy, don't you." This wasn't the first time they had entertained the idea, but every single time it hit him like a truck.

"You can say no," she hurried ahead of him. "You can stay strong to all of the reasons we lined up as to why we were going to wait." She looked up at him; serious and simple. "Or...or we can throw caution to the wind for a little while. We can be married and in love and reckless in a way that's not at all reckless..." She laughed lightly, watching the way his face grew brighter, the way his eyes began to crinkle at the corners.

"Is this about Ella and..."

"No," Maddie shook her head with a laugh. "It's not. That's not why you have a baby, right? I mean. I'm sure that having babies everywhere doesn't do anything to diminish my overwhelming desire to make a baby with you..."

"Overwhelming?" He breathed; inching closer, feeling the weight of her words in every bone.

"God Harry," she groaned. "You have no idea how much I want this." Her voice was deep and syrupy and nearly knocked him to the ground. He gulped back the emotions that pooled in his throat and stepped even closer to her.

"Maddie," he whispered, his left hand leaving the counter to pull up into her hair, bringing her forehead to meet his.

"Harry," she whispered in return; wanting to give him some time, some space but not having it in her to step away. They stood, just like that for a few moments; both of them running it over and over in their minds; their hearts. Harry took it all, tossed it around; here she was, his beautiful wife—his competitive, sarcastic, brilliant, loving, loyal wife—offering him everything he had ever wanted. And, though he knew there were reasons they had decided to wait, he also knew that all of those reasons were workable, he knew they could handle all of them.

And then a decision was made.

Harry nodded, the slightest of movements, before his hand slid from her hair, down her neck, across her shoulder and over the length of her arm. Slipping the small box of pills from her hand, he pulled back just enough to really meet her eyes. Maddie had never in her life felt so alive, so full of this restless sort of anticipation; her heart was pounding in her ears and her eyes were swimming and bright.

"So?" She arched an eyebrow, certain he could see into the depths of her soul in that moment.

He leaned in to kiss her, just below the ear where he whispered, "Duke."

Maddie's breath sucked into her lungs as he moved to kiss her jaw. "Duchess."

And then, with a big, shaky breath, he pulled back, met her eyes, and tossed the pills into the wastebasket beside them. "Baby."

"Baby?" Her eyes welled up and her heart leapt into her throat.
"Baby." He repeated just seconds before his mouth closed over hers.

The decision was made and suddenly...everything was different.

A rush of air drew into their lungs as they sucked together magnetically. Harry's arms moved around her, scooping her into his strong embrace and Maddie let out a tiny gasp as he pressed her tightly to his chest. And for a split second Harry worried that the abundance of joy that he felt in that moment might crush her so he eased up just a bit, just enough so that Maddie could pull her arms out from between them and wrap them around his neck, holding his face to hers as she kissed him back with all she had.

Everything was different. The kisses that started slow and soft and grew in intensity. The way he pulled her up into his arms, completely disregarding the gown that most likely cost thousands of dollars, completely disregarding anything they had to do the next morning, any of the sleep they should be getting, and he took her from the room. The way he sat her back on her feet next to their bed without moving his lips from hers.

Everything was different. The way she tugged hungrily at his clothes, the way he slipped hers from her body in a delicate, mindful way. The way she pulled him back to her, a fire in her eyes that made him groan from deep inside his chest. The way they didn't speak a recognizable word as they moved into the bed—finding speaking completely unnecessary.

Everything was different. The hands that roamed over her curves. The moans in his ear. The way his lips whispered over her skin, paying homage to her body. The way her fingers pressed encouragingly into the skin of his shoulders, pulling him closer and closer to where he was supposed to be, where he was meant to be.

He would be lying if he said that this moment wasn't enormous, if he said that it was just another love making session with his wife; just sex. It was so much bigger than that, bigger than words or stories or analogies. It was enormous. He had been having sex for a long time, making love to Maddie for years but this—this moment when they were using sex to create life—he would forever be unable to describe it.

This time when he took her breast into his mouth, when he roused it to attention with his tongue—he thought of what it meant for her to offer this to him. This time when he licked his way down her body, when he slipped between her thighs and kissed her with his warm wet mouth, when he did his level best to pull her as close to the edge as he already was—all he could think about, all he could think about was this amazing woman, this beautiful body, this magnificent mind and soul and this indescribable gift she was handing to him. He knew it was cheesy, he knew that he was being sentimental and emotional but fuck, he had wanted this his entire life.

And she was handing it over to him; in the most mind-blowing way possible.

He paused—for a fraction of a second—before entering her and he struggled. He struggled with how heavy with love his heart felt. He struggled with his want and desire to say something to her in this moment, knowing his words would only come out cheesy and goofy and...he struggled to keep from crying, to keep from laughing at himself for wanting to cry and then—because she knew him better than anyone in the world and because she was so uniquely her in this moment—Maddie took control. She turned her face to kiss the palm of the hand that held her so gently. She blinked at the tears in her eyes and she pulled him to her; one hand at his hip, one hand on the scruff of his neck, one fluid motion that took them both to this entirely new place.

And the breath that pushed from her lungs as he settled inside of her was light with the love that
was in the room. And with every stroke and every push, Maddie felt Harry loving her, Harry felt Maddie surrendering to him a part of her that would join with a part of him to make a baby. And it was the sort of amazement that had eluded him; the combination of all of the glorious physical sensations that came with sex and all of the rush of emotion that came with what was happening, what they were doing.

Everything was different when making love with the hope, the possibility of creating another person. It was heavy and serious and carried a gravity that Harry could have never understood until this moment. Though they had only just made this decision, though they had no idea how it would all play out, that night, on Day 4 of their tour, they had moved to a higher level of closeness; a higher level of intimacy.

When Maddie called out his name as she neared the end, when she scratched lightly at his shoulder and let the most delicious sort of abandon wash over her, Harry held onto for as long as he could and then he let go; falling apart inside of her. And when, after their breathing had calmed, after their hearts had slowed, Harry lifted his body off hers, moving to pull from her, Maddie held tight and pulled him back.

"Stay," she whispered, wiping at a small, stray tear in her eye. "Just for a minute. Just...stay." And he nodded, and returned to her, his face nuzzling into her neck as they held each other tight.

"I love you," he spoke against her skin and she chuckled. "I do. I adore you...more than you'll ever know, Madeline."

"I love you too baby," she hugged her arms around him and kissed the top of his head. "I love you too."

After a while he left her side, to clean up, to bring water to bed, to take a deep breath and allow it all to wash over him; what may have just happened in that hotel room in New York. And when he returned to their bed, he couldn't help the softer way he looked at her. He crawled in next to her, offering her a drink which she sleepily took, tasted and tucked away before curling up in his arms. And though he knew it was cliché, knew it was silly, he couldn't help it when his hand spread out over the soft of her belly, he couldn't help the hope that filled his heart. He couldn't help the way he felt he had just opened up his world to a whole new wonder
Day 5: Greenwich, CT

Annual Sentebale Polo Cup

When Maddie woke the next morning, her smile hit her lips before her eyes even opened. He was snuggled up behind her, his arm tossed over her hip in a looser version of the grasp he had on her when they fell asleep. Her eyes pulled open and she smiled wide. Her entire body warmed as she remembered what had happened the night before; the new, great big steps they were taking.

Her hand reached for his and he stirred behind her; not enough to wake, just enough to tighten his hold, to pull her closer. She could feel the slight morning stubble on his chin as he nuzzled against her. With a happy sigh, she turned to face him; his hand sliding around her as she moved.

"Harry..." She whispered; tucking close to him, enjoying her smallness against his tall, broad body. She tickled his chin with her finger, pressing a kiss at the juncture of his collar bones. "Captain Wales..." She smiled sweetly; inching closer to his warm, naked body. "Wake up baby..." She slid her hands down his chest to his stomach. "I need you."

And then she felt him stir; she felt his hands tighten at her back, felt him begin to harden against her hip.

"Madeline..." His voice was gravelly as he forced his eyes open. Though he tried for stern and annoyed, the smile was bright in his eyes, wide on his lips. "What are you trying to do to me?" He hugged her close, his body reacting to the way hers was pressed against him.

"I'm trying to make you a father." The sweet innocence of her words mixed with the sultry way in which she said them snapped his entire body awake. "Care to help me out with that?"

His eyes washed over her face, taking her in, and then he moved. "Absolutely." He rolled them both so that she was on her back and as his hands ran down her arms, lifting them up and over her head, his lips lowered to hers and everything in him heated up. Maddie moved her legs, making room for him and when she felt him, stiff and ready; she gasped into his mouth and tightened her fingers that were linked with his. And without warning, without much preamble—if her body pressing against his hadn't aroused him, her words most certainly did—Harry pressed into her; groaning at the warm wetness that awaited him.

"Good morning," he smiled down at his wife.

"Good morning," she repeated, letting him settle deep inside of her for just a moment before she arched up against him and he took her cue.

Pulling up to the Polo Club in Greenwich was the first time since they arrived that she felt the familiar pull of home. Her heart warmed at the realization that in that instant, the home she was referring to was London. It was a bit of a dreary morning; cloud cover and a mist of rain had settled over the sprawling green countryside. As the car slowed to a stop, Maddie patted Harry's hand that had rested on her knee the entire trip and flashed him a smile. And when he smiled back, she felt the flush rise to her skin.
Maddie rolled her eyes at herself. Ever since they had decided to throw away the birth control pills the night before something inside of her had shifted. Though she had pulled the pills from the trash, not wanting the housekeeping staff to be in on their new little adventure, this change in their relationship had turned her into a giddy, silly, and completely horny woman. She was convinced, in that moment, that humans were so much more animalistic than she had ever given credit to. Maybe that base level drive to procreate had taken over her brain. She laughed to herself as she looked him over, her pulse quickening even then, in the car—ready to step out and greet people. She wanted him; on a basic, instinctual level.

"Pull it together," she whispered to herself; causing Harry to glance in her direction just as the doors were pulled open. With a quick smile and wink to him, Maddie slid her knee out from under his hand and stepped from the car.

They were quickly greeted by Cathy Ferrier, the Chief Executive Officer of Sentebale. Maddie really enjoyed the time she was able to spend with the smart, lovely woman who headed up the Foundation. She was there to hug them hello, press kisses to cheeks and introduce them to the property owners and operators. Maddie managed to pull it together and let her mind move past making babies with Harry for at least long enough to do her job.

But only barely. The idea of him putting on those white polo pants and mounting a horse—she had to physically shake her head to try to rid her mind of the thought.

"Maddie," Harry's voice pulled her attention to him. "I would like you to meet a great friend of mine..." His hand reached out to pat the arm of the tall, darkly handsome man next to him. "And the best polo player in the world."

"Stop," the man's voice was deep and rich and Maddie's grin pulled further.

"Nacho Figueras, my wife; Maddie."

"Your Royal Highness," he caught her hand in his; bringing it to his lips. "It's wonderful to meet you."

"It's wonderful to meet you too," Maddie grinned as he leaned in to kiss her cheeks. "I've heard amazing things about you and I know that my husband appreciates your continued support of Sentebale."

"Anything I can do to help," he matched her grin and turned towards probably the most beautiful woman Maddie had ever seen in real life. "And this is my wife, Delfina Blaquier."

The two women shook hands and offered hellos and just as quickly as Maddie could open her mouth to ask more about her, they were being ushered off to the tent where everyone was waiting. Again; waiting for them. They would be enjoying a luncheon where Harry would give a speech to thank all of the contributors and then the polo match would commence. And the work began.

"Right this way Ma'am," Libby gestured towards where Maddie would be sitting to watch the match. She had shaken many, many hands; made small talk with many people and now it was time to watch her husband do his thing. Maddie's smile widened as she saw Ella waiting for her.

"Thank you Libby," Maddie smiled as the young woman moved to her seat just off to the side
behind her. "Ella!" She opened her arms to hug her best friend.

"Your Royal Highness," Ella's eyes gleamed as she dipped into a slight curtsey before hugging Maddie.

"You did not just do that."

"I absolutely did," she hugged tight and stepped back. "You look amazing today."

"Thank you," Maddie smiled and gestured for them to sit. "You do too. Thank you for coming."

"Wouldn't have missed it."

"You could have at least let me cover your ticket," Maddie's eyes narrowed just so.

"Not a chance," Ella shook her head, reaching for her glass of iced tea. "I'm a big fan of the work Sentebale does. You know that."

"I do," Maddie nodded, her hand reaching to squeeze Ella's. "I'm just really happy you're here."

"Me too," Ella squeezed back and the two women shared a look between them; of love and friendship.

"So..." Maddie smiled a thank you to the waiter who brought her the iced tea she had requested. "How are you feeling?"

"Really good," Ella's face softened as the conversation moved. "I've actually felt really great since I found out."

"Are you nervous?" Maddie watched as Ella shook her head, her eyes wide and open and...happy.

"No," her voice was soft and small. "I know that maybe I should be? Maybe I should be a wreck, but I'm not. I...I never thought I would want this. But I do."

"Yeah," Maddie smiled; her heart warming. "So what happens next? Or do you even know?"

"No," she shook her head, glancing out at the field as the horses began to appear. "I know what I want...or more accurately who I want but..." She shrugged, looking off into the distance as she grew sad. "But I have absolutely no claim to him anymore."

"No?" Maddie raised her eyebrows knowing exactly who they were talking about. "My guess is he would disagree."

"Well I guess we'll see," Ella looked down and took a deep breath. "Anyway...if he wants me or if he doesn't, I'm sure he'll be a good father."

"Bishop?" Maddie grinned. "Are you kidding? Bishop will be an amazing father."

"Yeah?" Ella smiled, her eyes dancing at the thought. "You think so?"

"Absolutely," Maddie nodded and Ella relaxed.
"What about you?" She studied the blonde Duchess next to her. "When are you and Harry going to get on it?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie grinned, a flush rising up her neck and into her cheeks. For a split second, she contemplated telling her, letting her in on their little secret. But as the horses trotted out to the field and she saw him, her heart grew in her chest and she changed her mind. Maybe she wanted to keep this little bit for just them—at least for a while longer. "I don't really know." And, thankfully, Ella was watching with the rest of the crowd as the players took to the field; lining up before them. And she missed the way Maddie's face softened as she watched Harry.

"Honest to God," Ella's voice was low as she leaned closer. "You know that I adore Bishop and that nobody does it for me quite like he does."

"It?" Maddie raised her eyebrows; amused at the way Ella's thoughts flowed.

"But I have no words for how sexy Polo is." She fanned herself with her hand as Maddie chuckled next to her. "Maybe it's the pregnancy hormones, but I can barely contain myself."

Maddie giggled quietly. "Well try your best to keep it in your pants."

"I make no promises," Ella winked and Maddie grinned. She was so happy she had this time with her friend, time to watch and enjoy the match and catch up. "I wonder if I have some kind of crazy condition...What do you think?"

"I don't know," Maddie grinned. "Are you attracted to the horses or the riders?"

"The riders." Ella rolled her eyes and then both of their attention was pulled from the conversation as they polo ponies ran past them. "Sweet Jesus, the riders," Ella's jaw slacked for just a moment before her eyes met Maddie's and they both laughed; focusing their attention and reigning it in.

"Well I think you're okay then," Maddie smiled and brought her hands together to join the group in applause and just like that, the match had begun.

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As the halftime break neared an end, Maddie and Ella were walking through the crowd on their way back to their seats. There were people everywhere; filing through the crowded walkways and Maddie's Protection Officers were close by as they moved. As they slowed to a stop in the traffic flow, they couldn't help but overhear a group of young women who were gathered together in front of them.

"I'm sorry but that man..." One of the women let out a long, heavy breath. "Fucking hot."

"Fucking hot." Another agreed.

"He's just so...tall and broad and...did you see the way he controls that horse?" Yet another spoke up. Maddie smiled at Ella who raised her eyebrows; listening to their tipsy back and forth.

"He rides that horse like a fucking God," the first woman pointed out.

"I honestly can't even deal with him sometimes," the second one groaned into her glass. "That Maddie is one lucky bitch."
And Maddie's eyes flew wide as Ella grabbed her arm. They were talking about Harry.

"She really is. UGH. If I were her, I would take him off that horse and drag him straight to the showers."

"I would take him off that horse and..."

"Ahem," Ella cleared her throat, unable to hold it in any longer. Maddie's eyes flashed even wider as she turned to Ella; quickly recovering when the women spun around.

"Oh. My. God."

"Hello," Maddie waved her fingers, watching as the women realized who she was; as the absolute humiliation began to wash over them.

"Oh my God..." One of the women clutched her stomach; nearly ill as she remembered their words. "Have you..."

"Yeah," Ella nodded; amused.

"Oh my God," another groaned, the mortification was too much as they looked at the wife of the man they were just lusting over.

"It's okay," Maddie smiled politely and took a step to the left; following where Sampson had cleared a path for them.

"I'm so, so sorry," the first woman shook her head; wishing she could run and hide.

"It's okay," Maddie shook her head as they moved past them; Ella snickering as she walked. "And you're right..." Maddie lowered her voice and smiled wide. "He is hot." And as the women gasped into stunned laughter, Maddie turned and hurried back to her seat.

"Oh my God..." Ella laughed as she and Maddie slipped back into their seats.

"I cannot believe you did that," Maddie turned an accusatory glare at her friend for drawing the attention to them.

"Me?" Ella pointed at her chest. "Did you hear what those women were saying?"

"Of course I did," Maddie shook her head.

"And?"

"And what?" Maddie shrugged.

"And what?!" Ella's eyebrows lifted. "These women are...Maddie. Those women were talking about how hot your husband is."

"I know," Maddie nodded, watching as the players returned to the field. "I heard them."

"And you just casually agree with them and move on?"

"Yes," Maddie laughed. "What am I supposed to do?"
"I don't know."

"And he is hot."

"You are a better woman than I."

"Come on Ella. I mean...look at him." Together their eyes watched as the game moved past them, focusing on Harry as he rode. "Those white pants, that riding crop. He's sweaty and a little dirty from the rain and the mud and...God. He really is riding that horse."

"Maddie!" Ella gasped under her breath. "What has gotten into you?"

"Sorry," she grinned, blushing slightly as her body stirred; remembering. "Sorry. It's just...I can't really blame them."

"That's big of you. I don't know that I would be so calm about it."

"Well," Maddie lowered her voice, shifting just a bit closer. "The thing about it all is that after this match is over, he's going to climb off that horse, he's going to smile for the cameras; charm, charm, charm and then..." A flicker of triumph flashed in her eyes. "He's going home with me. And between you and I...that horse isn't the only thing he rides like a God."

"Madeline!" Ella's voice dropped with her jaw. Maddie giggled at the shocked expression on her friends face. "Seriously. What has gotten into you?"

And honestly, Maddie didn't know but whatever it was—it was warming very single inch of her body, every pore; every nerve. This was getting out of hand.

Maddie moved swiftly through the crowd, smiling as she passed through; offering a polite nod that spoke of a woman who was on a mission. The match was over and Harry's team had been triumphant. Ella had excused herself to run to the restroom, to search for crackers and ginger ale and Maddie had made a decision. She had about fifteen minutes before the players would be called to the stand to accept their awards and that gave her a small window of time to find him; to convince him.

Sampson and Arthur were close behind, keeping in step with her quick clip. The rain from earlier filled her nostrils with every deep breath she took trying to steady the way blood was coursing through her body.

She felt a flush travel to her cheeks when her mind stopped to think about where she was going; what it was she was doing. She knew it was the slightest bit irresponsible; the risks were great if they were caught. But she couldn't help it. Just the thought of him sweaty and hot and roughed up from the match—drew her pulse to the quick. And the images of him riding that horse; galloping full speed, standing to stretch as the wind whipped that polo shirt around his muscles.

She had to pause, take a breath, and gather her wits before she continued to the stables. Risks and responsibilities aside—there was nothing that would keep her from what she was about to do. The ground evened out as she drew closer; the smell of the animals, the hay, the water piercing into her senses.
As she passed riders and handlers, they offered polite nods; a quick dip of their necks indicating their recognition, their respect. Maddie smiled and waved and continued on. She knew where to find him; knew exactly where he was, most likely offering his pony an apple as he slid out of his pads and readied for the awards presentation. The thought of him sliding out of anything made her stomach quiver in excitement.

Entering the stables, she made a sharp turn to the right and her pace increased; she was so close to him now she could barely stand it. And then she was there. Maddie smiled and stopped a few doors before they reached the room Harry was in and she turned to her two officers, swallowing any pride she was holding onto and went for it.

"Would you two mind staying right here? I have something I need to speak to Harry about alone and..." She swallowed. "And I would appreciate it if you would keep the area clear?"

Maddie wasn't really sure if they believed her or if they didn't, but for the rest of her life she would be grateful for the way they didn't even blink before they nodded and stood down.

"Thank you," she grinned and, spinning on her heels, she hurried forward towards the room. Jim was standing just outside the door, casual and easy going and just beyond him, Maddie could see Harry inside; tossing his helmet to the ground, stretching his arms over his head.

And every intimate part of her body ached for him to touch her.

"Ma'am," Jim smiled a greeting and Harry's eyes snapped towards them; surprised to see her there.

"Jim," she smiled, tearing her eyes from her husband's sweaty body, from his mudded up pants and roughed up hair. "Jim, I would like to speak to my husband alone for a moment. Would you mind joining the others in securing the room? Please?" She smiled sweetly at him, feeling more at ease with the request after the way her officers had responded.

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded, not even thinking twice before he took his leave. Maddie watched him for a second, took a look in the other direction and, feeling brave and heady and unbelievably turned on, she stepped into the stall with Harry.

He watched her as she moved, taking in the sway of her hips, the tilt of her chin. He watched as she slid the stall door shut behind her and turned to face him; her fingers running along the riding crop he had propped up against the wall.

"Securing the room?" The corner of his mouth pulled up in a smirk. "Speaking in private?" He ran a hand over the back of his neck and met her eyes. "Am I about to get in trouble or something?"

Maddie's lips curved into a grin, feeling the pink in her cheeks, the warmth between her legs. She took another step towards him and in a voice that made Harry's toes curl in anticipation, she answered.

"Or something."

"Madeline..." His voice dropped deep. "I know that look in your eyes."

"I bet you do," she slinked closer.

"Like you're about to jump into some sort of trouble."

"Hmm..." She smiled wide, her hands reaching out to him; traveling over his stomach to hold his
hips. "You think so?"

Harry chuckled, a deep rumble that said he was on to her. "Like you're up to no good."

"Yeah?" She grinned, her head leaning to the side as she stepped up to him; close enough to feel his heat, to smell that spicy musk that emanated from him when he went for a run or rode hard. Her breath sucked in through her lips as she remembered. "Maybe I am." Her hands settled on his belt buckle.

"Maybe?" He crooked an eyebrow; not bothering to try to hide or adjust just the kind of effect she was having on him. He knew that look in her eye, the way she was breathing. He knew exactly what she wanted from him. He was surprised, a little shocked even, that she wanted it here; that she wanted it now. He was going to give it to her, no doubt, but that didn't mean he wasn't enjoying the tease, the temptation.

"What do you say, Captain?" Her hands ran down the front of his pants and her eyes flashed to his; surprised to find him hard and growing. "Oh..." Her lips formed a perfect 'o' as she breathed and then they pulled into a wide grin; and she knew. "Want to join me in a little no good?" Her hands slid back up to his belt buckle and tugged him closer to her.

"You know I have to be out there in fifteen minutes."

"And you know that I have been watching you this entire match, sweaty and hot and riding that horse and..." She sighed. "And you're not going to need fifteen minutes to get me there, Harry. I'm already there. I just need a little, extra..." Her hands were more demanding this time as she pulled him even closer, her legs spreading to allow room for him. "Push."

"God, Maddie..." He groaned, his hand sliding up her side to her neck; cupping her face and tilting it up to him. "Do you know what you're doing to me?"

"Yes," she nodded slightly and, lifting her foot to the tack box just next to them on the floor, she pulled her skirt up just a bit higher and led his hand to her thigh. Looking him straight in the eye, "do you know what you're doing to me?"

He shook his head, his lips twitching in a smile and his hand gripped her thigh; sliding higher and higher until he was at that soft juncture where her legs met. His fingers pressed into her hip as his thumb moved over her panties, swiping over the damp fabric and his whole body pulsed.

"Fuck," he groaned and Maddie watched as he surrendered to her.

Taking advantage of the moment, Maddie pulled at him; one hand at his shirt, one at his neck and his lips met hers just as his body pushed against her; backing her into the wall. She could taste the sweet, saltiness on his lips as his tongue slid into her mouth. And she felt victorious.

Her hands were hungry, greedy as they moved back to his belt; expert as they pulled it loose and moved on to his button, his zipper. Her hands were soft as she moved them into the band of his boxers, sliding around to his backside and pulling him tight to her. Harry's eyes opened as he gasped into her mouth and Maddie opened her eyes to look at him; heavy with lust.

With shallow breaths, he looked her over and realized. This was really happening. His wife; his smart, beautiful wife, was pressed between him and the wall to the stable with wet panties and her hands pressing his body exactly where she wanted him to be. And he was blown away; by how much she wanted him in that moment. He knew that this sort of thing happened; riders meeting
women in the stalls to celebrate a win or grieve a loss. He had heard tales, he had once even turned back out of the stables after hearing moans coming from a stall. But he had never taken part. Until today.

Gulping back any hint of reservation he had—and really there was very little—he bent his head to kiss her and his hands moved higher, pushing the skirt of her dress as he moved. Though his initial reaction had been cautious, looking for certainty and clarification from her, those feelings had passed and he wanted this as much as she did.

"Yes," she whispered when his fingers stroked over her sex. "Harry..." She grinned when he slipped them into her panties; groaning at how wet she was. She wasn't lying; she was ready.

"Maddie..." He shook his head; in want, in lust, in warning. "You are going to have to be very quiet."

"I'll be anything you'd like if you would just..." She widened her hips, bringing him closer. "If you would just take me. Harry please."

"Madeline," his eyes darkened; his fingers moving methodically over her slit, running a warm circle over her clit when he reached the top. Maddie's knees slacked, her body weakening, and she was thankful for the support of the wall, of his arms. "You are going to have to be very quiet."

Maddie met his eyes, the desperate plea for more overtaking her features, and she nodded; her lips clamping shut. She would be anything he asked. And her hips rocked forward against his hand.

And Harry was gone; no ability to fight the urge he felt, the desire she ignited deep inside of him. His fingers curled, looping around her panties and pushing them to the side and then, with his teeth biting into his lip and his fingers pressing into Maddie's hip, he pushed himself into her; one fluid motion—as far as he could go.

Maddie let out a whimper as he filled her, her eyes widening as she adjusted around him; making room for him. And she had to remind herself to be quiet, remind herself that calling out his name was not okay in this moment. Her hands moved up his arms to his shoulders; holding onto him for stability, for support. Harry watched as she settled, watched as she took a breath, trying to calm, trying to prepare and then, so caught up in where she had pushed him—he couldn't wait any longer.

He pulled all the way out of her and, with a slow devastation, pushed all the way back in. He shuddered in her arms; his face lowering into her neck, burying his lips against her skin as he buried himself deep inside of her.

Maddie clutched at his shoulders as he began to move; hard and fast and rough against her; the maddening in and out. And she had been right. It wasn't going to take long to get her there. She had been so close to there all day. All she had needed was this; this sweet pressure of his body against hers, this mind blowing fullness that she only felt when he was within her, when he was moving inside of her.

"Oh God," she couldn't help the words that pushed from her mouth. Harry groaned into her ear and pulled his face from her neck so that his mouth could find hers. With one hand bracing them against the wall and one holding her tightly to him, his tongue pushed into her mouth, tangling with hers as his hips picked up speed, picked up depth and he caught her moans with his lips.

Maddie's fingers pressed into the skin at his shoulders, struggling to pull him closer; needing just a
bit more of him, a second longer of this amazing way he was moving against her and then, as his lips left hers for just a split second, as he pulled back to look at her face; Harry was gone. The flush of her skin, the way she was splayed back against the wall, the way she clung to him as he took her with everything he had. He couldn't hang on much longer, of that he was certain.

"Fuck, Maddie," he breathed; pulling out of her completely before slamming back into her. "Come on baby...I'm too close...Come with me..."

It was quick. It was dirty. And it was everything she had wanted when she had come looking for him. And she went. Grabbing his neck, she pulled his mouth back to hers and he swallowed every one of her cries as she unraveled in his arms.

With a grunt and a groan and her heel pressing against his back, pushing him into her, Harry followed right behind her, his teeth sinking lightly into her lip as he emptied everything he had into this beautiful, glorious woman who had come to the stables looking for him, looking for this.

Harry was breathing heavy, his pulse slowing as the tension left his body and the wonderful sort of bliss that came with making love to her flooded his veins. His lips moved against hers for a moment; soothing over the way he had nipped at her towards the end. His hands moved softly over her hips; holding her gently as he moved his body away from hers.

Maddie gasped at the feeling of loss that came when he slipped from her, but smiled wide at the way his eyes were looking at her. And she could see what all the fuss was about; the pictures, the videos, the observations of others. He adored her; truly adored her and everything about the way he was watching her was evidence of that.

"Jesus Madeline..." Harry shook his head, tucking himself back into his pants; zipping and buttoning and redoing his belt. Maddie's grin stretched wide as she adjusted herself; smoothing her skirt, shifting the top of her dress. Harry stepped back towards her, his thumb moving over her lips. "Are you okay?" He smiled down at her; thinking of the ways his body had pressed against hers.

"I'm better than okay," her fingers wrapped around his wrist and she leaned her face into his hand. "I'm wonderful. Thank you. I mean it Harry..." She leaned up to kiss him softly. "Thank you. I needed that."

"Ha." Harry chuckled and glanced out towards the field. "You know if this is what baby making sex is like with you...I may very well want to try for those eight little ones we discussed in the beginning."

"Yeah?" Maddie giggled and rubbed her thumb under his lips; checking for any evidence of her.

"Yeah," his voice dropped as his arm circled her waist pulling her close and tight to him. "I love you."

"I know you do," she hugged her arms around his waist. "And I love you. Now..." She patted his ass and stepped away. "I'm going to run to the ladies room and freshen up and you...I believe you have an award to accept."

"Really? That wasn't what we were just doing?" He smirked as he watched her walk away from him.

"I'll see you soon, Captain," she slid open the door to the stall and with a wink and a wave, she
stepped out of his view.

Maddie didn't know exactly what it was that had come over her, what it was that had taken over her mind in the last twenty-four hours, but whatever it was—it was powerful, it was instinctual, and it made her walk out of those stables with her head held high, her smile smug, and a whole new strut to her step.

For a full minute, Harry watched where she had just been, unable to believe it himself—what had just happened there. His mind went wild at the memory of it all. But there was very little time for that. He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. It was time to get back out there.

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After a quick stop at the bathrooms to freshen up and to check and double check and triple check her hair and her dress, Maddie hurried back to the field. It was amusing to her, more than a little exciting, knowing that she and Harry had just had sex not far from where all of these people were standing, waiting for them to reappear. Her Protection Officers were close behind and if they had even the slightest idea as to what had just happened, they didn't let on at all. Maddie smiled and nodded and moved gracefully back to her spot next to Ella.

"There you are," Ella smiled at her friend, turning towards her as she stepped up to her.

"Sorry," Maddie smiled. "I got caught up."

"Sure," Ella shrugged, her eyes sweeping over her. "Did you go see Harry?"

"Hmm?" Maddie turned to her, slightly caught off guard by the question.

"I said..." Ella met Maddie's eyes, ready to repeat what she had asked and then, catching the look on Maddie's face, her eyes narrowed, her mouth twisting up as she shook her head slowly. "Wow..."

"What?" Maddie raised her eyebrows, confused.

"Nothing," Ella's grin turned smug.

"Doesn't look like nothing," Maddie prodded, noticing that the riders were beginning to assemble. "What is it?" Ella cleared her throat and moved closer to her best friend.

"You just had sex." Her voice was low and conspiring.

"What?!" Maddie's eyes went wide, her voice dropping to a whisper. "No!"

"Yes you did," Ella's arms crossed over her chest. "Yes you did." She glanced around the crowd with a small laugh. "At a polo match. My GOD Maddie." And though her voice spoke of disbelief, she was quiet enough, her face calm enough, that body was the wiser.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Maddie rolled her eyes; schooling her features, trying to hide her flush. It didn't help in the least that this was the exact moment the players began to file out to the stage. She caught site of Harry; rosy cheeks and mussed up hair and her body heated. Ella laughed as she watched it happen.

"Deny it all you want. I can tell."
Maddie took a deep breath and let it out slowly, getting slightly nervous at the thought that there might be something showing, that maybe Harry had left a mark on her skin or torn her dress or...

"Okay seriously," she whispered, her eyes meeting Ella's in a moment of urgency. "Do I have hay in my hair or..."

"I knew it!" Her eyes grew pointed, her grin deeper.

"Shh!" Maddie kept her smile in place as she narrowed her gaze. "Ella seriously."

"You're fine," Ella waved off her concerns. "Your cheeks are just...flushed and..." She giggled at the look on her face. "Nobody else will know though. You're good."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Ella couldn't stop grinning. "And naughty. You're incredibly naughty." Maddie had nothing to say, no counter to offer. She had been caught and she simply had to smile and take it. "And your husband is grinning like a damn fool."

"Well," Maddie swallowed and stayed calm. "He did just win a polo match."

"Mmm Hmm." Ella nodded, keeping her eyes forward as the ceremony began. "I cannot believe you."

"Me?" Maddie's eyes stayed trained on the stage; looking in the same direction as Ella. "I'm not the one who got knocked up at Buckingham Palace."

"Hey!" Ella turned to her.

"Sorry," Maddie looked to her friend. "Was that too soon?" The two women shared a warm, familiar, loving smile for beat and then the ceremony began.

As the riders were called to the stage, Maddie moved into professional mode; smiling appreciatively and clapping as the men stepped to the stage. She watched with pride as the winning team, Harry included, were rewarded for their efforts. And maybe Ella had been right earlier, maybe there should have been a part of her that was a little jealous of the tall blonde who was pressing kisses to her husband's cheeks and posing for photos. But in all honesty, Maddie could still smell his scent on her skin, she could still feel the heat from where his fingers had been on her body, still feel the amazing sensations he had left when he had been inside of her.

And that woman could pose for as many photos as she wanted, those young women from earlier could weave together any intricate fantasy about showering with Harry as they could possibly dream of. She had him; all to herself. And, as if he was proving that very point, when the photos were done and the players left the stage, he moved with great purpose—straight to her.

His eyes were hot on hers, his smile smug as he bypassed any words; his hand slid to her waist and his mouth bent over hers in a congratulatory kiss. Maddie moaned lightly into his mouth when his lips parted and his hand sank lower just to the top of her ass. And she knew there would be photos of this moment—when he let propriety slide. In a matter of minutes their embrace, their shared looks of love, would be all over the internet—she couldn't care less.

"Congratulations on your win," she smiled wide when he pulled back from her.
"Thank you," he winked and patted her back side just so before he stepped back. His body turned out as his eyes took in Ella. "Ella!" His face brightened as he moved to hug her, to kiss her cheeks. "It's great to see you. How are you doing?"

"Really well," she hugged him back, offering a slight curtsey as she did. "Excellent ride today, Your Royal Highness." And without looking, Ella just knew that Maddie's cheeks were pink.

Following some more socializing, a few quick showers and a short trip back to the city, Harry and Maddie spent the rest of the night relaxing with Ella over a casual dinner. The next morning was going to come early, they were flying out of New York to Denver—for the last leg of their trip. Saying good-bye to their friend was hard, leaving this part of their tour, the place where they had decided to start trying for a baby, was more difficult than Maddie had imagined. But they were headed towards her family and that made her smile. They were half way through with their royal duties and—so far—this trip had been an unmitigated success.
Chapter 120

Day 6:
Fly to Denver, CO
Visit to Children's Hospital
Luncheon and Visit at Judi's House
Production and Reception at Denver Center for the Performing Arts

"You know, I see what you're doing," Maddie grinned as she looked to him from the side of her eyes.

"Do you?" He grinned in return, his eyes sweeping over her from his side of the backseat.

"Did you really think I wouldn't see you, checking me out?" Very purposefully she uncrossed and re-crossed her legs; her skirt slipping just a bit higher.

"Did you really think I was trying to hide it?" He reached out, resting his hand on her bared knee; the silk of the stockings soft against his palm.

"We're almost there," she nodded towards the Children's Hospital just ahead of them.

"So you're saying there's no time to..." His thumb rubbed at her knee, his fingers slipping up under her skirt just a bit.

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, her hand moving over his. "That's exactly what I'm saying. Maybe later?"

"Definitely later," he nodded, clearly sucked into the same insatiable vortex his wife had been lured into. As the car slowed to a stop, Harry squeezed her leg in his hand and, regrettably, released her.

When Maddie stepped from the car, Ms. Florence was at the ready, a large tote bag on her arm. Maddie smiled wide at her. "Are those the balloons?"

"Yes Ma'am," she nodded as the foursome made their way from the car.

"Latex free?"

"Just like they asked. Yes Ma'am."

"Latex free balloons?" Harry smiled at her as they took to the steps, the staff from the hospital waiting at the top to greet them.

"You'll see," Maddie promised with the quickest of winks in his direction before she turned to business and brought a wide smile to the people there to welcome them.

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"How is it that I am only now discovering that you know how to make balloon animals?" Harry watched in awe as she turned to the last little girl in the room, having already completed at least a dozen balloon requests. The kids, the families, the staff, the press; everyone was eating it up. And to be totally fair, so was he.
"I don't know," Maddie spoke to him through her grin as she turned her attention to the little girl before her. "What would you like sweetheart?"

"A giraffe."

"Excellent choice." Maddie nodded. "Now, what color would you like your giraffe?"

"Do you have purple?"

"I do," she pulled out a purple balloon and pumped air into it before tying off the end.

"Are you going to get one?" The little girl looked to Harry with something of a shy smile.

"Well...I suppose I should..." He flashed a smile to Maddie before he shifted to sit closer to the little girl, leaning in as though they were conspiring. "What do you think I should ask for?"

"Hmmm..." She looked at him, her tiny finger tapping on her lips. "I think a flower."

"A flower?" He raised his eyebrows.

"One that you wear on your head," she smiled cautiously unsure if this particular adult would go for it or not.

"Sounds about right," Harry's face warmed to the little girl and he looked up to Maddie who was just finishing up with the purple giraffe. "What do you say Duchess? Can you make me a flower to wear on my head?"

"I absolutely can," Maddie's cheeks hurt from the smile on her face. "What color of flower do you think?" She asked the little girl, handing over the purple giraffe.

"Thank you," she held onto the giraffe with both hands, her eyes lighting up. "I think purple."

"Is purple your favorite color?" Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Yes."

"Purple it is." And then he watched as his wife inflated balloons, twisting and turning them in her hands until it was ready. "I like purple too," he admitted to the little girl.

"It's a pretty color."

"It really is," he sighed; knowing exactly how this was about to look.

"And..." Maddie bit her lip as she put the finishing touch on her creation. "Here. Here you are Sir," she smiled wide as she handed it over to him.

"Thank you," he took it from her and then without any hint of reservation, no ounce of shame or doubt, he put the flower on his head and turned to the little girl. "What do you think?"

"It's perfect."

"I agree," he laughed and nodded to the girl's mother who was snapping away. "Thank you for
"Thank you for the giraffe," she turned to look up to Maddie. "And the flower is so pretty. Where did you learn how to do that?"

"Yes," Harry turned proud eyes up to her. "Where did you learn how to do that?"

"Well," Maddie leaned closer to the little girl. "Don't tell him this but..." She lowered her voice though she knew he could still hear her. "I was once a part of a traveling circus." The little girl burst into giggles as Harry shook his head.

As Thomas stepped up, signaling time to move on, Harry rose from the little girl's side and Maddie accepted a hug of thanks from her. As a chorus of tiny voices called out, "Thank you!" for the visit, for the balloon animals, for the priceless photo opportunities, the Duke and Duchess smiled wide and waved. And then, slipping through the door, Harry's hand found home on Maddie's back and he whispered.

"A traveling circus?" His lips tugged into a smirk. "Were you a clown?"

"Says the man with a purple flower on his head," she turned sweet eyes to him.

"You know me..." He winked. "Anything for the ladies."

When Harry and Maddie left the Children's Hospital for Judi's House, the mood between them shifted significantly. Judi's House had been established to work with children who had experienced great grief and loss; a parent or a sibling. And with their collective history, the feeling was much more somber. Maddie knew they would be meeting with the staff and then participating in some art therapy techniques with the kids; creating art projects.

No doubt they played with the kids, no doubt there were smiles and laughter and pride when the children showed them around the center. But both Maddie and Harry would take away a small conversation Maddie had with a seven year old boy who had been coming there for two months. They were waiting for the art project to begin and he was enthralled with the mystique that had surrounded the visit from the Duke and Duchess and, as the curious little boy that he was, he was entranced with Maddie. And then he grew quiet, opened his mouth and took up a permanent place in her heart.

"My daddy died." He was so matter of fact, as though he had been saying it over and over to himself; trying to convince himself no doubt. Maddie felt tears spring to her eyes and she swallowed it back.

"Yeah?" She could feel her brain shifting to professional mode.

"Yeah...My mom says that your daddy died too," he looked up to her then, through the large, thick frame of his glasses and Maddie shifted completely out of professional mode.

"He did," she nodded. "Your mom is right. My daddy died too."

"Were you little?" He pushed at the plastic over the bridge of his nose.

"No," Maddie shook her head, wanting to scoop him into her arms while he worked to make this
connection with her; wanting to hug him tight. "I wasn't little. I was big."

"Were you sad?"

"I was very, very sad."

"Me too," he admitted, looking down at his hands that were held together in his lap. "Do you miss him?"

"Every day," she nodded, mirroring his actions and looking to her hands in her lap.

"I miss my daddy too," he took a breath and smiled. "My mom says he watches me from Heaven. Do you think that's true?"

"I think that sounds wonderful," she smiled back. "Do you think that's true?"

"I do," he nodded and then his face lit up. "Do you think he's watching right now?"

"Well I suppose he probably is."

"I bet he's sad he can't be here."

"I'm sure he's sad he can't be here to play with you."

"Yeah..." The little boy nodded. "I bet your daddy is sad he can't play with you too."

"I'm sure that he is," Maddie nodded, blinking back the tears in her eyes. She took a breath and pulled it together. "Maybe the two of us can play together for a bit?" She nodded to the art supplies in front of them.

"Okay," the little boy nodded and she was touched by how quickly he moved his attentions. His hands reached for the crayons as Maddie's eyes met Harry's across the table. And she nearly lost it; the way he was looking at her, the wetness in his own eyes as he watched her with the little boy. She hurried to look down at the supplies and then the little boy handed her exactly what she needed to pull out of the emotion of the moment. "You know...you smell good."

"Oh?" She smiled at the transition only children could make seem so seamless.

"Yes," he nodded, flipping over a cut out shape and using a glue stick on the back. "Just like a Princess." And though she resisted, what she really wanted to do was pull that little boy into her arms and smother him with kisses. But she refrained; she took a deep breath and refrained.

Their time at Judi's House continued on into a meeting with the staff, discussing techniques and programs they offered and Harry took a backseat to Maddie as she lead discussion; asking questions, making suggestions. In all honesty, he was silenced with pride for her. And when they stepped out of the building and back towards their car, what he really wanted to do was pull her into a bone-crushing hug, what he really wanted to do was tell her how much he loved her, how amazed he was at the way she moved in the world—but there were crowds and press and he knew she was holding onto her smile. So instead he took her hand in his, running his thumb lightly over her knuckles and he winked when she glanced up at him. And together they slid into the car, on their way to their hotel to change and leave for the production they were seeing at The Denver Center for the Performing Arts.
"I see you," Harry's voice was low as he reclaimed his spot next to his wife. It was late and they had been working all day and it was starting to take a toll on her; physically and emotionally. He could tell. And it wasn't just the way she was trying to hide a yawn just then. "You okay?"

"I am," she smiled sleepily. The production had ended and they were well into the reception and in all truth, this was really the first time on the trip when she felt ready to be done; ready to go back to the hotel and turn it all off. "I'm sorry," she turned her body to his, closing in the space between them; drawing their conversation more to privacy than it was just moments ago. "I'm just feeling the weight of it all today."

"I know," his finger was light on her cheek; his eyes sweet on her. "You know...watching you with those children today..." He moved in closer, his hand dropping to her hip; his eyes scanning over the way her dress flowed around her, the soft curves of her body making him warm inside. "Madeline, you blew me away."

"Hmmm..." She smiled softly, her eyelids heavy as they blinked. "The kids are easy. Balloons and honesty."

"And smelling nice," he offered and they shared a chuckle. "Come on love. I think we've been here longer than we're required." Harry's eyes rose and scanned the room; a tiny, slight nod to Thomas bringing their evening to a close.

"Harry..." She protested only slightly, her fingers grasping the cloth of his tuxedo jacket. But it was too late; things were in motion; Thomas was moving into action, Libby heading in her direction. And the protest slipped away. "Maybe a hot bath would be nice."

"Then let's get you that bath," he pulled her hand to his lips. "Let's get you out of those shoes and off your feet..." His smile pulled wide as a small part of his mind drifted to a time in the future—hopefully the near future—when he would be looking out for a pregnant wife, a baby, a...He shook his head and focused. "What do you say?"

"Mmmm..." She leaned into his side as his arm wrapped around her. "I say you're speaking my language."

"Come on darling, let's go." And as Thomas stepped up to them, Libby right next to him, Harry tightened his hold on his wife and they began to make their exit.

As soon as the door closed on their staff, as soon as they were in their suite, in privacy, Maddie's body slumped and she let out a groan. Harry chuckled softly as he looked her over.

"Bath time?" He raised his eyebrows, amused at the dramatics that came with her exhaustion.

"I can barely stand," she sighed. "I doubt I have it in me to take a bath." Harry felt a rumble of a chuckle in his chest as he dropped his tuxedo jacket to the back of the couch; his tie right behind it.

"Here...let me..." He moved to stand in front of her and, with a kiss to her forehead, he leaned over.
"What are you doing?" She laughed, her hands resting on his back as she felt his hands move under her dress to her legs. His touch was warm on her calves as he lifted one foot and then the other; slipping her shoes from her feet. Maddie couldn't help the relieved sigh that escaped her lips as he let her feet rest on the soft pile of the carpet. "That's much better, Harry. Thank you..." She could feel him move under her hands; rising from his spot under her dress. And as he moved, his hands slid up her legs; bringing the skirt of her dress higher and higher until his hands were at her waist, fabric bunched around them. "What are you doing?" She shook her head with a wide smile; she was exhausted but the way he was looking at her gave her pause.

"I'm..." His hands tightened at her waist and lifted her from the ground, moving her so that her legs wrapped around his waist. "I'm taking you to a hot bath."

"Oh?" She lifted her eyebrows, her arms loose around his shoulders, her fingers pushing into the thick red hair on his neck and she felt her heart swell. They must have looked quite the sight, in that moment; a haphazard collection of formal bunched around them, sleep and love in their eyes.

"Come on," he grinned wickedly and, adjusting her tighter to him, he began to move; walking them through their bedroom into their bathroom. "Here we go..." He sat her gently on the counter and moved away from her.

Maddie watched from her perch as he moved to the tub, rolling up his sleeves, turning on the faucets, testing the temperature before he plugged it and turned to her. "Which one of these bottles do you want me to pour in here?" He lifted two small ones from the edge of the tub.

"The pink one," she smiled; feeling warm and loved and much more awake than she had hours earlier.

"Done," he turned and drained the small bottle before he tossed it into the wastebasket. And then, with the water splashing behind him, he returned to her; reclaiming his spot between her legs.

"Harry..." Maddie breathed as his hands slid up the silk stockings on her thighs.

"Mmm?" He lifted his eyebrows without looking up to her; his eyes focused on the garter clasps at the top of her stockings.

"What are you doing?" Her nerves stood on end as he began to slowly roll her stockings down her legs; first one and then the other. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed them to the ground.

"I'm giving you a bath," he smiled lazily, his hands moving around her body; stepping closer so that he could work the zipper on the back of her dress. With his eyes trained on hers, his hands moved in a long, steady motion as he undid the back of her dress.

"Really?" Her voice squeaked just a tiny bit as his hot hands slid into her dress, pressing against her soft skin. "Because it feels like you might be trying to give me an or...."

"Shhh..." He cut in with a smug grin; his finger pressing to her lips before he kissed her. "I'm going to need you to stand up for a minute." He hugged her close and tight to his body as his moved her to her feet. Once she was standing, he released her and the flowy fabric of her dress slid to the ground. His face dropped to her shoulder; his lips hot on her skin as his hands moved to the clasp on her bra. And Maddie wanted to reciprocate, she did. She wanted to will her hands to work the buttons on his shirt, she wanted to force her hands to his belt and zipper and rid him of his clothes just as he was taking hers.
But she couldn't. The soft, warm way he was loving her, the lack of intentional seduction that came with his movements; it only worked to lull her into this place where Harry was taking care of her, where he was pushing away the stress from the day.

He tossed her bra to the side and, pulling strength from where he did not know, he made no attempt to arouse her to sex—he made no attempt to move this in any other direction but the warm, comfort of the tub she had asked for at the reception. And though his intentions were innocent and simple, when his hands moved to her small, lacy panties, the innocence that had passed between them seemed to fade. His eyes locked to hers and Maddie sucked in a breath. Harry leaned closer, pressing a kiss to her hip, and he tugged at the fabric and Maddie's hands fell to his shoulders; seeking strength and support.

And then she was naked; standing before her tuxedo-clad husband who looked her over with a bite to his lip and a reminder. This was about taking care of her—not sex.

"Come on," he scooped her hands into his and, moving backwards, led her to the tub. "You need help in or..."

"I think I can manage," she narrowed her eyes playfully; holding tight to his hand as she stepped into the hot, bubbly water. And it felt amazing; soothing and beckoning and absolutely everything she needed after the day. As she sank into the water, she could feel all of the tension pull from her body, from her mind. "Thank you..." She breathed, her eyes fluttering closed.

"You're welcome," he smiled down at her as he scooped her dress from the floor and laid it over a chair. He leaned back against the counter, his arms crossing over his chest as he watched her. "Can I get you anything? A drink or some food or..."

"You," she smiled and pulled her eyes open. "Harry..." Her hand lifted and extended out to him.

"Maddie?" He leaned forward, his fingertips grasping hers.

"Come in here," she tugged him lightly; finding that the only thing that was missing from this moment was him.

"In the tub?" He laughed, moving away from the counter and her eyes opened.

"Yes," she nodded, the tips of her hair wet, her skin warm and pink and she smiled wide. "In the tub."

"But you wanted to..." He began, wanting to maintain the intent of the bath for as long as he could but when her fingers dropped hold of his and grabbed instead for his wrist, his argument died on his lips. She wrapped her fingers around his arm and she tugged softly.

"What I want is you," she smiled wider as she leaned up; meeting him in the middle. Her hands were wet on his shirt as she bunched the white, crisp fabric in her hands and pulled. Her eyes flashed to his before they closed and her lips were on his.

It started there, with a small, closed mouth kiss; four lips pressing to each other in a move that was almost perfunctory. But in the very next breath, Maddie's lips parted and Harry's followed and the intensity in the room rose infinitely. A small, loaded moan came from deep in her throat as his tongue slid alongside hers. Harry's hands gripped the side of the tub as Maddie held him to her mouth. Her hands loosened their hold on his shirt only to move up his chest, around his neck; her hands pressing him to her with no room for refusal.
Harry pulled back just a bit, just enough for a breath, her lips holding tight to one of his in a move that was greedy and lust-filled and caused a fire to kindle deep in his stomach. And though his mouth opened to speak, he had no words. The look in her eyes silenced him.

"Harry..." She breathed, pulling him further down, closer to her. "Get in this tub."

"Wow..." He chuckled, his eyes holding the same fire that was building inside of him. "I thought you were tired..."

"I'm not," she shook her head. "Harry...Harry...please. I want you in here with me." She sighed into the bubbles. "Today was just..." She smiled, her eyes growing teary. "And I need you...please." Her smile returned, wide and victorious, when he nodded and his hands moved to the buttons on his shirt.

"Look at you," he shook his head. "Cocky and triumphant and..." He tossed his shirt to the ground and Maddie's eyes danced with delight.

"I need your hands on me Harry," her voice snapped his attention right to her and he watched as her own hands slid down the wet skin of her chest; stopping to palm her own breasts before they disappeared under the bubbles and his eyes grew wide. He pulled his t-shirt over his head, his mind wild with want for her.

"I need to feel your body against mine..." She breathed; heavy and deep and watched with anticipation as his hands fell on his belt buckle. His fingers stalled, his concentration temporarily side tracked by the way she was looking at him, by the way her eyes grew heavy, the way her hand moved under the water and he knew, he knew exactly what was happening under those bubbles.

"Maddie..." He groaned, his cock pulsing; pressing against the confines of his pants. She held her breath as he slid his pants to his feet, taking his boxers along too. And when her eyes lifted to take him in, she felt her whole body wash with desire.

"I want you inside of me Harry," she spoke in breaths and Harry nearly came undone at the thought of her hands under the water, touching her body where he wanted to be touching her.

"Jesus Christ," he stepped out of his pants and looked her over.

"Get in this tub Harry." Her head tipped back as she ordered him to her.

And he went. With undeterred quickness, and water splashing over the edge, Harry got in that tub. As his lips met hers, his hand moved under the bubbles and finding her fingers stroking against herself, he pulled her hand out of the water with one of his; pressing it against the edge of the tub under his. Holding it there, his other hand moved to replace it.

"Yes." She gasped under his mouth as his long fingers replaced hers; his thumb moving instantly in strong circles around the bundle of nerves waiting for him.

"God Madeline," he groaned as his lips left hers, moving to her neck as he positioned himself between her legs.

"Please Harry..." She arched against his hand, unable to control any piece of the insatiable desire that was controlling every single part of her. "Harry please. I need you in—"
And with one, deep, heavy stroke, Harry buried himself inside her; pushing her against the tub, pushing water up around her and over the side and the groan that came from inside of her matched the groan that came from inside of him. And finally, she had what she wanted.

"Oh..." She breathed; feeling relief at the contact, at the connection at how right it felt to have him there.

"Jesus," he swallowed, trying to calm his heart, trying to calm his desires not wanting to finish before they had even started. Maddie moved underneath him then; her legs pulling high around his waist, forcing him further into her. Her free hand moving to his shoulder, sliding to his back and she smiled.

"I'm not sure I've ever needed you inside me more than I do right now..." And the truth in her words drew him closer to the edge than he already was.

"Well," he grinned sheepishly, pushing his hips against her; moving deeper, bringing the sweet friction they both craved. "You have that."

"Ah...." She sighed at the sensation and grinned, her eyes smiling to his. "You feel so amazing Harry." And he did; this in and out that moved the water around them, that drew fire to her very core. It felt amazing.

"Maddie..." He warned, knowing her words could drive him mad even more so than the delicious strokes he was delivering.

"You do..." Her hand slid to his cheek and her mouth was on his; kissing him with deep, heavy strokes of her tongue that matched the way he was moving inside of her. "I could do this forever."

"Maddie..." He groaned into her mouth.

"I could," she gasped as he pushed deeper with every stroke. "God the way you feel inside of me..." She took a breath. "The way you make me feel when you...Oh!" She cried out when he pressed in this time; something about the angle, about the drive, hitting somewhere new, somewhere different. Her fingers pressed into his back and her eyes flew open. "Oh my God...." He moved out and in and hit it again and she gasped sharp; just like her nails dug at his skin.

"Maddie," he shook his head.

"Please oh God..." Her head tipped back and her whole body readied itself, her heart thumping in her chest. And he hit it again. "Fuck! Harry!" She called out, her voice reverberating against the tile of the bathroom wall.

"Stop..." He warned. He needed her to stop talking to him, he needed her to stop moaning and sighing and gasping—or he wasn't going to make it. He wasn't going to be able to keep going.

"Please Harry..." She cried; a muffled, teary, needy sound and his hands left their spots over hers, one wrapping around her waist and one moving to her neck and he knew that his grip on her hip was probably too strong but, fuck, the way she felt, the way she arched up to him, the way she kept purring into his ear—he couldn't do it. He wasn't going to make it.

"Maddie..." He warned, he beckoned and she gasped.
"Yes!" Just as he was hitting something within her that he hadn't hit before, she was hitting an end she had never experienced before. "Yes!" Her breath was coming in short, sharp bursts and then all at once, her whole world exploded. "Oh GOD yes!" He hit it again and again and the shudder that ran through her was like nothing else. "Harry...Harry..." His name rolled off her tongue, from deep inside of her soul; her body contracting around him, draining him—taking everything he had.

And he couldn't take it any longer. He was done. He saw white behind his eyelids, he felt fire in his veins and as he pushed into her; deeper and heavier and with more drive than either of them were sure they had felt before, he called out into the room, "Oh God...Maddie!"

It was so intense, so surprising that neither of them had it together enough to hold them up and as they rode out the waves and shudders, they slipped, together under the water. Maddie emerged first, her breath bursting out into a wide, warm laugh, her hands tugging Harry's face from the water.

"Holy shit," his eyes met hers, his lips pulling into a wide, smug grin.

"I know!" She laughed again, her arms wrapping around his neck, hugging him close to her. "What was that?"

"I don't know," he shook his head, spitting water from his mouth before kissing her. "I don't know but it was..."

"It really was," she agreed, her hands smoothing over his forehead, over his hair. "Thank you for getting in the tub with me."

"As if I had a choice in the matter," his eyes crinkled when he smiled, his arms holding her slick body to his.

"There's a good chance we've flooded the bathroom," her eyes glanced up towards the rest of the room.

"I would think so," he chuckled, kissing her shoulder before he took a breath and pulled away from her; looking out over the edge. He nodded. "Yes. We have absolutely flooded this bathroom."

"Well we should clean that up," and though she said the words, she made no attempt to move.

"We should." He smiled down at her; wet and spent and so totally in love with her. "You know..." His voice dropped. "When you talk to me like that, when you say things like..."

"Like how amazing you feel inside of me?" She smiled sweetly.

"Like that," he nodded, pressing a kiss to the tip of her nose. "You just about do me in. It's all over for me when you say that."

"Is that a problem?"

"Not if it's not a problem for you," he chuckled. "You just better be close because if you think I have enough self-control when you're talking like that..."

"Point taken," she grinned and tipped her lips to his. "Come on Captain. Let's clean up this mess and get to bed."
"Yes ma'am," he sighed and pulled away from her entirely. Maddie sat up and took in the damage as Harry stepped from the tub. He immediately began to put towels down around the tub; sopping up the water.

"Oh wow..." She leaned to pull the plug from the tub before she took Harry's outstretched hand and rose to her feet. And as he helped her from the tub, his eyes moved over her body and the smile on his face, the flush to his cheeks, caught Maddie's attention. "What?" She glanced down.

"I just..." He shook his head, feeling silly as he took a breath and met her eyes. "You could be pregnant..." His voice held reverence in the way he spoke the word. "Right now, you could be..." He laughed at himself, at how sentimental it made him to even imagine it.

"I could," she smiled, blinking at the tears that sprang to her eyes; her heart warming at the look on his face. "Come here," she tugged on his hand and he moved to her. She leaned up on her toes to kiss him; soft and gentle and when she pulled back, her forehead rested against his. "You really do feel amazing inside of me, Harry."

"I know," he smiled and kissed her again; wrapping a towel around her. "I feel it too. Come on Momma, let's get you to bed."

Maddie felt her cheeks flush at his choice of words, felt her body stir at the connotation that came with them. And that night, when she cuddled close to his body and drifted to sleep, she couldn't help but imagine that his words were right. She could be pregnant—at that moment—with Harry's baby. It was all so much. It was everything.
Day 7:
First Pitch-Colorado Rockies Game
Reception for Olympic Athletes hosted by Consul-General
Spend night in Colorado Springs

"Did you see me with the pitching coach?" Maddie asked Harry as they walked through the underground, stone corridors leading them to Coors Field.

"I did," he nodded, biting back the snark. They had arrived early, allowing Maddie some time to throw the ball with the coach into the pitching net; something that he had also been allowed when he had thrown out the first pitch years ago.

"He said I was a natural."

"I heard."

"He said I had a great arm," Maddie loved poking at him, loved even more that she knew he wouldn't push back. They were too close to show time and he wouldn't want to mess with her head.

"Of course he did," Harry fought it but his eyes tipped up in a slight roll.

"I'm impressed by the way," Maddie grinned up at him as they slowed to a stop at a juncture; their escorts turning to face them.

"Impressed?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"At your ability to keep it together..." She stepped closer to him and lowered her voice. "In the face of what is going to be only another example of your wife...showing you up."

"Oh-ho...." He bit his cheek as a menacing chuckle rumbled in his chest. "Just wait until it's over."

"I figured," she laughed out loud, leaning in to press a kiss to his lips before she turned to Jena, the young woman who had been taking them around. "I'm guessing this is where we part ways Jena?"

"Yes ma'am," Jena nodded and smiled; feeling a bit voyeuristic as she watched them interact so closely, so intimately. "I'll take you up to the field and Mr. Swanson," she nodded to the young man with her, "will take the rest of you up to the suite."

"Fantastic," Maddie smiled at the young woman and slid her eyes to Harry. "I'll see you soon."

"Knock it out of the ballpark, Doctor." He leaned in to kiss her again; his lips twisted into a smirk.

"But I'm pitching," she grinned against his lips.

"I know," he winked and pulled away. Maddie shook her head at him with a small laugh before she turned to follow Jena down another corridor. Harry watched as she stepped away from him, noting how damn cute she was in casual clothes, custom jersey and ball cap, before he turned to
his own escort.

"Excuse me Sir," Mr. Swanson stepped closer to Harry. "While your wife was working with Mr. McLaughlin she told him that she used to play ball with her cousins..."

"Yes," Harry nodded, that particular fact burned in his mind.

"She said they used to have songs they would play for their introductions, just like in the Major's." Harry chuckled at that image and waited for the young man to continue. "Is there any chance you know what song she used to play for her introduction?"

"No," Harry grinned wide, realizing where this was headed. "But I know who does. Can I have just a minute?" He raised his eyebrows and pulled his phone from his pocket.

"Absolutely," the young man nodded and watched as Harry dialed Maddie's cousin Kyle.

When Maddie stepped out onto the field, the roar that greeted her threw her for just a moment. She glanced around quickly before she realized that it was for her. With a slight flush to her cheeks that she was certain only Harry and her mother would be able to detect, she recovered and smiled wide. And then she heard the announcer, in a loud booming voice, introduce her.

"And tonight, throwing out the ceremonial first pitch is one of our own. Born and raised in Colorado, let's give a Mile High welcome home to Her Royal Highness, Madeline, the Duchess of Sussex."

With the ball tucked tight into one hand she turned a wave towards the crowds with the other and they went absolutely crazy. This was the first time Maddie had experienced this—this all out fanaticism. She wondered if the athletes on the field ever got used to it. Certainly this was more about hometown pride than anything with the fans, but it felt crazy to witness all the same. And then, as she took a step towards the mound, she heard a song play out into the stadium and she stalled. Fighting a roll of her eyes, fighting a smug smirk, she smiled and continued to the field. She eyed the catcher and with a big breath, she took her stance; turning the ball in her fingers. Trying to tune out the music, she focused, took another breath and wound up. When she released the ball she knew instantly. She had done it. A wide grin spread across her face as the catcher plucked it out of the air with ease and the crowd went wild. With another wave, she moved off the mound and met the catcher in the dirt.

"Well done, Ma'am," he smiled kindly and handed her the ball back.

"Ha!" She laughed good-naturedly. "I'm sure you say that to all the ladies."

"No Ma'am," he chuckled, posing for pictures. "It was right over the plate, well within the strike zone and had a good solid oomph behind it."

"Well thank you," Maddie smiled and followed as they were lead off the field. "Any chance you can call my husband and tell him that?"

"Sure," He laughed and adjusted the mask on his head. "Maybe after the game?"

"Perfect," Maddie smiled and shook his hand. "Have a good game."
"Thank you." With a tip of her hat, Maddie left the young man to his job and followed her escort Jena off the field and back through the tunnels to meet up with Harry in the suite.

When Maddie stepped into the suite, a smattering of applause sounded out. Harry was there with the team owners and various staff and assistants who were quick to be introduced but Harry's were the first eyes on her, the first smile that greeted her. After shaking hands and meeting everyone, Maddie slid into the seat next to her husband.

"Hey there."

"Hey there," he grinned as he leaned to kiss her. "That was impressive."

"Thank you," she grinned back. "And that's exactly what Rosario said."

"Rosario?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Wilin Rosario," she raised hers in return; gesturing towards the field. "The catcher for the Rockies."

"Ah yes," Harry nodded, loving her knowledge of the game. "So...did you hear the song?"

"Now that you mention it," she crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes narrowed. "I did hear that song. How in the world did you..."

"Kyle," he perked up, eager to let her in on the secret. "Mr. Swanson overheard you talking to the pitching coach and asked if I knew your song and I called Kyle. And he told me your song."

"No," Maddie shook her head; her mind already at work as a twisted sort of smile moved over her face.

"No?" Harry watched her confused.

"I'm a Hustler Baby?" Her forehead crinkled as she snickered. "You thought the song I chose for myself was I'm a Hustler by Jay Z?"

"Ummm..." Harry's lips pressed together as he thought about it.

"No," Maddie shook her head. "That's the song they would play...to mess with me. To get in my head."

"Noooo," Harry shook his head, his eyes growing serious as he realized what had just happened. "You're telling me instead of helping you live out a childhood moment, I..."

"Helped my cousins mess with on the pitching mound at a nationally televised Major League baseball game. Yes. That's what you did."

"Oh God." He groaned.

"That's right oh God." Maddie shook her head and smiled.
"Well." Harry's eyes narrowed and he leaned closer to her. "I apologize. This was a rookie mistake on my part and it won't happen again. I assure you."

"Oh?"

"I think it's important to note that, given my eccentric group of extended family members and the fact that we are forced to operate under the radar ninety percent of the time..." He took a deep breath and lowered his voice. "I am particularly well versed and well suited to assist you in any part of a well-planned familial revenge." Maddie's eyes slid to his and they sparkled.

"Oh really?" Her lips pulled higher.

"Use me at your will," he winked before turning back towards their hosts for the night and Maddie laughed to herself; her mind and her body ignited by his words.

"I don't think I've seen somebody laugh so much in my life," Harry commented to Maddie as they were driven away from the reception they had attended with the Consulate General, a few local big names, Missy Franklin and various other local athletes.

"She was really very sweet," Maddie smiled; leaning back against the seat as they began their journey to their hotel.

"Oh I didn't say she wasn't sweet," Harry corrected, pulling his tie loose. "I just said I didn't think I had ever heard somebody laugh so much."

"Maybe she was nervous," Maddie offered.

"Nervous?"

"Well, meeting you can be a heart stopping experience," her hand rubbed at his knee and he rolled his eyes.

"Please."

"Or maybe she heard wind that you were going to challenge her to a swimming race," Maddie snickered as Harry brushed her hand off his knee playfully.

"You are on fire today."

"I think I'm still wound up from the baseball game."

"I suppose so," he laughed at her as she slumped back in the seat. "You know, we don't have to go over to the practice if you're not up for it."

"What?" She turned surprise in his direction.

"Yeah," he shrugged. "Nobody knows we were planning on going. If you want to do something else; go to the hotel, get settled in..."

"No way," she shook her head, reaching for his hand. "I've been looking forward to the Warrior Games the entire trip; we're going to go to that practice."
"You've been looking forward to the games the whole trip?" He was genuinely pleased that she wanted to stop in; touched.

"I have," she squeezed his fingers.

"Wait..." His eyes narrowed. "That isn't because you think this is yet another opportunity to beat me at something, is it?"

Watching the UK Warrior Games Volleyball team practice brought life to a tired Maddie. After the baseball game, the reception, and the travel, she had truly thought that she would be too exhausted to enjoy the evening. But she had been wrong. Watching the team on the floor rejuvenated her spirit. And when Harry moved to join them in their practice, her cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

He was amazing. Though this was something Maddie had always believed to be true, there were so many moments along the tour that only served to reinforce that truth. Not only was he not at all exhausted, not only was he up and chipper and ready to go for a few more hours—he was in the best of moods. Of course that most certainly had a great deal to do with the company they were in. He loved being a soldier. There was a tiny bit of Maddie that was certain he loved being a soldier more than he loved being her husband—lucky for her those two roles were not mutually exclusive. He was happy here; bright and charming and ready to dive right in. And it made her seep with pride.

"It's really great you know," Sgt. Woodford, the young woman who sat next to Maddie had a soft voice, bright green eyes—and two amputated legs after an IED blew up the Medical Transport she was traveling in as an Army nurse. She and Maddie had been deep in conversation when Harry had nearly fallen over trying to keep up with the team; bringing attention, laughter, and a smattering of photos.

"Great?" Maddie turned back to Sgt. Woodford, or Lisa as she asked to be called.

"The two of you coming here."

"Oh," Maddie smiled. "We were ahead of schedule and Harry would have been absolutely restless at the hotel so..."

"No," Lisa shook her head with a slight giggle. "Not here tonight. Well, not just here tonight. But...here. To the Warrior Games. It's really great that you're here. It's huge."

"Oh," Maddie's eyes shifted down, feeling a bit blushed, a bit embarrassed. "That's very sweet of you to say."

"I'm not just saying it," she grinned, catching the humility in the Duchess. "Your presence brings a great amount of attention to the soldiers who are participating, to the spirit that prevails even in the eyes of some terrible disabilities. It brings eyes to the cause. And that's admirable."

"I'm sure that you understand why it might be hard for me to hear that from somebody like you...who has done so much to exemplify the spirit of which you speak."

"Sure," the young woman nodded.
"We're simply shaking hands, posing for photos and meeting some amazing people."

"With all due respect, that's not all you're doing," Lisa grew serious. "If you weren't here, it would just be us playing around..."

"It would not be just you playing around," Maddie disagreed with a firm shake of her head.

"Well," the woman took a deep breath and smiled at Maddie. "Having the Duke and Duchess of Sussex here brings a great amount of international attention and, Ma'am, having you here brings the focus of the entire state—a state with military bases, with the Air force Academy—it brings the focus to wounded veterans. And, forgive me for being so blunt, but the hands you shake, the pictures you pose for...you'll never know the impact you've had; the impact you will have." She nodded then to Harry, still out on the floor playing. "Prince Harry—the Duke—he's always been such a huge supporter. The soldiers love him; his spirit, his tenacity, his character. There are quite a few here who have met him before, some who walked with him to the Arctic and everyone loves him."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded, her heart swelling with pride as she looked to her husband.

"And I must say, Ma'am," Lisa nudged her shoulder. "You've proven to be quite the supporter as well. It's an honor, truly, to have you both here."

"Well thank you very much Sergeant," Maddie nudged her back, biting back the lump in her throat. "It's quite the honor to be invited."

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Leaving the Olympic Training Facility later that night, both Maddie and Harry felt exhausted. They had enjoyed a long day; meeting people, being active and while Harry's exhaustion was mostly physical, Maddie's was a bit more than that. But it was with a small, warm smile that she slipped her hand into his as they stepped out into the Colorado night; her head tipping to his shoulder.

"How are you?" Harry's voice dropped low as they moved with their team to the awaiting SUVs.

"Good," she sighed; meaning it.

"Good," he planted a kiss to the top of her head just before she pulled away to step into their vehicles.

As they travelled, the conversation stayed business focused; Thomas running down their final two days of events, adding on a request.

"An interview?" Harry clarified. "With whom?"

"You and the Duchess, Sir."

"No, I'm sorry," Harry shook his head. "The interviewer."

"Diane Sawyer," Thomas smiled. "She will fly out upon confirmation."

"Wow," Maddie's attention was caught. "Diane Sawyer wants to speak to us?"
"Yes Ma'am."

"Did we do something wrong?" She was only half joking but the others in the car chuckled lightly.

"No ma'am."

"Why do you ask that?" Harry tossed a grin across the seat to her.

"Well...Diane Sawyer wants to interview us. Not just you...me too..." She shrugged. "I don't know. I just figured..."

"Actually," Libby spoke up. "Beg your pardon. Ma'am, your popularity numbers are incredibly high."

"I'm sorry?" Maddie laughed. "My popularity numbers?"

"It's true," Thomas nodded in agreement. "The public favors you quite highly."

"They what?" Maddie glanced to Harry, who looked far less surprised than she felt. "How do you even know such a thing? Did Cosmo do a poll or something?"

"No ma'am," Libby answered. "We did."

"Sorry?" Maddie's smile faded only slightly.

"Ahem," Harry cleared his throat and turned to face Maddie. "Sometimes SJP does some polling of their own; in order to find out who might be best to send out, to bring to an event. It's harmless."

"Oh?" This was new to Maddie, though she knew she shouldn't be surprised. After all, she knew she had married into an enterprise.

"And considering requests for your photos, information, appearances," Thomas continued. "You're incredibly popular right now; in England and, most certainly here in the United States."

"The public favors you, Madeline," Harry winked at her. "More than me, more than Will..."

"That is..." She shook her head; feeling a bit flushed by it all. "That is absurd."

"Your wedding increased tourism at a higher rate than any royal wedding so far," Libby offered. "Nearly tripled American visits. The skirt you wore on the first day, to Capitol Hill, it sold out completely in three minutes."

"I..." She looked down at her hands and shook her head again. "I don't know what to say. Did you know that?" She turned to her husband.

"About the skirt?" He smirked. "Sure. I bought three of them."

"Harry," Maddie laughed, her eyes seeking his for grounding.

"Yeah," he nodded. "I knew you were popular. I've seen some of the numbers they are talking
“Yeah?”

“Mmm,” he nodded. “You're an American Princess, Madeline.” He sighed. “Look, I know how ridiculous it sounds but...people eat it up I guess. They...they want to see you and be like you and be near you and...” He caught her scattered look then and reached for her hand. “It's not that I can blame them...”

“Will you stop?” She laughed, rolling her eyes but appreciating his efforts to alleviate the weight that this carried. She took a deep breath and let it out, feeling silly for being so surprised by these revelations. She lifted her eyes to Thomas. "I'm fine with the interview. If you are and if you are..." She nodded to Harry.

"Sure,” Harry shrugged; he was old hat at this.

"Great," Thomas nodded and made a note in his phone. "I'll let them know." And then, as he stuffed his phone back into the front pocket of his suit, the car rolled to a stop in front of the Broadmoor and the doors opened to their home for the last two days of their tour.

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"Harry...” Maddie's voice was low and heavy as she called to him; having finally shut the door on their day, on their staff of people.

"Yes?” He tossed over his shoulder, pulling his watch from his wrist and dropping it onto the dresser in their room. Maddie moved to stand behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her face into the camouflage fabric on his back.

"Harry...” Her voice was muffled as his hands slid to her arms; warm and firm as he stroked her skin there. And he stood, tall and steady and he waited; knowing there was something happening inside his wife's head. His hand caught one of hers and pulled it up to his lips.

"Are you okay back there?” He asked. Feeling her nod against his back, he smiled and squeezed her hands under his. "Okay.” He patted her hands and let her be. With one hand resting on her arm, he moved his other to begin working on the buttons of his shirt.

"Here...” Maddie sighed after a moment, pulling her face from his back and releasing her hold on him. "Let me help." She ran her hands over his stomach, over his chest, and he turned to face her. Though Harry's eyes sought hers immediately, Maddie's focused on the buttons of his shirts; her fingers making quick work of the buttons.

Harry's hands moved to her shoulders, smoothing down her arms as he stood, allowing her to undress him; wondering what was passing through that beautiful mind of hers. But he remained quiet, he let her process. They were getting better at this part of their relationship, after all—him sensing when she needed this, her working through it without running. He only wished she would let him in. But he could wait for that. With a soft smile, he watched; and she worked.

And when she finished her work on his shirt, she pushed it back and off his chest, over his shoulders and when her fingers met his hot skin, her eyes flashed up to his.

"Hi,” he smiled; sweet and slightly amused and Maddie's eyes blinked; full of emotion.
"Hi," she whispered.

And his shirt fell to the floor behind him.

Maddie's hands moved to his belt and it should have been simpler than it was. It should have been easier. But for some reason, she was struggling. The stiff fabric wouldn't cooperate and the buckle was stubborn under her fingers and because she was already so close to her exhausted emotional threshold, she felt tears well in her eyes.

And she hated when tears welled in her eyes. It had been an amazing day; fun events, wonderful people. And all she could think about was the total culmination of emotions from their trip; the soldiers—those wounded and those not, their families—those grieving, those waiting, those standing tall next to their loved ones. All she could see were the children at the hospital, the little boy whose father was watching him play—from heaven. All she could hear was Sergeant Lisa Woodford with her state of the art prosthetics telling Maddie how good of her it was to make it a point to come.

All she could see was Harry standing before her, in his camouflage fatigues and his tireless, unwavering spirit and dedication and she had this slight, daunting fear that she wouldn't meet expectations; his, the family's, the people and—her emotions were getting the best of her. And she hated it even more because she used to be better at this; holding the emotions at bay.

"Maddie?" Harry called to her, wanting to draw her mind to him.

"I..." She stumbled; on her words, on the buckle. "I can't get this..."

"Hey..." His hands fell on hers. "Don't worry about it. It's..."

"No," she shook her head.

"Maddie?" Harry's voice was low and sweet and meant to soothe.

"I need you out of this..." Maddie blinked at the unexpected tears, her fingers fumbling with the buckle again; her lip jutting out in frustration.

"Madeline..."

"I need you out of this uniform. I need this to just..." She huffed in exasperation, her eyes welling up as she looked to him. "I need you..."

"Hey..." His fingers wrapped around her wrists, stalling her actions; seriousness shading his eyes. "What is this?"

"I need you." She brushed at the tears with the backs of her hands. "I need to be close to you and..." She leaned into him. "Now. I need you now." And though the words were bossy, demanding, it came out in a plea.

"Like this?" He thumbed at a tear on her cheek, his face full of concern and love and a hint of a smile.

"Like you've never made love to a weepy woman before," her laughter cut through her tears.

"Oh I have," he went in for the joke, watching her smile spread even further. "And I will again if
you want me too..."

"God..." Maddie sighed; stepping into his arms and leaning against his now bare chest. "What is wrong with me?"

"I'm guessing nothing," his hands were gentle as his fingers stroked her cheeks, pushed her hair from her forehead. "It's been a long week. We've seen a lot. You've been working basically the entire time..."

"But that's just it. This...this is nothing compared to the work I used to do. I used to spend sixteen hours in the field and..."

"It's different." He shrugged; it was. They had been "on" virtually the entire time they had been there, they were constantly watched and analyzed.

"It's easier," she rolled her eyes at herself.

"It's not," Harry disagreed. "It's not. The work is different but it's not easier. Maddie, you have been working for eight days straight; without a break and sometimes that's overwhelming." His arms wrapped around her, hugging her close. "You've been doing so well I forgot that this is really your first time out there. I forgot how hard it can be."

"Oh please!" Maddie tried for sarcasm, but she felt teary.

"It is," he laughed. "It's harder than it looks. And we're not just...planting trees. We're meeting people, people with amazing stories to tell. And you carry that with you. And sometimes it gets heavy."

"Listen to you," Maddie sniffed with a smile. "You're so smart."

"I'm well-seasoned." He chuckled and rubbed her back.

"I love you." Maddie sighed; settling closer.

"I love you too," he kissed the top of her head and held her tight. Yes, she was doing amazing. Yes, her popularity was soaring. But he should have paid more attention; this was tough sometimes—even the tree planting grew tough sometimes. "Listen. It's been a long week. The Tomb, the White House, Walter Reed, the Children's Hospital, Judi's House...and tonight at the practice...it's a lot." Maddie tipped her face up to his, her chin resting on his chest. "Plus..." He grew a bit cockier. "You've been pouncing on me any chance you could."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tossed back in laughter. "Pouncing? Please." She pulled back from him then; his hands sliding down her arms to hold onto hers.

"Pouncing," he eyed her; his lips pulling higher, happy she was laughing again. "The bath tub. The stables..."

"Ah..." Maddie sighed. "The stables." Her face grew warm, her smile wide as she remembered. "That was fun."

"Absolutely no arguments here," Harry shook his head; eyes wide before he grew slightly serious for a moment. "We only have two more days. Are you going to make it?"
"Absolutely," she nodded; the moment, the stress, the upset, lifted from her shoulders as she looked to him. "I just needed...a moment. I needed to get it out and let it go. I'm good. And you...you handle me really well, you know?"

"Ha! Thank you," he squeezed her hands. "Now. You want to help me out of these pants and I'll see if I can handle you a little longer?"

"I would love that."

"I thought you might," he tugged her back to him; the mood in the room shifting entirely. His lips found hers with ease. Her hands conquered his belt with quickness and before Maddie could even stop to remember her momentary breakdown, her slight pause for reprieve, Harry was pulling her into their bed with a wide smile, soft hands and a promise to hold onto her for just as long as she needed.
Chapter 122

Day 8:
Colorado Springs
Opening Ceremony Warrior Games
Volleyball Games
Hosting Post-Party at The Golden Bee

"You know I can feel you..." Maddie's eyes slid to the side to glance at him, a smile bright on her face as they finished dressing for the morning.

"Feel me?" Harry lifted his eyebrows; adjusting his shirt. "I'm all the way across the room."

"I can feel you watching me," she smiled, stepping into her shoes.

"Well that certainly cannot be a rarity," he finished his adjustments and flashed her his smile. "I watch you all the time."

"Oh?" Maddie chuckled, smoothing out her skirt; finished and ready to go. "Does my security team know about you?"

"They do," Harry nodded. "They aren't worried. I'm a low level threat apparently."

"Apparently." Maddie repeated as he moved in on her; looking her over.

"They are secure in the knowledge that you could take me down quite easily."

"With my stunning abilities to immobilize?"

"With your stunning..." His eyes snapped up from her legs to her eyes with a spark. "Mind."

"I bet," Maddie chuckled, as a happy laughter settled between them.

"Madeline," Harry's hands settled on her arms, his eyes searching her face more seriously.

"Henry," she held his gaze.

"How are you this morning?"

"I'm wonderful," her face was bright and open and sincere and Harry caught that. Nodding; feeling relief. "I am fine this morning Harry. Last night was just...a moment. And it's passed. I'm refreshed and ready to take down these next two days with aplomb and style."

"Aplomb and style?" He smirked.

"Well...have you seen my shoes?" Maddie's smile pulled wide as they both shifted from the moment; seamless and together.

"Those are excellent shoes." His voice was so full of sarcasm, Maddie could almost feel it.
"They are." She arched an eyebrow. "I'm good. I promise."

"Right," he dipped to kiss her; taking her word. "Come on love. We have an Opening Ceremony to attend."

The remainder of the day went by without a hitch and anyone watching; in person or via the media, would see what Maddie felt—relaxed, proud, and so incredibly pleased to be where she was.

At the Opening Ceremony, Navy Lt. Bradley Snyder, along with Missy Franklin and Harry lit the torch while Maddie stood at attention with the others on stage. She smiled for cameras, she shook hands, she slipped very easily into the mix around her. And Harry, keeping an eye on her even when he was working, could see that she was, in fact, doing much better than she had been the night before; back in full swing—with the sass and grace that came with her. So he breathed relief and continued on with his day.

And it was a beautiful day.

Maddie met many people; soldiers, families, supporters. She met organizers and even a few fans; offering a wave and a slight giggle at the return of the Team Maddie shirts. The weather was perfect and the events were alive with excitement. Of course, none was as exciting as when Harry was pulled to the floor to play with the Volleyball Team. Maddie cheered with the crowd as he pulled on his team shirt and tossed her a wink before he took to the floor. And there was no denying how unbelievably sexy that man was—Maddie could feel her stomach stir for him as he moved. But she pulled it together and she watched with enthusiasm as he played; handing the photographers some amazing and hilarious photos of the Duchess reacting to the play on the floor. And later, once the game was over, she threw her arms around her husband's sweaty neck and kissed him in celebration before moving to congratulate the rest of the team.

It was a beautiful day; well spent and well documented and before they had even returned to their hotel room to change and ready for the party they were hosting at The Golden Bee, pictures of the Duchess kissing the Duke were all over the media; print and online. And Maddie could already see the smirk on Ella's face as she viewed them. But she didn't care. She was finishing up these last two days of their tour just as she had spent all of the others before; working hard, playing hard, and incredibly in love with her husband.

"Harry..." Maddie called to him as they moved around their suite; dressing for their night out. Though they would still be working—almost always working—it was much more relaxed and casual. Harry, for sure, felt more at home with fellow soldiers, giving the night a more personable feel. And Maddie was feeling the adrenaline high that came with such a great day; the natural lift that came with watching Harry do his thing.

"Mmm?" He slipped his watch on his wrist; showered and dressed and ready for a relaxing night. He looked great; fresh and clean and though the image of him sweaty in fatigues would be burned in her mind forever, this image was warm and natural and made her want to cuddle close.

"Maddie?" He smiled at her half-dazed expression.

"Sorry," she shook her head and smiled sweetly. "Would you mind holding my lip gloss tonight?" She held up a tube. "My dress doesn't have pockets and..."
"Sure," he held out his hand. "Give it here."

"Thank you," she pressed a kiss to his cheek as he took the tube from her, slipping it in his pocket; such a natural, easy act of a husband. Maddie watched him for a moment, taking him in as he finished up.

A knock at their door told them it was time to go.

"That's us," Harry looked up to Maddie as she slipped back in the bathroom. "Madeline?"

"On my way," she called and then, just as quickly, reappeared; bright rosy cheeks and a smile.

"Fantastic," Harry reached for the door handle as Maddie breezed across the room.

"Just one more thing..." She was a bit short of breath as she smiled up at him; eyes flashing something he couldn't quite pin. "I was wondering if you might be able to hold onto these for me."

She held out her hand. Without looking down, Harry smirked and held out his.

"Sure."

"Thank you." And then, as she dropped a soft ball of fabric in his hand, she stepped past him and out the door. "Thomas. Libby." Her voice was bright and perky and Harry—Harry was frozen inside their room.

Because there, in his hand, were Maddie's black lace panties.

"Harry?" Maddie turned to him; smiling wide. "Are you coming?" And Harry's eyes snapped up, his fingers closing over his wife's panties.

_His wife's panties._

His eyes met hers and honest to God, he couldn't find his fucking voice for anything. He cleared his throat and nodded. His eyes met hers and Maddie knew in an instant; she had rattled him. Her un-rattle-able husband was sufficiently rattled. He almost always had the upper-hand on her but in this one, small instance, she had him.

And she couldn't help the heat of victory that pulsed in her veins.

With one hand, he pulled their door shut and with the other, he stuffed the small, the so fucking small, slip of fabric into his pocket and he followed as the group moved through the halls. Pulling together what was left of his wits, what was left of his survival instincts, he glanced around; taking in faces, reactions. Nobody seemed to be the wiser, nobody seemed to know.

Except for her.

His wife. Though she was smiling sweetly, though her bubbly exterior was well honed, carrying on conversation as they moved, he could see the excitement in her eyes, the extra beat in her step. She had him. And she fucking knew it. Clearly she was back in full swing. Maybe this was her way of letting him know that. Or maybe this was her way to mess with him on the most basic level possible.

Harry shook his head, a deep chuckle trapped in his chest. Yes. She had him. Her panties were in
his pocket. Not on her.

Fuck. His eyes traveled to her; the soft yellow fabric of her dress swishing as she kept up with the quick clip of the group.

She was wearing nothing under that dress. Nothing; her underwear were in his pocket. And Harry instantly felt hot; his pants felt tighter.

Yes. She had him. And, as the doors to the elevator opened and the group filed in, her eyes slid to his and the kinked twist of her lips was her tell. She was loving this.

From that moment on, Maddie's panties were burning a hole in Harry's pocket; the knowledge of them there, of them not on her, branded in his mind. It put a twist on absolutely everything.

The way she moved through the lobby.

The way she smiled at the on-lookers, offering a wave.

His mind couldn't sort it out; which part threw him the most. Was it that he had her panties tucked into his pocket? Was it that she was right there in front of him, going about business, without any on? Was it that his sweet, lovely wife had handed him what was possibly the biggest shock he had received up until that point? Jesus. He didn't know.

He was completely torn.

Until they stepped into The Golden Bee and the introductions began. And then he stood there, smile in place and watched as his wife stepped forward; meeting the men and women he had played with that afternoon. He watched as men, soldiers, bowed their heads to The Duchess. He caught the way they looked at her, the way their hands held onto her fingers. They were a tad star struck—he got that. It happened to the best of them and, under normal circumstances, it wouldn't have fazed him at all. He had been there more than once, he had seen peoples' reactions to her.

But there she was; smiling back, congratulating them on their win, asking the kinds of questions that made her so very good at this—and her panties were in her pocket. A soft, almost indiscernible groan came from his throat and he shook his head; biting at the inside of his cheek. She was absolutely messing with his mind.

Maddie, hearing his groan, glanced back at him, looking him over with a smug sort of expression on her face. And when her eyes landed on his, her breath sucked in.

Yes, she was messing with him. She had intended to.

But that dark, deep fire in his eyes, that slanted smile of his—she knew. This was far from over; far from a game-set-match victory. And—had she been wearing any—her panties would have been wet with anticipation. But she wasn't. They were in her husband's pocket.

And her breath caught in her throat as her cheeks flushed. For a split second she second guessed her decision; wondering if it wasn't going to throw her off her game more than it was going to throw him—wondering if this very private secret they now shared wasn't going to keep her from having a normal conversation.

And then she took a deep breath and pulled her eyes from him. Her back straightened and she felt...bold.
With everything in her, she forced her mind to snap back to the moment; turning to the next of the introductions with that shining smile and quick mind. She had to be patient and remain focused and remember—this was exactly how she wanted this to go.

Hours later, there were still a few handfuls of servicemen and women at the bar and Maddie and Harry were at a table with two of the men who had completed the Walking With the Wounded trek to the North Pole that Harry had been a part of. Sergeant Steve Young and his now wife Emma and Private Jaco Van Gass had joined them and in that moment, Maddie and Emma were laughing at the tales the men were telling of the other.

"Now you're gearing up to go in April?" Steve looked to Maddie.

"Yes," she nodded with a smile. "I'm very excited."

"Have you started the training yet?" Jaco reached for his drink.

"No," she shook her head with a knowing smirk. "I'll pick it up when we get back to London after the trip is over."

"Yes," Harry chuckled and looked to the two men. "Would you tell her she's going to need to start running?"

"Aye, Harry..." Maddie groaned.

"That she's going to need the endurance and the energy and..." Harry rattled off a list as Maddie rolled her eyes at him.

"Says the man who made it, what was it, four days?" Steve offered; grinning into his drink at Harry's surprise.

"Oh!" Maddie clapped her hands together as Harry turned narrowed eyes to his fellow soldier.

"Sorry?" Harry's hand moved to his chest in mock pain and hurt. "I had to return to London."

"Of course," Jaco smirked amidst the laughter at the table.

"Come on," Harry met his eyes. "You know I would have been there if I could have." The two men shared a silent communication that was born of camaraderie, of a shared understanding and it made Maddie's smile stretch.

"Yes," Steve nodded, allowing a moment of seriousness. "We do know that."

"Okay," Harry's smile flashed and he eased back.

"Of course," Steve's eyes flashed to Maddie sympathetically. "We were spared two weeks of your snoring."

The laughter erupted at the table once more. And Maddie could see the shift in Harry. She could see how much more at ease he was with Steve and Jaco, how himself he felt. And it made her so happy to see him that way.
"So," Jaco turned his enchanting smile to Maddie. "Are you going to do the entire trek?"

"I am," Maddie nodded, her hand finding Harry's leg under the table. "I'm incredibly lucky that this was really the first thing to hit my schedule so now other things are scheduling around the trek, instead of the other way around." Harry's hand found hers and squeezed. "I'm very much looking forward to it."

"Well, we'll all have to get together after you return and swap notes," he tossed out the suggestion before he even thought about who he was talking to. But before he could take it back or apologize for being so presumptuous, Maddie was rushing ahead.

"Absolutely!" She nodded excitedly. "I would really like that. Do we know how to get ahold of you?"

"I don't know," Jaco smiled at the look on her face while Steve laughed at the look on Harry's. "But I can give you my number."

"That would be perfect."

"Hold on," Harry's hand held up in good-natured fun; moving into Jaco's line of vision. "You're giving my wife your phone number?"

"It would appear that way, yes," Jaco nodded, flashing a smile at the Duchess.

"I'm right here!" Harry held his hands up as the rest of the table laughed.

"I'm sorry, are you jealous?" Steve mocked him good heartedly.

"A little bit," Harry nodded, waving a hand to Jaco. "Have you seen him? My wife's a sucker for good looking soldiers, in case you haven't noticed." Harry winked and they laughed.

"Oh come on Captain," Maddie's hand slid up his leg to his pocket, patting the bulge the contents made with a smug grin. "You know better."

"Oh?" He turned knowing eyes to her, his mind snapping instantly to their shared secret, his blood warming. "You're killing me here Madeline."

And to the rest of the table, he absolutely could have meant her back and forth with Jaco or the fact that she was laughing at his snoring or that he was only able to spend four days on the trek. But they both knew exactly what he was talking about and it made Maddie's stomach clench.

"I know," she offered a slight wink before she took a breath and adjusted purposefully in her seat; uncrossing and re-crossing her legs.

"God," Harry groaned and pulled his eyes from hers, forcing them not to focus on exactly where his mind was focused. He raised his hand to signal for their waiter. "I think I need another drink. Care for another round?" He looked to their guests and took a deep breath. It was going to be a long night.

The end of their night came late. After miles of laughter and rounds of drinks, Maddie and Harry
made their way back towards their room. The reception at The Golden Bee had been a perfect way to cap off their last night of their tour. They had one day left, one interview and then they were free for a few days. And spending this time with fellow soldiers, with men who had shared an experience with Harry that he would always look at so fondly had been a perfect cap. Harry had been "one of the guys" for the night and Maddie had simply been his wife.

As they moved towards the end of their day, they moved into their usual routine; slinking closer to the other, shutting it all down. The elevator ride to their floor was quiet, Thomas running through their call time the next morning, their short list of events, and by the time they reached their room, they had finished business. Saying good-bye to staff, the Security team took leave to their part of the suite and Maddie and Harry, hazy from the late hour, from their drinks, from the laughter, moved to their room; Harry leading the way.

"I'm so sleepy..." Maddie yawned, walking in past him as he held the door for her. "I can't wait to crawl into..."

"Hold on," Harry's hand at her waist stalled Maddie as she stepped into their room. Harry shut the door behind her and she could feel the heat from his eyes; from his gaze. And it all came rushing back to her. Though her lips tugged up at that memory, she forced her face calm, steadied her stance.

"Everything okay?" She kept her voice sweet.

"No," he shook his head, his chuckle deep and low as he stepped around her; standing in front of her.

"No?" She smiled and met his eyes. And that was her demise; the deep, dark fire there told her just what she had known would be there—just what she had intended to find when she slipped her panties into his hand.

"No," he repeated, stepping closer to her; her instincts moving her a step back, closer to the door. "You see. I've had this..." His fingers pulled the small slip of silky material from his pocket, letting it hang between them. "I've had this in my pocket all night."

"Oh?" She gulped and tried for innocent. "Black lace. Interesting choice." There was a tip in her voice, an uplift that drew him closer; half a step in and she took half a step back—finding the door with a small oomph.

"Yes," he nodded; his eyes shifted to the soft fabric hanging from his fingers and he moved closer. "You know, I'm a trained officer in the British Army."

"A Captain," she breathed; her chest rising and falling. "I know."

"Trained to think on my feet..." He took a small, half step forward.

"Yeah?" She could feel the heat from his body.

"To react quickly, to handle the unexpected..." One more step and she was pinned; her chest to his.

"Mmm?" Her lips pressed together in effort to keep the moan in her mouth. The way he was watching her, the way he was speaking; she needed that door behind her for support.
"And I've had years..." He chuckled, moving his left hand to the door, right beside her head; her panties still wrapped in his fingers. "Years of putting a smile to the world...

"Well sure," she shrugged, her voice wavering just a bit.

"But tonight," he shook his head, his other hand moving low on her hip. "Tonight you just about brought all of that training..." His fingers at her hip began to pull at the flowy material of her dress; bringing the skirt slowly higher and higher. "All of those years of practice..." He leaned in, his nose nudging hers as his eyes locked with hers; heavy and dark and she nearly lost it. "...almost came crashing to the ground."

"Oh..." She breathed as his fingers reached the hem of her skirt; her leg bare just below his hand as he stalled.

"And I've just been wondering," he pressed a soft, too light, kiss to her lips. "I've been dying to know..." His hand slipped up under the bunched fabric, releasing it so that his hand fell hot and firm against her bare thigh.

"What?" She gulped at her dry throat; daring to put her voice into this heated exchange. "What have you been dying to know?"

"If the presence of these..." He pulled her panties closer to her cheek. "In my pocket really meant that there was an absence..." And then with a slow, torturous movement, his hand under her dress slid across her thigh to her center; finding her completely exposed and unbelievably aroused. His voice was low and labored as his fingers slid into realization. "God...Madeline." His eyes fell closed, his forehead pressing to hers as he let it sink in; as his lungs pulled in his breath.

Maddie stood completely still, her eyes watching him closely, her heart pounding in her throat, and every nerve in her body focusing on her center, where his fingers rested; firm and solid. "Harry..." She whispered and his eyes opened.

And the intensity she saw there, the unfiltered lust brought a surge of desire through her body and when Harry moved, his lips pressing against hers as his body was pressing against her, she gasped at the feeling. Harry, taking advantage of the moment, pushed his tongue into her mouth, seeking with fervor. Finding her tongue, he ran hot, firm strokes with his.

And then his fingers moved against her; mimicking the way his tongue was moving in her mouth. And it was all happening so fast and so heated that Maddie could barely react. She could barely process it; barely wrap her mind around it. She groaned against his mouth, her hands moving to his chest as her body slumped, weakened by what he was doing to her, by the way he was doing it to her and she thought for a moment she just might fall. But he was having none of that.

"Oh no," he shook his head, his lips pulling from hers with a smile; swollen and pink and his eyes locked with hers. His hand moved to her cheek, pressing her black lace panties to the warm skin there as he held her face in his palm. "Do you have any idea what you did to me tonight? Slipping these in my hand so casually..." His thumb moved over her pouty lips as he took a shuddery breath. "Do you have any idea..." His eyebrows lifted and Maddie, feeling brave and emboldened by the way he was pressed against her, the way he was looking at her, pulled together her wits and let her hands fall, running down his chest, over his stomach and past his belt buckle.

And her eyes never left his as her fingers wrapped around the hard, stiff bulge she found there. Her lips tugged up at the corners and she nodded; slowly, methodically and in a breathy voice she answered. "Yes." And, feeling her own lust wash over her, she parted her lips and never breaking
eye contact, she sucked his thumb into her mouth.

And it was Harry's turn to weaken, Harry's turn to catch his breath, to slump at the knees. And he did; he wavered, momentarily shaken by the feel of her mouth wrapped around his thumb, the way her tongue licked heat onto his skin. He wavered.

But only for a second.

His hand pulled his thumb from her mouth and in an instant, his mouth covered hers. And as his lips worked against hers, as his tongue invaded her warm, wet mouth, his fingers pressed into her slick, wet core; fast and deep and the groan that came from within her was primal and needy and if Harry hadn't been battling this long drawn out foreplay she had initiated, that would have absolutely done him in.

Maddie was quick, and ready and the buildup had been exhausting; the entire night dipping in and out of a place where all she wanted to do was push him up against the wall and have her way with him. Her hands moved to his belt buckle and the fumbling she had been met with the day before had disappeared. As his fingers stroked against her, she slid the belt from his buckle, handled the button and the zipper and with a sigh of satisfaction, she had him in her grasp.

"Fuck," Harry groaned as she stroked him; a fire burning in his belly, an ache for her that had been teased out all night. God, he wanted her. And from the way her hips were arching against his hand, he had no doubt she wanted him just as much.

Harry was quick too; with one hand he pulled hers from his pants and with the other, he pulled his fingers from her. Though Maddie groaned a protest, he continued on; capturing her wrists in his hands he was fast and nimble and before she could blink twice, he had wrapped those tiny black lace panties around her wrists; binding them together and pinning them over her head against the door.

"Yes..." She breathed, her bottom lip pulling into her teeth as she smiled; surprised and aroused and unable to do anything but what his body was making her do. His face tipped to hers, kissing her deeply. With one hand holding hers in place, the other slid down her arm; a trail of heat fell from his fingers as they moved along her side and he stepped forward into the opening gate of her hips and she could feel him hard and warm against the soft, thin fabric of her dress and it made her moan in want.

And though he was half tempted to tease her, half tempted to drive her as mad as she had driven him this entire night, he really didn't have it in him to delay this any longer. Pushing her hands against the door with one hand, he bunched her skirt up with the other and without any more deliberation, he lifted her leg to his hip and pushed into her; swift and deep and causing the both of them to gasp out for breath.

Maddie laughed; a slight, muffled sound that told of her satisfaction, of her relief at finally having him inside of her. Harry turned a smile to her, the same intimate look they had been sharing the entire night and then, as he began to move against her, his mouth moved to her neck.

"Yes..." She breathed, her head tipping back against the door as Harry's lips moved over her skin; his tongue teasing, his teeth nipping. His hands holding her steady at her hip and over her head as he thrust every ounce of pent up want he had been holding onto that night.

It felt raw and heavy and a bit rough. But his lips were soft on her and even the hands that held her in place were warm and loving and the way he was driving into her was bringing her so close
to that eminent explosion.

But Harry wanted more. He wanted to be closer, he wanted her wrapped all the way around him, he wanted her to be able to touch him, to be able to hold on to him as he held onto her. And then, in a move that surprised Maddie, he released her still bound hands and moved both of his to the backs of her thighs. As he lifted her off the ground, she grinned and let her arms fall around his neck; wrists still tied in her panties circling around him as her legs circled around his waist.

And he sank deeper.

"Oh God yes..." Maddie moaned, lifting her hands, together, into his hair. This new angle, this new tilt, brought him in contact with every spot she had and as he pressed her back against the door, she knew it wasn't going to be long.

"Oh Maddie..." He groaned into her mouth, now captured with his; his hand between her back and the door as he pressed into her over and over and over.

"Yes..." She nodded, her fingers tugging at his hair, her breath coming up shallow and ragged and...

"Maddie..." He warned, his hand clutching at her bare ass with tight fingers. He was close, too close and he needed her to join him before it was too late.

"Harry..." She arched out against him and he knew. His hand slid from behind her back, moving around to her chest and he pulled at the fabric there; pulling her breast from her bra, from her dress. His mouth left hers and pulled her pert nipple into his teeth and with one soft bite and one firm suck, Maddie was there. "Oh!" She gasped; her head tipping back. "Yes..." She breathed; her hands clutching to him, holding him closer and tighter and... "Harry!"

"Fuck," he groaned. "Maddie...I can't."

Her whole body clenched around him.

His entire world pulsed up into her.

And that buildup she had started, that tease she had initiated when she had dropped those black lace panties, still wrapped around her wrists, into his lap—came to a fiery, sweaty, beautiful end there against that door.

Harry's breath was hot against her skin, her chest was rising and falling as they both fought for air.

"Oh my God..." Maddie laughed, light and airy and winded.

"I know," he nodded, pulling his lips from her skin and straightening up. He looked down at her then as everything about their interaction softened. Pulling her from the door, he gathered her into his arms; taking on her weight. His hands were smooth against her as his arms wrapped around her, hugging her to him. "You okay?" He smiled sweetly.

"Mmm..." Maddie nodded, snuggling closer to him. "I'm better than okay. In fact..." She raised her arms and pulled the black lacy fabric from around her wrists. "I think I'm going to have to hand these off to you more often." With a wide smile, she pulled her panties onto his head like a hat and wrapped her arms around his neck; kissing his upturned lips. "There we go."
"Ha!" Harry laughed, shaking his head as he moved them away from the door, into their room. "I don't think I could make it through another day with these..." His eyes rolled up to his head with a grin. "In my pocket. But God..." He shook his head at her again. "God I love how your mind works."

"Yeah?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"Yeah," he kissed her and then, with a groan from him and a moan from her; he slipped himself from her body and sat her on her feet.

"Booo..." Maddie's lip stuck out slightly as he stepped from her; righting himself.

"Sorry love," he chuckled. "But I'm going to shower and get ready for bed. I'm exhausted and our last day is tomorrow."

"Fair enough. Here..." She reached up to his head to retrieve the panties and, as her hand moved from him, he snatched it in his and kissed the inside of her wrist. She smiled wider and watched as he dropped her hand, as he moved towards their bathroom. With a satisfied sigh and a deep breath, she tossed the black lacy panties into the air and caught them in her hand.

"Madeline?" His voice called to her from the bathroom.

"Captain?" She called back.

"Join me in the shower?"

And though she bit her lip and giggled; playing coy for only a split second, she tossed her panties to the ground and hurried after his voice; peeling clothes from her body as she moved
"Harry?" Maddie called out to him as she moved across the room the next morning.

"Yes love?" He was sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling his shoes on.

"Would you mind holding onto this for me?" She breezed past him and dropped, in his lap, a pair of white, cotton panties.

"Oh no!" His face snapped up, his hand reaching for her arm as she passed. "No way," he tugged her back as she laughed; incredibly amused. "I cannot do this another day, not while I'm working..." He pulled her into his lap and though he would guess based off her laughter that she was completely messing with him, he had to be sure. As she tipped back in his arms, he slid a hand up her leg, under her skirt and, finding that she was in fact messing with him, he shook his head at her. "Naughty girl."

"Sorry," she shrugged, content there in his arms. "I couldn't help myself."

"What am I going to do with you?" His hand squeezed her ass and then, quite unexpectedly, pulled back and gave her a little tap.

"Oh!" Maddie's lips twisted up into a smile as her eyes flashed wide. "Oh..."

"Sorry, I..." Harry began, rubbing his hands over the spot he had slapped.

"No," she held her fingers to his lips. "Don't apologize, I..." She flushed pink. "Oh God. Did I like that?" Their eyes locked and the heat rose between them.

"We don't have time to do this right now," Harry whispered, his hand sliding slowly, regretfully, from her ass to the outside of her skirt.

"No," she shook her head, trying to convince herself that he was right; settling into his lap. "Maybe later?"

"Madeline," he groaned, taking in the hopeful look in her eyes, the fun tip to her voice. He wrapped his arms around her completely and hugged her tight and close and kissed at her neck. "You can't talk to me like that before we head out."

"Or what?" She sighed; eyes wide with a mocking innocence. "You'll spank me?"

"Oh God," Harry groaned again. He hugged her tighter as she squealed and laughed and struggled lightly against his arms. It was going to be a long day.
Their last day on their first tour served up moment after moment ripe for Maddie to poke fun, primed for Maddie's bright smile and wide laughter. They attended the Bike Races where once again he was gifted with a defunct air horn. After the laughter from the crowd died down, Harry had allowed a side-glance to his wife who stood smug and smirking and words just waiting on her lips.

"Go ahead," he spoke low, only to her as their eyes stayed trained on the games. "I know you're dying to..."

"Have that problem often?" She went for it; as cheesy and expected as it was, she went. "Your magic fingers failing you? Lost your touch?"

"Wow..." Harry shook his head, biting at his lower lip as his hands rested on his hips. "Is that the best you have?" He raised his eyebrows and looked straight to her.

"Well," she sighed, turning her body to face his. "I was going to comment on your inability to get things to...blow...when you want them too but..." She reached out, letting her fingers run lightly over the short line of buttons on his polo shirt. "But we both know that's not true." Her smile pulled wide as she turned away from then, refocusing on the bikes that were sailing past them and he nodded. This had become just the kind of smart he had grown to expect from her on this trip; her own particular brand of sass. If there hadn't been so many cameras on them, he may very well have offered the swift smack to her ass she had asked for earlier. But he knew better; when to draw the line.

And they both stood dangerously close to that line later that day at the United States Air Force Academy training facility when after tossing an American football, he was talked into getting on all fours at the bottom of a pyramid. Maddie, wearing a skirt and heels, was relegated to the side where she stood with a wide smile she had to bite at to keep from laughing. She waved at him as he shook his head; knowing exactly what was going through her mind. And, when she pulled her own cell phone out, something she never, ever did, to snap a picture, Harry's eyes narrowed and his lips curved into a smile.

"Are we done now?" He mouthed, looking up to her; hoping her sass would come to an end soon. With a glimmer in her eye and another snap of her phone, Maddie shook her head and tucked her phone back into her pocket. She could barely wait to show their friends back home those pictures.

Eventually the pyramid came down and Harry stood up. It took everything he had in him not to go right to his wife and swing back with some fun of his own. But he didn't. H stayed on point and they finished up at the training center. And, finally, they could see the end of their tour on the horizon.

They hurried to the hotel, hurried to change and hurried to the interview site. And Maddie was so busy rushing around that she hadn't the time to stop and contemplate the nationally televised interview she was about to give until they were there; meeting Diane Sawyer while production assistants helped them with their microphones. They had talked in the car on the way over; Thomas giving them notes, Libby reminding them of talking points but it hadn't really hit her until that moment.

And the interview began. Diane was kind and warm and didn't seem like she was out to get either of them; putting Maddie at ease as she sat next to Harry on the small couch. The questions started light; how has the tour been? What has been your favorite part so far? And then she took it a step deeper, turning to Harry with a small smile.
"Now, you've spent a lot of time on the tour meeting with military men and women and their families. Clearly that's a cause important to the two of you; you as a soldier and you in working with those transitioning back to civilian life. Tell me, Captain Wales, do you plan on continuing in the Army now that you're married and working as a full time royal?"

"That's a good question," Harry adjusted slightly in his seat as his mind shifted over to her line of questions; to his military role. "At this point in time I have every intention on maintaining both my military commitments and certainly with Madeline at my side now, we'll be taking on more royal duties together and individually." He tossed a smile to his wife and turned back to Diane. "So I suppose my answer is that I will continue to do both just as long as I can, as long as those two roles will continue to allow me to exist in both areas."

"And are there any plans or possibility of another deployment in the future?" Maddie's hands stayed still and calm in her lap though her heart jumped just a bit—as it always did when thinking of him heading out again.

"Plans?" Harry shook his head; solemn and thoughtful as he did. "I'm not currently aware of any immediate plans though it is always a possibility." He took a deep breath. "As with any active soldier in the military, you go when they tell you to go, where they tell you to go and, should I receive those orders, I'll take up—just like any other soldier. As I've said before, time, money and resources were spent training me to do a job and nobody; myself, my family, the military; nobody would have wasted those if it meant me sitting on the side while others head out."

"And you," Diane turned a smile to Maddie. "What's that like for you; newlywed into this...sometimes surreal life...looking at the possibility of another deployment?"

"Well," Maddie took a breath and blinked. "I am, and have always been, immensely proud of my husband's service in the Army. That's not to say I don't worry. I think all military spouses, partners and families do. But I trust that he knows what he's doing, I trust in his training and I trust in the men and women who serve beside him—many of which we spent time with on this tour, here in Colorado and in Washington and New York." A satisfied glimmer flashed in Harry's eyes as his wife masterfully turned the question back on point; The Tour, The people. If he could have high-fived her, he would have. But he kept his cool; hands folded in his lap.

"And what a successful tour it's been," Diane's smile spread. "Throngs of people have come out to see you; to wave and to vie for a chance to say hello. That must be quite something to see."

"Sure," Maddie smiled and nodded. "I mean, I've seen Harry elicit that kind of reaction before and certainly in England we've seen crowds at various events but I was surprised by the level of interest; even here in my home state. It was really quite something to see."

"That's right," Diane nodded. "You were born here in Colorado."

"I was."

"Do you still consider Colorado to be your home?"

"Oh wow..." Maddie thought for a second. "I suppose in some senses I do. I mean, my mother still lives here. This is where my father lived so...when I think of my childhood home, this is where I think of." Her smile grew soft as she remembered. "But I've been very fortunate to live in some very different areas. I grew up on a farm in a small, rural town in the US. I went to college in New York City. I lived in a tiny, remote part of Africa and now..."
"You live in a palace," Diane offered and Maddie's smile tugged higher as her eyes shifted down for just a moment.

"I do," she nodded. "Each place has been remarkable; offered up lessons and friendships and taken a little bit of my heart but..." She shrugged lightly; her demeanor airy and at ease as she answered. "But when I think of home, I think of London; of my home with Harry at Kensington."

"Of course," Diane nodded in understanding. "Do you miss it? Colorado?"

"Sure," Maddie answered. "I miss my family, my old bedroom. Sure. But I haven't lived here in a very long time. Long before Harry and this new part of my life."

"Do you think the two of you will come back often? Seeing as your family is still here?" Maddie took a breath, preparing to answer but before she could, Harry spoke up.

"I think that we'll come to the US more than I have before alone, for sure," he grinned. "I've always got along well with Maddie's family and we really enjoy visiting them and spending time here. So I would say yes, we'll be back." He raised his eyebrows to Maddie who nodded.

"Is it strange," Diane concentrated on Maddie. "Coming back to this familiar place but in this new role?"

"Not really," Maddie laughed lightly. "There are certainly moments that stick out; throwing out the first pitch at a field where I used to watch games in the cheap seats—that was a bit surreal but I wouldn't say strange."

"Fair enough." Diane nodded and turned to Harry for a moment. "Now, you've done this for your entire life..."

"Quite a few years, yes." Harry chuckled.

"But this is your wife's first Royal Tour," she smiled sweetly at Maddie.

"Yes it is," Harry's lips slipped higher.

"And by all accounts; the news coverage, the turnout, the response...it's been a remarkably successful tour." She paused for a moment and spoke softly. "And it appears to be a pretty seamless transition into this new role as your wife and a Duchess. You must be incredibly proud? At all surprised? What's it like to see this all unfold?"

"Proud?" Harry actually sat a bit taller as he thought about it; thought about her. Though he tried to stay focused, tried to stay trained on Diane Sawyer, his eyes drifted to Maddie and he felt a flush in his cheeks. "Yes. Enormously proud. I think in a...role like mine you just...you hope that you find somebody willing to take it on, somebody willing to jump into all that comes with this lifestyle and the responsibilities that surround it. Am I surprised? At how well she's done? At how she's stepped into the role and the responsibilities?" He shook his head. "No. Not in the least."

"Aw," Maddie's voice grew soft as she smiled at him; distracted for just a moment by his words, by the look on his face as he spoke them. "That's very sweet."

"That is very sweet," Diane agreed and Maddie snapped right back.

"But it's more than just that," Harry leaned in a bit; wanting to make a point. "What I mean is that
Maddie has worked hard all of her life for many of the same people who I like to think I'm working for; children, military members and their families. She isn't new to service, to hard work and determination. This may be a new avenue, a new way of doing things but this isn't something foreign to her. I had no doubts she would be able to step up to this with little effort.

"I see," Diane smiled, knowing exactly what she was catching on film; Prince Harry getting personal, letting them in on his feelings for his wife. It was something to see and, she knew, it would be something when the world saw it. Turning to Maddie, she continued. "And right before you left for the tour you announced two big projects you're taking on; Walking With the Women and The Delphinium Project. Can you tell us a bit more about those?"

Maddie nodded and fell into ease as she explained the two projects; each unique and so very different from each other, all while maintaining a close, personal tie to her. She was succinct and clear and the passion she had for her work was clear to everyone who was watching and who would be later. And then, as the interview drew closer to the end, Diane moved on from official business and went straight for what she knew viewers would want her to ask.

"Now of course, we can't sit down with two members of the royal family and not ask about the newest addition. Not long before you came to the United States you welcomed your first nephew into the family. Tell us, how is he doing? What's it like to be an aunt and uncle for the first time?"

"Wow..." Harry sighed as both of their faces lit up with wide smiles and dancing eyes. "I would say it's quite amazing. Wouldn't you?"

"Oh my yes! And he is just..." Maddie grinned as she recalled his chubby cheeks. "He's perfect. He really is and I know I speak for Harry when I say that we can't wait to see him when we return to London. We have thoroughly enjoyed this trip and everyone who we've met along the way and it's sad to see it come to an end. But knowing that we get to see Arthur on the other end...it makes it that much sweeter."

"Absolutely," Harry nodded in agreement.

"And I suppose that begs the question," Diane's eyes twinkled and both Harry and Maddie knew exactly what was coming next. "Are there any immediate plans for a cousin for Arthur?"

"Ha!" Harry laughed; clapping his hands together. "Immediate? No. No immediate plans," he smiled at Maddie, hoping that their faces didn't show just how much they had been trying to make it more immediate.

"No," Maddie shook her head, tearing her eyes from his. "Though we absolutely want a family..."

"A large family," Harry interjected.

"A large family," Maddie agreed. "There are some things that need to happen first."

"And I think we both want to be married for a while, figure things out before we bring a baby into the mix," Harry offered. "But yes. At some point we will have children."


"Well you both seem to be very energetic and quite happy in your newlywed phase."

"Well I won't speak for Maddie," Harry smoothed down his tie and adjusted in his seat; turning
just slightly towards Maddie. "But this has absolutely been two of the best months of my life."

"Wow," Diane's eyes flashed wide as Maddie smiled; finding humor in how blunt and over the top Harry seemed to be. "That's quite a statement."

"It certainly is," Maddie shook her head slightly as her cheeks warmed. If he wanted her to remain calm, cool and collected, he was sure making it more difficult. "We are both quite happy, yes."

"And speaking to that," Diane moved in her seat; reaching for a folder of photos she had. "Throughout your tour here in the US, there has been a great deal of coverage and comment on just how...happy and close the two of you seem." She opened up the folder and began to flip through some of the photos; all pictures of Harry and Maddie together, touching in one way or another. It was nothing crass or inappropriate; hand holding, his hand on the small of her back, her hand tucked around his waist under his jacket. There were more than a few of them kissing or locked in an embrace and there was even one or two of Harry's hand drifting to Maddie's ass.

"Well," Maddie cleared her throat and smiled sheepishly. "What can I say? We are newlyweds and..." She sat up a bit taller and shrugged just a bit. "We've been traveling around the country visiting organizations and projects that have such inspiration behind them, we've been meeting people who have amazing stories and, at the end of the day, we carry that emotion with us and...we're drawn to each other; to share those emotions and this experience and..."

"Honestly," Harry lifted his eyebrows, smiling at the interviewer; knowing fully well what he was about to hand her. "I just really enjoy kissing my wife." Maddie nearly choked on the air in her lungs. "All of those things are true; what Maddie just said. There is a lot of emotion and meaning that we carry with us but...I enjoy kissing my wife, being with her, holding her hand and...I don't know." He shrugged and glanced to Maddie quickly before looking to Diane. "It's still socially acceptable to kiss your wife, right?"

"Well yes," Diane laughed in the moment, despite her professionalism. "I suppose it is."

"Well there you go," Harry smiled to Maddie who met his eye with the sarcastic glimmer he had seen from her all day. He was in for it and he didn't care one bit.

"Is that the message for the day?" Diane laughed; genuinely warmed by the two of them and their interactions.

"Yes," Harry nodded before turning to the cameras and with the charm and sass that was so unique to Harry, he smiled and said. "Kiss your wife." And then he caught himself. "Or your husband or your significant other."

"Fantastic," Diane clapped her hands together, certain that she wouldn't find a more perfect place to end the interview. "You heard it here from the heart of southern Colorado and His Royal Highness, the Duke of Sussex. Go home. Kiss your wife." She turned from the camera and smiled at the young couple. "Your Royal Highnesses, thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me today. I certainly hope you enjoy the well-deserved break you have coming."

"Thank you very much Diane," Harry nodded.

"Yes thank you," Maddie smiled sweetly and then, as the camera blinked to a stop, she clipped off her microphone and slid her eyes to her husband. "Very nice Captain."

"You liked that?" He smirked as he clipped of his own mic; leaning in to press a kiss to her cheek.
while Diane finished up with technicalities and her own mic. "Did it make you want to spank me?" His voice whispered in her ear just seconds before he rose to his feet to shake Diane's hand and say their final good-byes. With pink cheeks that were easily explained by the interview, Maddie rose to her feet and followed suit; shaking hands, offering thanks, and soon she and her cheeky husband were being escorted to their car.

Their first Official Tour was officially over.

On their short drive back to their hotel, the debrief began. Maddie could tell that while Thomas wasn't as amused by Harry's last answer as she was sure the rest of the world was going to be, he wasn't all that upset or surprised about it either. He had worked for Harry for years and it would have been a gut level shock had he not added his own bit of flavor somewhere in there. They finished up discussions about traveling home. Thomas and Libby would be leaving the next morning, leaving them behind only with security. All of their travel paperwork was already organized and waiting for them in their suite. So far they had heard nothing but positive comments and feedback regarding their trip; both from the palace and the public.

"You should," Thomas made it a point to meet Maddie's eyes when he spoke. "Consider this trip an enormous success." While Maddie blushed and fought her instinct to deny that it had anything to do with her, Harry smiled wide and pulled her hand to his lips for a kiss.

And then, because there was nothing more to discuss; no call times, no lists of names or rundowns of itineraries; the four of them relaxed into their seats, took in the scenery and soaked up those moments of accomplishment; something finished, something done well.

As they pulled up the drive to the hotel, Maddie turned to Libby and reached for her hand. The young woman was a bit surprised by the gesture but hid it well. "Thank you, so much. Truly. You kept me on track, you were unbelievably prepared. I absolutely could not have made it without you."

"Oh, Ma'am, I..." Libby shook her head; slightly uncomfortable receiving that kind of lauding, especially in front of Thomas and Harry. "It's my job."

"I know it's your job," Maddie continued on. "And you do it so well. I just wanted to say thank you."

"You're welcome Ma'am," Libby patted Maddie's hand with her own and smiled sweetly. Though it wasn't within her character or in the nature of her job to expect that kind of thanks or certainly attention, she would forever think the Duchess was kind for offering it.

And before anything else could be said on the matter, their car had come to a halt and everyone was stepping out.

"Oh. Harry..." Maddie called out just as they were ready to step from the car.

"Hmmm?" He pulled back in, looking to her with lifted eyebrows and questioning eyes.

"The answer is yes." Her eyes crinkled up at the corners just a bit as she smiled. "To the question you asked me earlier. It absolutely does."

Though every night of the trip so far had consistently ended with the two of them connecting
physically; hands clasped or her tucked under his arm or wrapped in his embrace, this night was a little different. They were feeling a bit more free and relaxed and enjoying the slight uplift that came with a successful tour. And Harry was enjoying watching her move. As they walked from the car, he loved how she was quick to look to where people were waiting to catch a glimpse; offering a wave and a smile and a cherry hello. He watched as she walked tall through the lobby, as she had a light conversation with Sampson in the elevator. And when they finally came to a stop at their door, they said good-bye to Thomas and Libby and then she stood in front of him; eyes soft with a hint of smirk and she sighed out a long breath.

"We're done..."

"We are," Harry nodded; tugging her into his arms, unashamed and without care. "Are you ready to celebrate?"

"I am," she nodded; lowering her voice as the security officers filed into their suite. "Though...you said such amazing things about me today. It was all so beautiful and sweet." She leaned in even closer as Harry reached out to hold the door for her. "It's probably totally inappropriate to ask you to spank me now." Harry let out a deep chuckle as his arms snaked around her waist; tugging her closer, his lips dipping to her ear.

"It is never inappropriate to ask me to spank you." Maddie giggled in his arms and glanced towards their suite, ready to haul him in and make him prove it.

But she stopped. As her eyes peered into the room, her wicked smile faded into sweetness and she breathed. "What is this?"

"Come on in," Harry nodded his head towards the room. "Let's find out."

With his hand at the small of her back, Maddie stepped away from Harry and moved into their suite. After the door locked behind them, the security officers slipped nonchalantly from the main room into their own rooms and Harry and Maddie were alone in the candlelit room.

"There's..." She looked around, moving further into their space, coming back to her own mind with each step. "A lot of candles, Wales." She laughed. "Does the Fire Marshall know about you?"

"He does," Harry laughed with her, loosening his tie as he followed. "We have champagne and dinner and..." He reached out to pull a tall silver lid from a cloth covered table. "Red Velvet cupcakes..."

"Oh!" Maddie's hands clapped together like an excited little child. "You're the best husband ever."

"Says the woman who, only moments ago was threatening to spank me," his eyes danced with humor in the candlelit and Maddie sighed.

"Promising," she corrected with a gleam in her eye.

"Right," he laughed.

"Harry..." She moved closer to him then, wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing against him. "This is..." She smiled wide. "Why is this?"

"Why?" He smiled, his fingers tucking hair away from her face. "Because you're done. You
survived your first tour. You survived nine full days at work with me." They both chuckled as he wrapped his arms around her; his face dipping closer to hers, his cheek rubbing soft against hers. "Because you're going to have my babies..."

"Harry..." Maddie felt a lump in her throat as she turned her face to look at him.

"I wanted to celebrate," he shrugged. "Care to celebrate with me?" His eyes widened teasingly. "I have champagne."

"Mmmm..." She moaned slightly, tightening her hold around his waist. "I suppose if there's champagne."

"There is," he nodded.

"And the red velvet cupcakes?" She bit at her bottom lip.

"Absolutely," he nodded with a snicker; loving how unabashed she was in her love for food. It reminded him of how full on she loved him and it made him undeniably happy.

"Then you have yourself a deal."

"Perfect," he ran his hands over her back. "Now. I am going to open the champagne and while I do that..." He slipped his hand into his pocket, pulling out his phone and pushing a few buttons before holding it out. "There is somebody who wants to speak with you."

"Me?" Maddie was confused as she took the phone from him, but slid it to her ear anyway. Harry pressed a kiss to her shoulder and slipped away to open champagne, to take the silver off of dinner. Maddie's eyes followed him as she waited and then, with a click, the deep, soothing voice told her instantly who it was.

"Madeline."

"Charles," she grinned; feeling instantaneously relaxed, content, and a bit homesick.

"Congratulations on the end of your first tour my dear."

"Thank you," Maddie smiled wide; feeling silly and happy. "I had an amazing time."

"Good, good," he was smiling. She could tell. "We've seen remarkable coverage of the two of you and I just wanted to let you know that we're all very proud of how well you've done. Very proud and very pleased."

"Oh wow..." Maddie's voice dropped as her emotions rose. "That's very sweet of you to say, Sir."

"The Palace has had nothing but good things to pass on," he added on, wanting her to know that it wasn't just him voicing these things. "Are the two of you celebrating tonight?"

"Yes sir," Maddie looked around the room at the candles, at the set table, at Harry, who had dropped his coat and tie to the couch—pouring champagne for the two of them.

"Has he champagne?"

"Yes," Maddie laughed. "He has."
"And some ridiculously expensive celebratory gift?" He asked as though he were reading off of some checklist and Maddie giggled slightly.

"Well I don't know about that," she found him so funny and sweet sometimes. "I do know, however, that there are some red velvet cupcakes."

"Wonderful. Wonderful." He missed her; he missed both of them and was excited for them to be back in London. "Well, I will let you go now dear. I simply wanted to pass on my congratulations. We'll expect to see the both of you when you return in a few days."

"Absolutely," Maddie nodded, taking the glass Harry was offering as he stepped close. "And thank you, again."

"Very well. Good night darling."

"Good night," Maddie smiled and, with a sigh, disconnected. She held the phone out to Harry and watched as he tucked it away and moved in closer. "Your father wanted to congratulate me..."

"Oh?" Harry's lips turned into a coy smile as he moved into her space.

"He didn't need to do that."

"He's terribly proud," Harry shrugged. "And so am I."

"You really need to stop with this," Maddie rolled her eyes; feeling a flush in her cheeks. "It's not a feat to do your job and you two are acting as though I parted the Red Sea. You with your lines to Diane Sawyer and..."

"Lines?" Harry's eyebrows lifted. "I meant every word I said."

"I know you did," she ran a hand over his chest and surrendered just a bit; letting it be. This was how they were; the Windsor men. "It's just...a lot. You with this room and your father...asking if there was champagne and if you had a ridiculously expensive celebratory gift..." She shook her head again and took a drink; her eyes catching Harry's over her glass. "Harry..."

"Well," he sighed, setting his glass to the side. "Now that you mention it..."

"Mention what?" Her voice had slight warning to it; slight uncertainty as she watched him move across the room. He went around the bar and leaned down; searching. When he reappeared, he had a square box in his hands; meticulously and beautifully wrapped. "Henry Charles," Maddie watched as he held it up.

"I don't know that it's ridiculously expensive," he brought the box with him as he returned to her side. "But it most certainly is a celebratory gift."

"What are you doing right now?" She watched him with soft eyes and a bit of a tug at her heart as he moved before her. "You know you don't need to do stuff like this."

"I do know that," he nodded; his eyes catching hers and she saw there something that made her see that this wasn't just Harry being Harry, this wasn't just about offering up a gift for the sake of offering one up. So she calmed and she waited and she saw him struggle a bit with his emotions.
"Hold on. Are you okay?" Her hand reached out to his arm and he smiled; wide and with abandon.

"I am absolutely okay," he nodded. "I just...this is a gift for the end of your first tour, for the end of your first American tour," he was careful to be specific as he contemplated the box in his hands. "And well...it has some meaning behind it that..." He was having a hard time finding the words over his emotions so he took a breath and handed it to her. "I'll explain, I think, after you open it."

"Okay," Maddie breathed; taking the box from his hands. It felt so cozy and intimate in that giant suite, in that moment. This moment where Harry stood close, watching her with bated breath as she pulled at the bow, as she moved the paper off the box. And just before her fingers lifted the lid, his eyes slid to hers and the look she caught there made a lump begin in her throat.

But she lifted the lid away and pulled at the silky fabric resting over what was inside and she unveiled what was possibly the most beautiful piece of jewelry she had ever seen in real life. Strands of pearls coming together around a deep blue sapphire surrounded by diamonds; it took her breath away the way it sparkled in the room. She looked it over with great reverence; her eyes welling with tears for some reason she couldn't quite place. It looked so sparkly, so beautiful—so familiar. Her eyes flashed up to Harry's and he smiled with emotion filled eyes.

"It's a necklace," his voice cracked but he cleared his throat and continued. "That my mother wore..."

"Harry..." Maddie's eyes pooled as her heart swelled and Harry, taking a breath and letting it all wash over him, smiled. He reached out to run his hand over her cheek, cupping her face in his palm for just a moment.

"She wore it on her...First US tour..." His lips tugged up in a smile and Maddie blinked at the tears in her eyes. "When she danced with..."

"John Travolta," Maddie finished with a shaky voice; the images instantly flashing to her mind.

"Exactly," Harry smiled at the memory.

"Harry...this is..." She shook her head, overwhelmed by it all; by the history, by the significance, by the meaning behind him giving it to her on this trip. It was a lot, to be faced with something holding so MUCH.

"Yours," he finished with a soft voice. "I...I know that it's not entirely your style and it's a bit...large and...flashy?" He lifted an eyebrow with a smirk.

"No Harry it's..." She took a steadying breath. "It's beautiful."

"And you don't have to wear it," he continued on. "I just...it was hers and I want it to be yours and I couldn't think of something better to give you on the last day of our..."

"Harry," Maddie's fingers fell over his lips; her eyes fixed on his. "Just...stop." And then, holding tight to the box in her hand, Maddie leaned in and replaced her fingers with her lips and she kissed him.

This kiss wasn't the teasing, lust-filled variety they had been sharing as of late, it was slow and sweet and so amazingly laced with passion that it made both of them stop and take notice. Her lips were soft against his and she could feel the mass of emotion he had for her as he kissed her back.
"It's beautiful," she whispered; pulling her lips from his, her eyes searching to hold onto his. "It's beautiful and perfect and..." She smiled wide. "And I can't wait to wear it. Harry I'm so...I'm so honored that you want me to have it and..." She blinked back tears as she looked down at it again; this beautiful piece of jewelry that had been Diana's—his mother's, her mother-in-law's. It was all so touching; it was all so much. And he caught it; he knew it would be.

As Harry moved the necklace from her hand, as he laid it down on the table next to them, her arms moved immediately around him—and his around her. As Harry's mouth tilted over hers, as Maddie's opened and invited him in, they forgot about the champagne and the dinner and the tour and the necklace and the candles and...

They held onto each other.

Because in the end they had both been right. When Diane Sawyer had asked about the photos of the two of them together; touching and kissing and holding. They had both been right. It was a lot of emotion to hold onto and, at the end of the day or between engagements, they drew naturally to the other; seeking and finding support for what they had heard, for what they were doing. They found their center in each other—and this trip had proven that. They were going to be an amazing team; a force to be reckoned with and everyone had seen it happen—the public, the media, Charles, the Palace. Even Maddie and Harry knew.

But they had both been right. There was a lot of emotion. There was a primal need to connect but that wasn't the end of it.

As Harry lifted Maddie slowly into his arms, as Maddie’s entire body wrapped around his; her ankles linking around his waist, her arms tangling around his neck, as he moved them from the candlelit room into their room, into their bed, as he peeled clothes from her body in a slow, torturous fashion, as she clung to him and called out his name; as they both marveled at how easily this day had moved from a naughty, tease of a promise to something so laced with heavy feeling and love.

There was a lot of emotion; the need to connect. But they had BOTH been right.

Harry loved to kiss wife. It was as complicated and as simple as that.
Day 10-13:

Time off with family

Day Ten

The next three days spent with Maddie's family were exactly what the two of them needed; some low-key down time with her crazy cousins. Her mother was meeting them at the hotel and they would be heading into the mountains together. Her cousins and her uncle were already in at her uncle's cabin and they were all set up, just waiting for the remaining three to join them.

Maddie woke before Harry, without the assistance of an alarm for the first day in weeks, and she turned over so that she could look at him. It struck her funny that no matter how many times she had seen him naked, no matter how many times they had done unspeakable things to each others' bodies, she still felt a slight flush when she looked at him. He was snuggled on his stomach, his face turned towards her with a light scruff and his bare, broad shoulders were peeking out above the folds of the sheets. And she had seen this before; many, many times; but she still felt that flush, that sigh that came from her lungs.

And she hoped she always would.

Though she was tempted to pull him awake and into her arms, she let him sleep. He had been working just as hard as she had, probably more so keeping up with her emotional rollercoaster rides. He deserved his rest.

So she stretched her arms out and slipped from their bed. Pulling on a robe, she stepped out into the living area and closed the door softly behind her. And her smile widened. Remnants of the night before were still strewn about; the extinguished candles, the uneaten food, the opened bottle of champagne and...

"Red Velvet Cupcakes!" She clapped her hands together excitedly as she hurried to the tall silver cover and pulled it off. There they all were, still intact and uneaten and Maddie was about to fix that. Pulling two from the tower they were situated on, she moved over to the table next to the window, pulling out a chair and settling into it and then she saw it. The necklace; that beautiful piece of jewelry that had been his mothers. Her eyes watched it as she took a bite of a cupcake, moaning quietly at the deliciousness. With a cautious hand, she reached out for the box, sliding it closer with one finger. Biting into the cupcake again, she let her eyes run over it just before her fingers did and she felt her skin shiver as though she was touching history. Finishing off the first cupcake, she supposed she really was.

Wiping her hands on a napkin, she pulled her entire focus to the gift Harry had given her. Pulling it from the box, she held it up in front of her; the light from the morning catching on the diamonds, sending sparkles of light around the room. The little girl inside of her smiled wide, nearing a giggle, as she contemplated wearing it.

It was moments like this; looking at an infamous piece of jewelry, a necklace that had graced the neck of a legend...here in her fingers. It reminded her so much of the moment the Strathmore Rose Tiara had been delivered to their place at Kensington Palace before the wedding. It was moments
like those, when Maddie was holding something in her hands that had its own Wikipedia page, blogs, search histories on google. It all felt incredibly surreal.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and centered herself. Yes. The necklace was all of those things. But it was also Harry’s mother’s. And now it was hers. And the act of giving it to her had been so thought out by Harry, it made her heart warm.

"Well..." Maddie sighed and looked for the clasp; feeling as though if she didn't try it on at least once, she might never be able to. With a slight shake to her hands, she opened it up and pulled it around her neck. The clasp was sturdy and relatively easy to re-hook and then it was on; laying heavy against the juncture of her collarbones as she rose to her feet. Walking a few steps towards a mirror on the wall, she pulled her hair up off her neck and looked at her reflection. And she didn't know if she should laugh or cry; she wasn't entirely sure she was breathing.

It was so beautiful. And the history, the significance of it brought tears to her eyes. Her fingers reached up to run along the strands of pearls and she took a deep breath; letting it out slowly. What a gift. Maddie was so caught up in the moment, in trying to school her reactions to the moment, that she didn't even hear Harry step from their bedroom, she didn't sense his presence until his soft voice called out to her.

"It looks lovely on you." She turned with a jerk towards the sound, finding him half dressed in their doorway with a smile on his face.

"Oh God," Maddie groaned, feeling caught. She pulled from the mirror, let her hair fall and instantly moved to the clasp. "This is embarrassing."

"What is?" Harry had pushed away from the door, moving over to the table. "The fact that you're eating day old cupcakes for breakfast or that you're admiring yourself in the mirror?" He glanced up to her with a smirk and a wink.

"Jesus, both," Maddie laughed and her hands moved to the clasp. "Will you help me with this?"

"Sure," Harry moved in behind her, his fingers working easily as he pulled the necklace from her neck. "I thought we'd call Thomas and ask him to take it with him back to London..."

"That's a great idea," Maddie turned around to face him, watching as he handed it back to her. "I'm not sure I'll need it in the mountains."

"Probably not," he laughed. "But it does look nice on your neck."

Maddie was beyond excited as her mother's arrival drew nearer. She was practically bouncing around the room while Harry flipped through the channels on the television.

"You know, you never get this excited to see me," he chuckled as he watched her.

"Aw," she ruffled a hand through his hair as she walked behind the couch. "You just haven't left me for a while. I mean...I haven't seen her in two months and..."

"It's okay," he grabbed her hand and tugged her down to him for a kiss. "I'm excited too."

And then, as if on cue, there was a knock at the door. Maddie lifted her mouth from his and
hurried towards the door. Harry shrugged and flipped off the TV; rising to follow her. The second
Hannah stepped into the suite, they were engulfed in hugs and kisses and words of praise.

"Oh Maddie," she hugged her daughter tightly to her. "I read your speech you gave at the White
House, the White House and....It was so touching." Her face was full of pride. "And we saw you
both at the Tomb of the Unknown and you..." She turned to Harry, taking his face in between her
hands in a way that surprised him and made his heart swell at the same time. "In fatigues at the
Warrior Games...playing even! Derek was so proud of the work you two have done." She kissed
his cheek. "We all are."

"Thank you," Harry laughed, wrapping his arms around her; finding Maddie's excitement to be
contagious as they all moved further into the suite.

"Now," Hannah sighed, calming just a bit as she wrapped her arm around her daughter's shoulder.
"Tell me the two of you have been working on giving me that grandbaby you promised."

"Mother!" Maddie blushed as Harry turned wide eyes to Hannah. "I cannot believe you just said
that."

"Ha!" Hannah laughed. "Neither can I."

"When did you start talking like that?"

"I think maybe I've been spending too much time with Kyle. But the look on Harry's face is
completely worth it." She laughed again and shook her head; dismissing the subject.

"Fantastic." Harry's voice went flat as he looked to Maddie. "Now you're mother's messing with
me."

"Well..." Maddie sighed. "I would think you would expect that by now."

"And I would think..." Hannah smiled. "That you should be prepared for a lot more of that if you
two are coming with me to the cabins. Your days of propriety have come to an end and your
cousins are waiting. Shall we join them?"

The trip to the cabins wasn't terribly long and the scenery was beautiful so it seemed to pass even
quicker and when they arrived, Maddie and Harry had both shifted into the relaxed state of
serenity that came with their surroundings. While Harry had sat back in his seat and watched the
world pass him by, Maddie and Hannah had spent a great deal of time catching up. Maddie
brought her mother up to date on her upcoming trip to the Arctic; giving her details of the
upcoming training and the dates she would actually be gone. Hannah let them both in on the
decision she had made to start nursing school. She had been thinking about it for a while, having
been moved by the kindness and professionalism she found the nurses had when her husband was
ill and, after spending some time talking with Ella when she was in London for the wedding, she
decided it was something she wanted to do. Maddie was excited for this new direction for her
mother and Harry was quick to offer his support and congratulations.

The two black SUVs pulled up a long, private gated drive and, after rounding quite a few corners,
they came to a stop in front of a beautiful, large log home with a few smaller cabins scattered
behind and off to the side, a little further up the slope. They were surrounded by land; forest,
meadow and not too far down hill, a river and a dock. Harry rolled down the window in the SUV
and took a long, deep breath; smiling wide as he did.

And as soon as their caravan pulled up, Maddie's family began to surface; some from the dock, some from the houses—all of them coming to greet them and allow the agents to do their thing. They stepped out of the car and met up with Maddie's uncle Patrick, who showed them inside the main house where Maddie and Harry would be staying.

And while they set up inside, everyone else met in the long drive in a warm, wonderful chaos; hugging and kissing and smiling wide as the family all came together again for the first time since Maddie and Harry's wedding. And Harry instantly felt all the warmth and light and familial bond that came with this particular group of people. Amidst the hugs and kisses, there were loads of questions.

"How was the ride up?"

"Relaxing," Harry answered as he hugged Jenna hello.

"Where are Dena and the girls?" Maddie kissed Derek's cheeks.

"Down the river in tubes." He laughed.

"And Amy?" Maddie moved to Kyle's waiting arms, catching a glimpse of his t-shirt that appeared to have the same colors and wording as the one she was certain Derek was wearing.

"Up at our place," he told her. "We're staying behind the main house. She'll be right down."

"Fantastic but...hold on..." Maddie took a step back from Kyle. "What in the hell are you wearing?" She unzipped his jacket; revealing a t-shirt that made her roll her eyes. "Are you kidding me?"

"What's it say?" Harry leaned to look and busted out in laughter. "I Crashed The Royal Wedding?!" He clapped his hands together. "You guys kill me with the shirts."

"Where did you get this?" Maddie fought the smile that was pulling at her lips.

"Where do you think?"

"Jenna!" Maddie spun on her heel, finding the blonde who smiled sweetly; clearly wearing the same shirt—as was everyone else.

"Nicely done," Harry smiled to Jenna appreciatively. He loved their sense of humor, the way they played with each other like that. "I love it. I absolutely love it."

Maddie rolled her eyes with a laugh. "Of course you do."

"Of course I do," he narrowed his eyes at his wife for a moment before turning to Jenna who held a bag out to him. "What's this?"

"Yours." Jenna swung the bag in her fingers. "I figured you would want one and..."

"You got me one?" And Maddie couldn't deny the way his face lifted in excitement, the way it warmed her heart to see it happen. "Oh my God!" Harry took the bag from Jenna and pulled out his very own shirt. His smile stretched wide as he looked from the shirt to Jenna. "Come here," he
pulled her into a hug; pressing a kiss to her cheek. "That was incredibly thoughtful of you."

"It's like you're his dealer," Maddie laughed lightly. "His supplier."

"My supplier of awesome," he hugged her once more before he stepped back to look at the shirt. "Thank you for doing this." Pulling his hat from his head, he tugged at the t-shirt he wore.

"What the hell?" Maddie giggled as he tossed it to her, pulling the new shirt on and replacing his hat.

"I'm wearing it," he grinned from ear to ear. "It makes me feel like part of the family."

"Oh God," Maddie groaned but she loved how touched Harry seemed by the gesture and she loved her family even more for extending it to him.

"Don't worry," Harry winked at her. "If you're nice to me, I might let you borrow it." The cousins rumbled in laughter as Maddie shook her head at her husband.

"What on Earth is going on out here?" Amy's voice called out as she joined them in the drive.

"Amy!" Maddie's face brightened; her mind shifted instantly as she went to hug her close.

"It's so good to see you," Amy hugged Maddie tight, kissing her cheek; genuinely thrilled to have the two of them there with them. "You looked amazing on the news and..."

"Hold on," Harry's voice was serious as he interrupted them. "What the hell are you wearing?" Maddie pulled back from Amy's arms and looked to her husband who was pointing at Amy and staring intensely at her hand. Maddie's eyes followed his and then she saw it.

"Holy shit!" She gasped; her hands clamping instantly to her mouth and laughter filled the air; amused as Maddie and Harry joined in on the secret. "Amy...is that..."

"An engagement ring?" Amy finished; beaming. "Yes it is."

"Oh my GOD!" Maddie clapped her hands together; instantly giddy at the news. "You're getting married?!" Her head whipped from Amy to Kyle and back again.

"Yes," Amy blushed just slightly as the attention focused on her.

"Does Kyle know?" Maddie joked as tears pricked to her eyes and they all laughed.

"Smooth," Harry snickered. "Congratulations," he took his turn to hug Amy and then turned to Kyle to do the same.

"Look at you," Maddie nudged her cousin in the ribs. "All grown up and everything."

"Please," he rolled his eyes.

"When did this happen?" She was so happy for him and Amy—though she already very much felt Amy was part of the family.

"A few weeks ago," Kyle's sweet smile to Amy made Maddie's insides turn to mush.
"Do you have any plans yet?"

"No," Amy shook her head. "We're thinking maybe next summer, but we're not sure."

"That's amazing," Maddie sighed, her eyes flashing to Harry who was already watching her with a grin. "Congratulations you two."

"Thanks," Kyle smiled and moved to pull the attention from them. "Now. We were getting ready to head down to the river, meet up with Dena and the girls. You coming or..."

"Yes!" Maddie nodded, turning towards Harry and her mother and the agents. "I think we're going to get settled and then head on down."

"Great. We'll see you in a bit."

As they all dispersed, Maddie, Harry and Hannah made their way into the main house that Jim and his team had cleared for them.

It wasn't long before the three of them were heading down to the river. Along the bank there was a very large deck and a small deckhouse where they kept tubes and a fridge with drinks. Somebody could stay there if they wanted, there was a small cot and electricity and they often used it to change or to escape a surprise rain storm. On the deck there was tables and chairs and a fire pit in the middle. And Maddie's family was strewn about, relaxed as some read books, some propped their feet up and watched the river and a few of them were gearing up to go fishing.

"Now this..." Harry sighed as they stepped onto the deck. "Is how to finish up a tour."

"Hey," Gary smiled up at them. "Pull up a chair. There's beer in that cooler."

"Perfect," Harry grinned, sliding his sunglasses onto his face and reaching for a beer and taking a seat. "Maddie?"

"No," she shook her head with a smile. "I'm good." Her focus was on Kyle who was messing with his rod. "What are you doing?"

"You know exactly what I'm doing," Kyle answered lightly before turning a smug, cocky look to Maddie. "What do you say, Your Royal Highness, still know how to fly fish?" There were a few light snickers around the deck as Harry watched his wife's eyes darken with competitiveness.

"Enough to out catch you I would imagine." She was smug and glib and shrugged. And the snickers grew louder.

"Ohhhhh." Kyle chuckled. "You think so?"

"Jesus. Here we go." Amy rolled her eyes and dropped into a camp chair next to Harry. "Tell your wife good-bye, Harry. We'll never see them again."

"What?" He watched with amusement as Maddie grew serious.

"Gary," she glanced back, hands on hips. "Can I borrow your rod?"
"Sure," he shrugged and pointed to a rod leaning against the railing of the deck. "I have a vest in the house that will probably fit you. You can take what you need from mine."

"Perfect," Maddie smiled victoriously and turned back to Kyle. "Come on Kyle. Whataya got? Want to put some money down on this?"

"Money?" Harry laughed, took a pull from his bottle and turned to Amy. "Are they about to fish for money?"

"Yes," Amy rolled her eyes, opening her own drink.

"We've only been here for like...ten minutes." He laughed to himself and settled back.

"Maddie, I have waders in the house if you want them," Amy nodded towards the deckhouse.

"Thank you," Maddie smiled to her as she moved towards the house, calling out to her PO. "Sampson, I'm going down that river in five minutes, you coming with me?" Harry snickered as he watched lift her eyebrows to her agent and laughed outright when Sampson glanced to Jim and followed behind her.

It was less than five minutes when Maddie emerged in waders and a vest, all decked out with flies and other fishing supplies. Harry looked her over appreciatively, more than sufficiently turned on by how cute she looked with the rod in her hand and her hair pulled back from her face. And he loved that he got to see this side of her too.

"Hey baby..." She turned to him; her voice dropping sweet in such a way he knew she wanted something from him.

"Darling?" Harry looked up to her.

"Can I borrow your hat?" She tapped his Panama with a finger.

"It'll cost ya." The corner of his mouth tugged up and his eyes flickered.

"Oh?" She grinned. "What will it cost me?"

"Come here," he snatched her hand in his and pulled her down to him; his lips catching hers in a kiss. "Go ahead." He whispered against her lips before kissing her once more.

"Thank you," she nudged his nose with hers and pulled his hat from his head onto hers. "Come on Kyle. I'm going to kick your ass."

"Get 'em baby," Harry called after her as he leaned back, kicking his feet up onto the ledge and turning to Amy. "The level of competiveness in this family is outrageous."

"Agreed," she laughed.

"But..." He lowered his voice. "Sometimes...it's pretty damn cute."

"I'll drink to that," she held her bottle to his. Harry clinked the glass together and took a drink; ready to watch it all unfold next to Amy and Gary. And as Maddie followed Kyle down the steps towards the water, Harry caught a soft look on Hannah's face that for some reason made his heart swell a bit.
"Tell me," Harry spoke to his drinking partners. "How long have they been like this?"

"Kyle and Maddie?" Gary asked.

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "I mean. You're all pretty nuts..."

"Thank you," Gary laughed.

"But those two seem to be at it the most."

"Yeah," Gary agreed. "I think they've been this way for as long as I can remember. They are the closest in age and they've just always razzed each other."

"In everything?" Harry asked.

"In everything," Amy smiled.

"So...who's going to win this round?" He nodded towards the water where Kyle and Maddie and a reluctant Sampson were wading in.

"Well," Gary took a breath. "Five years ago? Maddie. No doubt. She's always been the better of the two with the fly rod. But..." He glanced to Harry with a twisted smirk. "She's been...doing other things for a while..."

"Other things?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, catching the tone of Gary's voice.

"You know...making speeches, waving..."

"Hey!" Harry's hand moved to his chest.

"Helping children in Africa," Amy added and they all softened.

"She hasn't been in the river for a while," Gary smiled at the camaraderie between them; enjoying how easily Harry flowed with the family. "So maybe this is Kyle's chance."

"God I hope so," Amy shook her head. "I'm not sure I can handle him otherwise." And the three of them settled in their chairs and watched.

"Who taught them to fly fish?" Harry's eyes were fixed on Maddie who was just flicking her line into the water.

"Jay," Gary answered with a low, solemn voice that drew Harry's eyes to him. "Maddie's father taught us all how to fish." Harry watched his eyes grow sad and he understood the look on Hannah's face; certain the look on his echoed it. Turning back to Maddie he took a breath and he hoped with all he had that she was about to kick Kyle's ass.

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It was nearly dark and almost everyone was sitting around the fire burning in the fire pit in the middle of the deck. Harry sat amongst the circle, listening to the water; his eyes glancing out to it every few seconds.
"Relax," Jenna giggled as he glanced again. "They're fine. They'll be back."

"Ha." Harry chuckled, trying to hide the tad bit of nervousness. "Sorry. Is it obvious?"

"A little bit," Jenna pinched her fingers together.

"Don't worry," Amy waved her hand. "They are going to fish till the sun is down and then they'll be back. Plus...if there was an issue, wouldn't Sampson have contacted you by now?"

"Sure," Harry sighed, glancing to Jim before sitting back while Derek and Gary chuckled.

"Look at the newlywed," Gary nodded to Harry who immediately turned a smirk to him.

"Please."

"Give him a break," Jenna nudged her husband. "He just misses his wife."

"Well, it's been what...two hours?" Gary poked easy fun at Harry who rolled his eyes while a light laughter traveled around the circle.

"Fine, fine," Harry waved his hand. "Take your best shot. I can take it." In truth he knew this meant that they really accepted him as one of their own.

"I think it's nice," Dena shrugged.

"Me too," Jenna agreed. "It's nice when a man likes to go home...kiss his wife." She looked pointedly at Gary as she repeated Harry's words from his interview.

"Oh for God's sake!" Gary threw up his hands as they all laughed. "That reminds me," he turned to Harry. "You really think we don't have enough problems..."

"We?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, smiling brightly at the amusingly irritated man beside him.

"Men." Gary answered.

"Not all men," Derek shot out, wrapping an arm around his wife as Harry laughed and Gary continued.

"You think we don't have enough problems around here without you running around in your camo fatigues and your British accent..."

"Hey! I can't help the accent," Harry defended as the laughter around him increased.

"Telling the world how much you like to kiss your wife!"

"I DO like to kiss my wife," Harry defended.

"Yeah, we've heard," Gary shook his head, still smiling. "Telling the world to go home and kiss their wives. Jesus."

"You know Gary maybe you SHOULD kiss your wife more often," Harry nodded to him as he took a swig from his bottle.
"Yeah Gary," Jenna clapped her hands together. "Maybe you should."

"You might be more relaxed," Harry shrugged and he was certain he could hear Patrick snort as he laughed at Gary. And then he heard it; sloshing water, light laughter and soft voices. They were back. Harry instantly perked up as his head snapped to the water and he didn't care who made fun of him.

"Speaking of your wife," Amy snickered.

"Well look at that," Hannah stood from her chair, grinning wide as Maddie and Kyle stepped back into view; both with wide smiles on their faces.

"So..." Gary called out to them as the rest of the group stretched and turned to see them. "Who won?" Harry rose to his feet as Maddie's eyes met his and she flashed him the cutest smile he'd seen on her face in a long time.


"Not by a long shot," Maddie nudged her cousin, walking next to him onto the deck. "But yes..." She sighed and let her face pull smug. "It was a victory for the house of Sussex." And Harry tossed his head back in laughter.

"That's my girl," he winked at her as she dropped her stuff to the side and made her way to him. "Congratulations." Harry wasn't the only one that was happy for her; even Kyle didn't seem all that upset.

"Thanks baby," she grinned wide and leaned in to kiss him. "Also...I think I owe Sampson some hazard pay."

"Hazard pay?" Harry pulled back, glancing to where Sampson was coming up the stairs, dripping wet.

"He fell in." Maddie shrugged, her face as innocent as can be. And this time, when the laughter roared, Jim was the loudest.

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Eventually the sun gave way to the moon and the dark, mountain sky was peppered with a smattering of shining bright stars. Though they had all remained out on the deck for a long time; grilling dinner, drinking plenty of beer, and indulging in s'mores as the laughter and stories continued to circle the group; eventually people began to file back towards the houses.

First it was Dena, Derek and the girls. Next it was Patrick and Gary and Amy.

"Already?" Maddie looked up to Amy.

"We're hiking at dawn," she yawned. "Are you two coming with us?" Harry looked to Maddie.

"I don't know," Maddie shrugged and raised her eyebrows to him. "You want to hike?"

"If you want to," he was open for whatever she was. "But I was thinking maybe you could teach me to fly fish."
"Oh yeah?" Maddie's lips pulled wide. Looking back up to Amy, she shook her head. "Guess we're staying here. We'll see you in the afternoon though."

"Perfect," Amy smiled at the two of them. "Good night."

"Good night," Maddie waved as they stepped away.

"I think now's my chance," Harry squeezed Maddie's fingers in his.

"For?" She was sleepy but she was loving the sound of the water, the feel of the fire, the stars—she was loving it too much to really move. Harry leaned in to kiss her cheek.

"I'm going to go take your mother for a walk..." Harry whispered in Maddie's ear, patting his chest pocket where she knew two cigars rested. "It's Friday, you know."

"I love you," she held tight to him for a moment.

"I love you too," he kissed her hand.

"Don't burn down the forest," she smiled up at him sleepily.

"I promise," he chuckled and rose to his feet. "You'll be okay?"

"Of course," she nodded and sighed further into her chair; she felt happy and content.

"Perfect." He offered another smile before he stepped away.

Maddie watched as he made his way around the circle. She tried not to be obvious as she watched her husband lean over and speak to her mother. She tried not to cry when she saw the look on her mother's face at his words, as she rose from her chair and took Harry's arm. And as the two people Maddie loved most in the world slipped inconspicuously from the group, she turned her eyes back to the fire and smiled. This really was the perfect way to end their tour.

And this was only Day One.
Day 10-13:

Time off with family

Day Eleven

"It's so early..." Harry yawned as he and Maddie made their way down to the dock. And he was right. The sun had barely begun to peak up over the mountain tops as they navigated the terrain.

"Don't be such a sissy," Maddie turned a grin back to him. "The rest of them have been hiking for two hours."

"Yeah..." He stretched his hands up over his head. "Did I mention that you are all the craziest bunch of people I've ever met? And I've met some crazy people...you've met my brother."

"Nice," she turned to watch him as she walked backwards. "And you didn't mention it, but I'll be sure to pass it on."

"You do that," he couldn't help but smile at her. It was ridiculously early and the air had a crisp chill to it but she looked so good he could barely keep his distance; hair in braids, flannel shirt knotted over a tank top, his hat on her head. Maddie caught the look in his eye and shook her head.

"No time for that Captain," she turned around. "We have fish to catch."

"Yes ma'am," he chuckled, eyes following her as he walked. "Hey...we're not fishing for money, are we?"

"Ha!" She laughed. "Now there's that sense of humor I love. How much money you got on ya, Wales?"

"None," he shook his head as they stepped onto the dock and slowed down.

"Well I guess we'll have to fish for something else." They stepped into the dock house and Maddie went quickly to work.

"I have a suggestion..." He leaned so he could watch her lean over to collect a vest.

"Yeah I bet you do," Maddie narrowed her eyes and tossed the vest up to him. "Try this one on." And he did as he was told as Maddie pulled on the vest she had used the night before.

"This works."

"Great," Maddie pulled his hat from her head and offered it to him. "You should wear this."

"Nah," he shook his head. "You go ahead. It looks cuter on you."

"Put it on Harry or your scalp will burn," she plopped it on his head and moved past him towards the poles along the long wall.
"What about your scalp?" He turned to watch her as she moved back through the door with a few poles.

"I have more hair on my scalp." She shrugged and handed him a pole.

"Hold on." His face screwed up. "Did you just call me bald?"

"Shhh..." Maddie shot him a smirk. "Be quiet baby or you'll scare the fish."

"Fuck the fish. You just called me bald."

"Come on grumpy," Maddie's voice dropped to a whisper as they started down the stairs to the water. "And watch out for Brad behind you. Sampson went in pretty easily." And though Harry had just been the butt of her jokes, he snickered as he tossed a smirk back to the PO that was coming with them, with another staying behind on the dock.

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"I told you we needed to turn around," Maddie called out behind her to the two men as they all stepped from the river onto the muddy bank; her voice barely rising above the pouring rain.

"Those clouds were tiny!" Harry called back, taking her rod from her as they climbed up the stairs.

"They all start out tiny!" Maddie laughed as she shook her head.

"So it's a little water," Harry laughed at how sopping wet they all were. "We were already in the river."

"Fair enough," Maddie smiled, not minding the rain so much. Certainly not minding what it did to Harry's t-shirt. "You two head up to the house, I'll just put this stuff away and I'll be right up."

Brad nodded; they were in a secure area.

"I'll help you," Harry held up the rods in his hands and watched as Brad thought about it for only a beat before he nodded and turned up towards the main house. Harry followed behind her as she pushed into the house and shut the door behind him.

"Wow..." Maddie breathed heavily as she pulled the vest from her shoulders. "I didn't think we'd ever make it back up that corner with the rain pouring like that."

"Ha!" Harry laughed, leaning the poles back into their spaces before turning to her. And when he turned, when his eyes fell over her, he felt his body warm. His fingers tugged at the zipper to his vest and it slid off easily. His eyes traveling over the way the fabric of her clothes clung to every curve she had.

"Here..." Maddie reached for it but as she tried to pull it from Harry's hand, he held tight. "Oh..." She looked up to him. "Are you going to let me have it?"

"I am absolutely going to let you have it," Harry's voice dropped and filled with meaning and Maddie's blood pulsed. "You know...I was thinking...there's still the matter of settling this bet of ours."
"Oh?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted, liking where this was headed. "I thought we hadn't agreed on the terms."

"I was thinking maybe..." He tugged at the vest, bringing her closer and his eyes cast down over her. "I was thinking we might be able to negotiate something."

Maddie's lips slid into a wide smile and she felt the shift in the room. "Is that right?" She took a few steps closer; forgetting the vest.

"Mmm Hmm," Harry nodded, taking it from her and setting it aside; his hands moving instantly to her waist and pulling her body flush to his and despite their soaking wet clothing, he could feel the heat between them.

"Well..." Maddie's hands moved over his chest, well defined and prominent under his wet t-shirt. "You did out-catch me."

"I did," he grinned, his head dipping to kiss her. His lips were hot and slick against hers and the tiniest of moans pushed from her mouth into his. Harry groaned at the sound and his arms moved tight around her. Maddie's hands slid up his chest, over his shoulders and up his neck, pushing the hat from his head and tossing it to the side; wanting to bury her fingers in his hair. His hot lips tore from her mouth, blazing fire down her jaw to her neck.

There was something about this moment that mirrored the time in the greenhouse they almost had sex, the almost first. The time in Bendal when the rain had finally started falling again. They had run into the greenhouse seeking refuge and instead found the inability to keep from the other. Just like then, Maddie's hands pulled at Harry's t-shirt; up and over his arms before she tossed it aside and his hands returned to her. Just like then, his strong arms lifted her off the ground, sitting her on the counter as she tugged at the knotted flannel that stuck to her skin in such a way that made all of the blood in Harry's body course to his groin.

Though this time, there were no interruptions as Maddie's hands made quick work of Harry's pants; unbuttoning, unzipping, pushing with haste. This time there were no interruptions as Harry tugged her shirts from her, first one and then the other, letting them fall with a slap to the wood floor below them. They shared warm laughter as she lifted her hips from the counter, allowing him better leverage as he pulled her heavy, wet pants from her legs; her panties following just as quickly.

Before either of them stopped to think about the unlocked door or the fact that her entire family was most likely hurrying back from their rained out hike, Maddie and Harry were in the dock house clinging to each other, lips pressed to lips; tongues tangled in the hot, urgent dance that sent them both full throttle towards each other. And this was one of her most favorite things about being married to him; she could have him—whenever she wanted, wherever she wanted. There was very little preamble, hardly any persuasion involved; a look, a smile, a touch. And there they were; naked in the dock house

Maddie leaned away from Harry, her arm stretching to click the lock on the door as his mouth moved to capture her breast; his tongue circling her nipple, bringing warmth and a moan. When she moved back to him, she tugged at his hair, bringing his mouth back to hers. With her hands at his waist, she moved closer to the edge and pulled him into the space between her legs; insistent and ready.

And there was this moment, this tiny little pause, when her eyes met her husband's and they both
smiled; wide and happy and incredibly connected. And then, as her fingers wrapped around the back of his neck and his around the curve of her hip, Harry pushed into her and Maddie called out into the small deck house. And so it began; the rain pounding against the roof and the windows, her heart pounded in her chest and Harry pounded love into her.

Dressed in their already wet clothes, Maddie and Harry meandered back to the main house; Maddie's arm tucked through Harry's. She was wearing his hat and he was wearing this giddy smile and though nobody would have said a word to the giggly, happy duo—they would be lying if they said they didn't at least assume what had just happened. They moved through the house and up to their room to change and get ready for a late lunch with the cousins who were on their way back from their hike—presumably just as wet as Harry and Maddie were.

It wasn't much longer when Maddie and Harry, dressed and dry, were sitting on at the large dining table in the kitchen eating a bit and having a few drinks, when the cousins began to file in. They weren't nearly as wet as Maddie expected.

"Did you make it down before the rain started?" She looked up as they all moved into the room; grabbing for food and drinks.

"Almost," Derek laughed. "Amy turned us around quick enough. We only walked in the rain for a bit."

"Did you make it to the summit?" Harry swallowed a bite of his sandwich.

"No," Jenna shook her head, pulling herself up onto the counter as Gary tossed her a drink. "We'll try again before we head back. How about you two...how was your first lesson?"

"Yeah," Kyle stepped in the room last. "How was it?"

"Well," Harry glanced up to Maddie before he turned a smirk to the group. "I learned more about foam than I ever thought I would need to know." A light, warm laughter circled the group.

"Well foam is important to a fly fisherman," Kyle nodded with a knowing smile.

"Apparently," Harry laughed along with them.

"And how did you do?" Kyle nodded his head to Harry.

"Not bad for a beginner," Harry shrugged and winked to Maddie.

"Oh go ahead and tell them," she sighed with a slight roll of her eyes. "I know you're dying to."

"Nah," he shook his head; smirk firmly in place.

"Harry..." She nudged his knee with her foot under the table.

"Well..." He took a breath, offered a shrug and tried for nonchalance. "I out caught her," but when he spoke the words, his entire face lit up like a child on Christmas.

"What?!" Kyle called out from where he stood across the room; flabbergasted. "You're kidding me!" Amy and Gary were already laughing at the look on Kyle's face.
"He's not kidding," Maddie shook her head. "You know I wouldn't let him lie about this."

"Jesus Christ!" Kyle pulled his ball cap from his head and tossed it to the counter next to Jenna. "How did that happen?"

"Beginner's Luck," Harry shrugged, loving the looks on their faces; loving that Maddie let him have this moment.

"No," she shook her head. "He's good. No luck involved." She caught the look from Kyle and continued. "He's a natural sportsman, he paid attention to what I taught him and...he's tenacious..."

"And I pay attention to foam," Harry snickered and Maddie waved her hand in his direction.

"There you go."

"Son of a bitch," Kyle laughed while he shook his head. "Now I'm getting out fished by the Prince! What's next?! The girls?"

"Hey!" Harry called out, feigning offense. "Easy!"

"Yeah!" Maddie called out. "He's a Duke!" As the room dissolved into giggles, Derek and Gary both came to congratulate Harry on his "win" and Dena told them they were all heading into town for ice cream after they changed; inviting them to come along. Maddie raised her eyes to Harry and Harry, feeling the high from his victory, from their quick rendezvous in the deck house, was ready to go.

The trip to town was fun and laid back. Everyone went; every last one of them. Harry laughed as they rolled into town, commenting that their parade reminded him more of home than it should. And he honestly wasn't sure if the double takes in town were due to his and Maddie's presence or to the sheer volume of their group.

Either way, he strolled casually through the shops; arm around Maddie, smiling at her as she shopped, buying her ice cream. And as insane as it sounded, he felt incredibly normal and at ease. They weren't in town long; just enough time to have ice cream, buy a few funny trinkets and a bit more beer and alcohol to replenish what they had all consumed since they had arrived.

Soon enough they were back at the main house; having eaten an amazing meal, they all settled in to drink, laugh, and play cards. Harry felt at home with the raucous group. In truth he always had. They had embraced him right away but this trip, he truly felt part of the family—they didn't hesitate to tease him, to razz him. And he knew, from watching them work each other—that was how they included you. That was how you knew you were one of them. So, hours later, when he and Maddie were sitting out a round on the couch, he didn't hesitate to suggest a retaliation plan.

"So..." He leaned closer to Maddie, his eyes trained forward as the games and laughter continued around them. "I have an idea."

"Oh?" Maddie's eyes never looked to him, sensing his tone as a conspiring air settled between them. "For?"

"For getting Kyle back for giving me the wrong song."
"Ohhhh..." Maddie grinned, loving that Harry had remembered, loving even more that he was ready for revenge. Using everything she had learned in school, everything she had used on tour, she kept her eyes steady, hid the giddiness from her face. "Tell me more."

"It involves ditching security," Harry's voice was soft as he offered up the terms. "And climbing out of a second story window."

Maddie's eyes were dancing as she thought about it. Her heart beating faster as Harry's hand moved to her thigh. With a calming breath and shrug, she turned to him. "I'm in."

"Great," he smiled wide and relaxed back into the couch; his arm draping behind her. "I'm going to call your phone in about a minute. You answer like it's Libby and step out of the room. I'll meet you in our room in about five minutes."

"Done." Maddie nodded and then as though she were slipping into character, she patted his knee and rose to her feet, moving to the other side of the room where Amy and Jenna were flipping through magazines.

Harry watched her with an amused and impressed smile and for a second he debated just taking her up to their room and convincing her of a repeat performance from the afternoon. But he stayed put. Kyle had messed with her on National TV and he had done so by lying to him. And frankly, Harry knew he wouldn't be the husband he was supposed to be, or the self-respecting member of this family, until he and Maddie took care of this. So he stayed put and, after a few minutes, he slipped his hand into his pocket, he pulled his phone out and dialed; careful for anyone watching. The second she pulled hers from her pocket, he slid his away.

"Here we go," he chuckled to himself; watching as Maddie stepped out of the room, speaking purposefully to "Libby". Nonchalantly he glanced at Sampson who watched her walk up the staircase and sat back in his chair. This was going to be too easy.

Careful not to seem too eager, Harry sipped from his bottle, glanced around and then rose to his feet. Though he was anxious to follow Maddie up the stairs, he knew this part was important. He slipped into the kitchen for another beer and, casually, he slipped back into the living room; looking around.

"Hey..." He smiled at Amy. "Where did Maddie go?"

"She got a phone call," Amy glanced up at him with a shrug and a smile. "I don't know. I think she went up to take it?"

"Sure," he nodded and looked down at her magazine. "I think I'll go check on her. I like that one..." He pointed at a light blue bridesmaid's dress.

"Is that right?" She laughed.

"Blue's a good color on me," he chuckled and then, without glancing back to Jim, he stepped from the room and moved up the stairs.

Stepping into their room, he was greeted by his wife; giddy with excitement. He almost laughed at the way she bounced on her heels. Locking the door behind him, he stepped inside.

"Took you long enough," she grinned.
"I've done this before. It's important to take your time," he handed her his mostly full beer and hurried across the room to the window.

"I'll take your word for it," she took a sip from his bottle and followed him. "Are you going to let me in on the plan or am I flying blind?"

"Yeah, I'll tell you. Just..." His fingers pushed at the lock on the window. "Can you just...giggle." He nodded to her.

"Giggle?" She lifted her eyebrows at him; confused.

"Yeah. I need you to giggle," his voice was strained as he jiggled the lock.

"You think it's something I can do on your command?"

"Yes," he nodded as the lock finally slid open and his hands moved to pull up the window. "Now could you..." Maddie crossed her arms over her chest, half a smirk on her lips as she watched him. "What's the problem?" He sighed and stood tall.

"That's your plan? I'm going to giggle while you open the window."

"Yeah," he turned to her, attracted to the sass in her eyes. Leaning his body into hers; his hand slid around her waist to her backside. "It's masterfully thought out. Now...are you going to help me or not?"

"Ohhhh..." Maddie moaned at the contact; at the feel of him flush against her. "I suppose I can help you..." She met his eyes and he shook his head, biting at a grin as his hand pulled back and slapped her ass. "Oh! Harry!" She cried out right before a giggle burst from her lips. "You shit..." She shook her head and pushed at his chest as he moved away from her.

"Knew I could get you to do it," he winked and pulled at the window; opening it with less force than he thought he would need. He lowered his voice as he reached for the screen. "Sampson wasn't fazed when you walked out. However, Jim's known me forever...but..." He pulled at the screen. "If he thinks we're in here having sex..." The screen popped loose. "Then he won't think twice."

"Ah..." Maddie nodded and thought for a moment. "Can I just say that I appreciate that the sound you associate me making when I have sex with you is giggling."

"Very funny," Harry sat the screen on the floor, sliding it under the bed. "You ready?"

"After you tell me what we're doing."

"We're going to Kyle's cabin and we're going to set their alarms, their phones, really anything that has an alarm to go off at four am. If we took security with us, they would know that we were leaving and..."

"We're going to wake them up early?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted, not entirely sure.

"Yes," Harry nodded, pulling his phone from his pocket. "But we're going to wake them up with this..." He pushed a button and Jay Z's "I'm a Hustler" played out into the room.
And Maddie's face brightened; her cheeks hurting from the smile on her face. "You know..." She sighed as she moved to the window. "I knew there was a reason I married you."

"Yeah?" Harry laughed as he ducked through the open window out onto the ledge beneath it. "My ability to retaliate at practical jokes?"

"That..." She grinned and took his outstretched hand, dipping through the window to join him outside. "And your sweet ass."

"Ha," he laughed quietly. "Well, there is that. You ready?" He nodded towards the small jump they were going to make to the roof two feet below.

"Yep," she nodded, squeezing his fingers in her hand. And then, with a sense of wild abandon, Maddie jumped.

"Harry!" Maddie's voice was a rushed whisper as she moved from Kyle and Amy's bedroom; flashlight in hand.

"I'm almost done in here," he called from the other room with a low voice.

"I think somebody is coming," she turned off her flashlight and let her eyes adjust.

"I think you're paranoid," Harry chuckled lightly as he joined her in the hallway. "Okay. I think we got them all."

"Good," Maddie smiled. "Three am, right?"

"What? No," Harry shook his head. "Four."

"I know," she laughed and poked him in the ribs. "I was just kidding."

"Ha, ha..." He loved how she just jumped right in and went along with him. And then, the laughter on his face froze as he heard the handle on the door jiggle. "Shit."

"I told you," Maddie's eyes narrowed, her voice dropping. "Who's paranoid now?"

"Shhhh..." He held his finger to his lips and reached for her hand. "Come on. We'll go out the back door. You can sass me when we get back."

"You bet your sweet ass," Maddie guaranteed it as she followed quickly behind him. They slipped from the room just as the front door opened. And very, very quietly, Harry pulled Maddie with him through the kitchen, around the corner and down two quick steps and then they were out.

Quietly and quickly, they began down the hill towards the main house, hoping to sneak back in through the back door, just next to the back staircase. Because somebody had come into Kyle and Amy's cabin, Maddie and Harry were forced to go the back way, forced to take a bit more rocky terrain than the gravel road they had taken up. But both of them were too happy with themselves, too excited about the prank, about their success in pulling it off, to really think much of the change up. Maddie dropped Harry's hand and began to move more quickly down the mountain; loving the feeling it brought—the freedom, the exhilaration. And Harry couldn't help himself. Seeing Maddie so happy and so giggly, he tossed his head back and let out a laugh. And when he looked
up at the sky, all he could see for miles were stars; bright and plentiful and he felt absolutely amazing.

And then it all came crashing down. With an agonizing scream from just down the hill. His head snapped back and his heart jumped in his throat. Her scream was loud and strangled and rose the hair on the back of his neck.

"Maddie?!"

To Be Continued...
Chapter 126

Day 10-13:

Time off with family

Quietly and quickly, they began down the hill towards the main house, hoping to sneak back in through the back door, just next to the back staircase. Because somebody had come into Kyle and Amy's cabin, Maddie and Harry were forced to go the back way, forced to take a bit more rocky terrain than the gravel road they had taken up. But both of them were too happy with themselves, too excited about the prank, about their success in pulling it off, to really think much of the change up. Maddie dropped Harry's hand and began to move more quickly down the mountain; loving the feeling it brought—the freedom, the exhilaration. And Harry couldn't help himself. Seeing Maddie so happy and so giggly, he tossed his head back and let out a laugh. And when he looked up at the sky, all he could see for miles were stars; bright and plentiful and he felt absolutely amazing.

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"Maddie?"

"Harry!" Maddie's voice sounded shaky as she called out to him in the dark and his ears immediately perked up; his breath letting loose.

"Maddie?" He stopped running and looked around; searching out in front of him where she had just been.

"Harry!" Her voice was more urgent, more insistent and he knew something was wrong.

"Where are you?" All the humor from the moment drained completely.

"Here..." She flipped on her flashlight and he spotted her instantly; headed in her direction before he even registered the light.

"What happened?" He hurried towards her; further down the hill.

"Be careful!" She called out in a bit of a groan. "There's a barbed wire fence and...fuck. I ran into it and I twisted my ankle and...fuck!" She called out and Harry grew more and more nervous given her word choice. "Harry..." Her voice grew teary. "There's a lot of blood...I'm really hurt."

"Okay, okay..." He moved in closer, sliding a bit on the loose dirt as his eyes found her. "Let me see." He kneeled down in the dirt next to her; clicking his flashlight on. His eyes scanned her leg and he drew in a breath. She had sliced nearly a five inch gash in her shin and she was right, there was a lot of blood. It looked terrible. His eyes flashed down to her ankle; already swelling and turning color. "We need to put something on it..." Harry looked around. "Here," pulling off his t-shirt, he moved it over the bleeding wound, wrapping it around her leg and tying it tightly. Maddie hissed and bit her lip as he worked. "That cut is bad."

"I know," she nodded.
"We have to get you back to the house," Harry glanced towards the home, not too far away. "Do you think you can stand?"

"I don't know," she shook her head at him; eyes wide. "I tried to stand right back up and I just couldn't."

"I'll carry you," he moved closer to her, moving his arms under and around her.

"Harry...maybe we should...Oh!" She gasped as he lifted her off the ground.

"I have you," his voice was reassuring as he settled her in his arms. "I have you. Come on." And then he began to walk towards the cabin; his mind reeling with what was about to go down.

Walking into the cabin shirtless with Maddie in his arms with a bloodied leg and a swelling ankle brought about the exact reaction Harry had expected. A collective gasp, shock and then organized chaos.

"What the hell?" Kyle was the first to speak as the room jostled into motion. Amy and Jenna pushed aside their magazines, Hannah rose from her chair and, just as Harry imagined, Jim sent a quick glance to the stairs he had gone up and then turned a tight face back to him.

"I tripped on a barbed wire fence," Maddie began to explain as Harry moved her quickly into the house and onto the couch; her family moving around her. "I twisted my ankle and I can't walk and..."

And then Jim stepped into the middle of it all, the people around him parting as he neared Maddie. "Do you have a First Aid kit handy?" Jim looked up to Patrick who nodded and moved to the kitchen to grab it. His eyes fell to Harry and the wordless conversation that happened between them spoke volumes about their dynamic.

"Through the window?" Hannah looked from Harry to Maddie with a concern that only mothers carried. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"Mom..." Maddie looked wide eyed at her mother.

"Isn't that a little dangerous and stupid and..."

"Mother!" Maddie's voice was louder; shocked at the way her mother was reacting, as though this were the first time any of the people around them had done something stupid and been hurt.

"Here you go," Patrick handed the kit over to Jim who opened it up.

"No. She's right," Harry's hand fell on her good leg as Jim moved in to take a look at the gash on her leg. "We should not have gone out the window."

"You think?" Sampson spoke up as he moved next to Jim, his voice considerably more calm than Hannah's but his gaze just as pointed.

"I'm sorry...are we in trouble right now?" Maddie felt a light laugh press through her lips, grimacing as Jim poked at her cut, felt at her ankle.
"No," Jim spoke quickly and firmly but she wasn't sure she believed him. "But we are on our way to the hospital." He looked up to Sampson and moved into business mode. "Wake up Arthur. Let's get the cars ready and find the nearest medical center. We need to..."

"No," Maddie groaned, her head tipping back into the pillows. "Do we really need to..."

"The cut on your leg is around twelve centimeters long and at least one deep. You hit a barbed wire fence with who knows what on it and your ankle is swelling as we speak. This isn't a discussion, Your Royal Highness," in three words he reminded her of her role, of his role and her inability to speak to this decision. His eyes shifted back to the other officers, now in motion. "We're rolling in under five. And you..." He looked to Harry. "I would suggest you find a shirt."

"Yeah," Harry sighed and looked to Maddie. "I'll be right back."

"I'm sorry," Maddie reached to squeeze his fingers.

"Not your fault," he shook his head, offering a smile that didn't quite meet his eyes. "I should have known better."

"What the hell were you guys doing running down a mountain in the dark anyway?" Gary asked what he felt was the most obvious question in the room. And, despite the situation, Maddie's eyes met Harry's and they both allowed a small chuckle. If they were on their way to the hospital, they were going with their secret kept.

"We just..." Maddie shrugged. "We wanted a little time alone. Now go..." She winced in pain. "Get your shirt. I think that Jim might just leave without you." Harry nodded, dropped her fingers and hurried up the stairs, knowing she was absolutely right. The way Jim had looked at him, the way all of them were looking at him—there was a good chance they would leave him behind.

In under five minutes, Harry and Maddie were loaded in the SUVs and pulling away from the house. Though Hannah had considered going along, she refrained; thinking it best to step aside and let Harry stand next to Maddie on this particular ER visit. They were heading out of the mountains at a top speed, on their way to a small medical center where Jim felt comfortable taking Maddie for what he assumed would be a relatively routine incident—but for the HRH that came with it all.

Harry sat next to Maddie on the back seat, her wrapped leg propped up on a pillow in his lap as they wound through the mountain roads.

"Hey," Maddie nudged his leg with her other foot; bringing his attention to her eyes. He looked to her and she tilted her head to the side, softening.

"Hey..." He breathed, his hand rubbing up her good leg as the events continued to settle in him. "You know your mother does the guilt thing better than my father. Seriously. She should go work for the palace. Had she been there ten years ago, who knows what I would have amounted to."

"It was an accident," Maddie's voice was pointed.

"Yeah..." Harry sighed and looked up to his PO sitting in the jump seat while Arthur drove. "Jim..."

"Sir?" Jim's voice was low and his eyes trained forward.
"Sir?" Harry groaned and leaned back into his seat; knowing the tone, knowing the word choice. "You have nothing to say?"

"No," Jim shook his head.

"God..." Harry sighed. "It's so much worse when you don't yell." And when Jim began to speak, his voice was low and clear and meant to convey exactly what Harry was talking about.

"In about two minutes we're going to roll into a small medical center and they are going to take your wife into a back room where they are going to flush out that huge wound of hers with a solution that's probably going to sting a bit. They are absolutely going to give her stitches; I'm guessing at least ten. They are going to give her a whole battery of shots. They are going to splint that ankle and give her crutches for a week. They are probably going to keep you up for the next four hours," Jim shrugged. "All because you thought it would be funny..."

"Hey, wait a second," Maddie spoke up next to Harry.

"No he's right," Harry shook his head to her.

"He didn't make me go out of that window," Maddie continued and Jim turned around in his chair; his eyes meeting Maddie's with an expression she had never seen from him before.

"I am very well aware of that ma'am," he nodded.

"Ma'am?" Maddie's voice went hoarse at the way the word sounded from him in that moment.

"I'm not sure I need to remind you of the last time you went off without security..."

"Now hold on," Harry's voice grew rough and assertive.

"No," Jim shook his head, his eyes snapping back to the front, looking at Arthur who sat silently as he drove. "If we don't know where you're at, we don't know where to come looking for you when you don't come back." He turned back to Maddie whose heart was pounding in her chest. "And you should know that."

"Jim," Harry's voice held warning as Maddie's eyes grew wide.

"Henry," Jim volleyed back and everyone in the car grew silent, including Harry. The tension was high and the words were loaded and Maddie knew enough to know that it was best if she kept quiet. Though, if Jim had meant to drive home a point, to make sure she understood the severity of what had happened, what could have happened—he had succeeded. Clearly her mother wasn't the only one around who could throw down some guilt.

The car pulled to a stop outside the ambulance bay with the shadow car right behind them. Jim was the first one out the door, reaching Harry's and pulling it open. His eyes met the young man's; calmer and quieter than it was before. "Out a second story bedroom window."

"I know," Harry groaned, running a hand through his hair as they both rounded the car to Maddie's side, where Arthur stood.

"With your wife," Jim shook his head.
"I know..." Harry let out a breath. Jim was right; he should have thought it out further.

"Running down a mountain in the dark with who knows who or what is out there..."

"You done?" Harry lifted his eyebrows as Arthur reached to open Maddie's door.

"I don't know," Jim shrugged. "Am I going to need to start camping out with you and the Missus?" Without waiting for a retort from Harry, Jim shifted out of father mode and into professional mode; reaching for Maddie's hand as their team went to work. Lucky for them, it was relatively late at night and the small medical center seemed to be running slow and easy for the night.

Trying for inconspicuous, it was only Jim and Arthur who accompanied them inside while the others parked the cars and waited on radio if needed. Harry held onto Maddie as she stepped up to the counter and smiled at the nurse on the other side.

"What can we do for you?" The woman on the other side had to have been her mother's age; short and petite but with warm, firm eyes.

"I was running in the dark and I tripped over a barbed wire fence," Maddie explained with a slightly embarrassed smile on her face. "I have a pretty serious gash in my leg and I twisted my ankle and..."

"I see," the nurse looked over the counter, glancing back to an aid sitting down the way from her. "Jerry, grab a wheel chair would you please?" The young man moved quickly, bringing it around to Maddie and Harry helped him settle her in.

"Okay now..." The nurse turned back to the notes she was taking. "Your name?"

"Um. Maddie," she was caught off guard for just a moment after nine days of everyone knowing exactly who she was. "My name is Madeline."

"Last name?" She reached for a clipboard and some paperwork.

"Sussex," Maddie blinked as Harry stepped up, holding his hand out for the clipboard the nurse was arranging. "I'm her husband. Do I need to fill this out?"

"That would be great." She handed it over and turned to Maddie. "Now I'm going to see what I can do to get you back there just as quickly as I can. I'm going to need you to keep this leg elevated and the pressure on the wound. Just like you're doing, okay?"

"Yes, thank you," Maddie smiled as the nurse looked around at Arthur and Jim and nodded a small smile before disappearing. "Oh my God," Maddie whispered to Harry as the nurse stepped away. "They don't know."

"I noticed," he scanned the pages.

"I mean it. They don't even notice you." Maddie was grinning; clearly amused. "It's like the Twilight Zone when they don't even notice you."

"Well put," he sighed and looked to Jim who was watching as the formerly empty waiting areas began to get busy—a carload of seemingly drunk teens filing in. Jim's eyes met Harry's and he nodded, moving towards the counter. "Listen," Harry moved closer to her. "Jim's going to have to
tell them."

"What? Why?" She looked from Harry to Arthur who had moved in closer.

"Well to begin with," Arthur stepped in, nodding to the group of people. "We have company. It would be better for you to at least be behind a curtain. Not just for safety, but for press." Maddie nodded; it made sense.

"Which reminds me," Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I have to call my father..."

"God, baby, I'm so sorry," Maddie's lips turned in a frown, knowing instinctually that Charles' reaction was going to mirror that of her mother's, of Jim.

"It's okay," Harry shook his head and pulled his phone from his pocket. "I'm just going to turn this in and then I'll call papa." He smiled with a hint of sarcasm to Maddie and moved next to Jim at the counter; turning over his clipboard, talking with the nurse.

Maddie took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying not to think about the pain in her leg; if it wasn't the gash, it was her ankle. And both were beginning to sting quite a bit. She turned tired eyes to Arthur who stood next to her chair. "I'm sorry if I made you worry." Her voice was small but genuine and he turned fatherly eyes to her.

"I'm not as...mad as Jim." He confessed. "We were in a relatively secure location with very low threat," he sighed. "But he has a point."

"I know," she nodded.

"If we don't know you're gone..." He shook his head as both of their minds jumped to that afternoon that things had almost ended up so much worse.

"We just..." She rolled her eyes and decided to be honest. "We were pulling a prank on my cousins. They messed with Harry when I threw the first pitch and we wanted to get them back..." She looked up at him and suddenly felt very silly for even admitting this; for thinking it might be some sort of justification.

"And you thought if we went with you, they would know," he offered and she nodded. "I hear you. I do. Just next time, tell us what you're wanting to do and we'll work around it."

"I'm sorry Arthur," she meant it; that was evident. "I hope you don't get into any...trouble for stuff like this."

"I don't," he chuckled lightly. "But sooner or later if you keep slipping away and getting hurt when you do...one of us is going to get it," he waved a finger between them. "And they probably aren't going to transfer you anywhere if you know what I mean."

"I do," she smiled at the look on his face and took a breath. "It won't happen again."

"Oh I know," he nodded and gestured towards where Harry stood with his phone pressed to his ear. "Jim has been on him for years, his father even longer..." Arthur shrugged and looked to Maddie. "I think maybe we've found the way to keep him in check." And before Maddie could tell him she wasn't about to be part of some plot to "rein" Harry in, things began to happen. Jim and Harry made their way back to her, along with a doctor and another nurse.
In minutes, they were back in the ER; off in the corner in their own room and while Arthur and Jim stood outside, Harry sat in a chair next to Maddie's bed and watched as she answered the doctor's questions; rehashing the incident while he did a preliminary look at her wounds and took a brief medical history.

"And you're up to date on all of your immunizations? Tetanus?"

"Yes sir," Maddie nodded. "They checked before we came to the states."

"Are you taking any medications? Herbal supplements? Anything prescribed?"

"No," Maddie shook her head as the Doctor made notes.

"Allergic to anything?"

"Not that I know of."

"And you're thirty years old?"

"Yes," she smiled as Harry squeezed her fingers in his hand.

"And is there any chance that you might be pregnant?" Though the question was routine and the doctor didn't even blink when he asked, the room went absolutely still.

"Whoa...wait..." Harry snapped to attention. And when Maddie looked to Harry, she could see it; the paranoia that only came with a lifetime of people trying to take advantage of your most intimate moments.

"Sorry," the doctor looked from Harry to Maddie. "We're going to have to x-ray your ankle to check for a break and there's an issue with some of the contrast. But...if you would rather not answer, we can just double vest you and..."

"We just stopped using birth control," Maddie answered with a smile and a hand to Harry's arm. She was going to trust the doctor; trust the process.

"How long ago?" He didn't take notes, didn't write anything down.

"Just this week."

"Okay," he nodded. "And your period, was it regular before that?"

"Yes sir," Maddie smiled.

"And you used birth control before this recent change?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "We were very careful. I can't imagine it's been enough time for us to be able to tell something like that, has it?" From the corner of her eye, she could see Harry's eyes dance at the possibility.

"No ma'am," the doctor shook his head with a smile. "But we'll just treat it like you were; double vest, specific contrast and mindful of the antibiotics if we order them."

"Great," she let out a breath and felt more at ease.
"Now," the doctor sat his notes aside and reached for the bandaged part of her leg. "Let's take a look at this, shall we?"

On almost all accounts, Jim had been right. They flushed Maddie's wound, stitched it up with twelve stitches. After a few x-rays, they determined she had a severe sprain but no break. They splinted her ankle, gave her crutches and a prescription for some pain pills to supplement what they were handing her to leave with. And when he told her she needed to stay off the foot for at least a week, Maddie couldn't help but shrug and pass off a joke about delaying her training for the Arctic another week. And even a slightly sullen and guilty Harry couldn't help but laugh and insist she would do anything to get out of running.

It was nearly four hours later when the SUVs pulled up that long, private gravel road. And, having heard news from Harry earlier that Maddie was okay, the houses were silent; everyone was asleep. Harry lifted a heavy lidded Maddie into his arms and carried her up the stairs to their room where Brad had re-installed the window screen and locked the window in their absence.

He helped her get settled; changed into pajamas, tucked into bed with her foot propped up and then, finally, he slipped into his own pajamas and slid in next to her; this long night finally coming to a close. Harry was exhausted but Maddie seemed to have a resurgence of energy. She had snoozed in the car on the way back. She had barely woken up the entire time Harry had been nestling her into their bed. But for some reason, the silence and the comfy surroundings seemed to stir her wake; her mind wild at work. She couldn't really find a comfortable position as she adjusted in the bed. And finally, turning to look at her husband, she gave in with a sigh.

"Harry," she whispered, nudging him lightly. "Harrrrrrrry..." She drew out his name; low and slow as she watched with a grin as he stirred from his quick dip into slumber.

"Mmmmm?" His eyebrows lifted though his eyes remained closed. "Did you need some water?" He whispered; his body wanting to stay asleep while his mind wanted to take care of her. "Or more pain pills or..."

"I can't sleep," she knew she sounded ridiculous given all that had happened but she felt drowsy and drugged up and she couldn't help it when her bottom lip pulled out in a slight pout.

"Ah..." He breathed, his eyes peeking out at her. "So you're waking me?"

"For better or worse?" She smiled sweetly and Harry chuckled; shaking his head as he woke even further.

"Come here," he rolled to his side and his arm moved around her, careful as he pulled himself closer to her; tucking his body into hers. Maddie snuggled into him, her hands tugging his arm tighter, sighing into his body.

"Better," she smiled, her hand running along the arm he had around her waist.

"Good," he kissed the side of her head and tucked her closer. "Are you in pain?"

"No..." She ran her fingers across the soft patch of hair on his forearm and shook her head. "I'm just...I was so tired and now that I'm laying here...I don't know. My mind is running crazy. Maybe I'm still coming down from tonight. Or maybe I'm nervous about going back to London or...I just
can't sleep."

Harry smiled, finding it a tad sweet that she wanted him up with her; happy to oblige her with anything she asked after the night she had just had. "Would you like me to tell you a story?"

"A story?" Her grin peaked as she turned her head to look up at him. "I think yes...I would like for you to tell me a story."

"Okay," he yawned; big and wide and then settled down against her, kissing her shoulder and smiling. "Once upon a time, there was a Prince..."

"A Prince?" Maddie giggled quietly. "Is this a fairy tale?"

"It is," he nodded, careful of her leg as he moved. "Now. Once upon a time there was a Prince. He was a tall, handsome, brave Prince..."

"Of course he was," Maddie grinned.

"And he was a good and happy Prince but...something was missing." Though Maddie snickered, he continued. "The Prince loved to smile but his smile...it was a bit broken."

"A broken smile?" Her snickers faded as she clarified.

"What? Have you heard this before?" He leaned to look at her with a smirk.

"No," she laughed.

"Then shush and let me tell my story." Maddie blinked warmth up at him and waved her hand. "He could smile but his smile wouldn't quite go all the way...it wasn't as big as it could be. So, he travelled all over the land looking for that something that would make his smile complete. And then one day..." His voice moved dramatically as he weaved this tale. "One day he traveled to the enchanted desert of Bendal and there...he met this beautiful doctor..."

"Oh for Heaven's sake," Maddie sighed. "Have you been taking my pain meds?" Harry ignored her sass and continued.

"She was smart and friendly and the most beautiful person the Prince had ever seen."

"Harry..."

"And she was there helping people feel better, healing their hearts and making them smile all the way." He looked down at Maddie then and he smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners and though she rolled her eyes, she was listening intently as he continued. "So the Prince went to see this magical doctor and before he could even tell her about his broken smile....she had fixed it!" His eyes went wide and Maddie giggled. "Before he knew it, the Prince was smiling; wider than he had ever smiled, from ear to ear and he knew..."

"What did he know?" She couldn't help the way her voice dipped into a whisper.

"He loved this magical doctor."

"Well sure." She blinked.
"And he wanted to be with her forever."

"The magical doctor?"

"Yes," he nodded, smoothing a hand over her shoulder. "A magical doctor who gives people their whole smiles back." He bent to press a kiss there. "So the Prince went to the beautiful doctor and with his heart in his hands he asked her, begged her, to come with him back to his kingdom where she would become his Princess and make him smile forever..."

"I'm going to guess she said yes?"

"She said yes." Harry nodded reverently.

"And they lived happily ever after?"

"Well," Harry shrugged and chuckled. "I know the Prince did. The jury is still out on the magical doctor."

"This is the story you tell your laid up wife who can't sleep?" She smiled love up to him, her hand working into his hair.

"No," he shook his head, turned to kiss the arm that ran by his face. "This is the story I'm going to tell our daughters."

"Harry..." Maddie eyes teared up.

"Tonight when the doctor asked about the possibility of you being pregnant..." Harry groaned at himself. "I shouldn't have taken you out that window."

"Stop," she shook her head, smoothing her fingers over the lines his worry created on his face. "It was an accident."

"But you're hurt," he looked down at her leg. "You're hurt pretty badly and God..." His hand moved over her stomach. "What if there's a baby in there? What if I took our little baby out a second story window and..."

"Shhh..." Maddie's fingers moved to his lips, pinching them together gently. "If there's a baby in there she's happy to have such an adventurous daddy...thrilled in fact." Maddie's eyes locked with his and she waited, eyebrows lifted, until he nodded and backed down. Releasing his lips she nestled closer to him.

"Did you say she?" Harry's voice held a strong reverence in it.

"I did," Maddie nodded, her other hand moving to lay over his on her stomach. "You said daughters. I said she..." She took a breath and thought for a moment. "There are just entirely too many boys around here."

"Agreed," Harry nodded enthusiastically.

"Besides...if we only have sons...What story will you tell then?"

"Same story," Harry was beaming brighter than the light from the moon. "Just with more dragons."
When they finally made it downstairs the next morning, Maddie and Harry were greeted by a smattering of her family; all stationed around the large kitchen eating breakfast. Hannah was the first to spot them as they moved into the room.

"Oh wow..." She let out a breath, her eyes swinging over Maddie's leg.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Maddie was quick to assure her, noticing the softness in her mother's face; a stark contrast from the night before.

"How many?" Gary asked, nodding to the bandage over her cut.

"Twelve," Maddie sighed, sitting in the chair Harry pulled out for her.

"Ouch," Patrick shook his head.

"It's already in the papers," Jenna waved her i-pad in the air and began to read. "An announcement from Saint James Palace; Her Royal Highness, The Duchess of Sussex, while vacationing in the Rocky Mountains with family took an unexpected fall resulting in twelve stitches to a gash on her shin and a splint and crutches for a severely sprained ankle. She is expected to make a full recovery in seven days and there will be no schedule changes necessary."

"Would you look at that," Maddie grinned hazily tired from the meds, from the late night.

"They are quick," Harry smiled back at her and moved to pour them both some coffee.

"Listen," Maddie turned to her mother, reaching for her hand. "I'm really sorry that I worried you last night. I had no intention of anything bad happening and I promise you we weren't in any danger..."

"Ahem," Hannah raised her eyebrows and glanced down at Maddie's leg.

"It was a barbed wire fence that...I swear...hadn't been there during the day time," Maddie joked and Hannah let out a small smile. "It won't happen again. I promise."

"I know," Hannah sighed. "I know I reacted a bit...over the top. But we thought you two had gone to bed and when he carried you in with blood everywhere...my mind just..." She waved her hands in the air and Maddie laughed lightly.

"I know. And I'm sorry," Maddie patted her mom's hand as Hannah moved to kiss the top of her head; all was forgiven.

At least from Hannah.

As Harry returned with some coffee and a plate of fruit, the door to the house opened and they could all hear people walking through the living area into the kitchen. Their eyes shifted up and the first person to walk through the door was Kyle with Amy following sluggishly behind him.

And he wasn't happy. His eyes moved instantly to Maddie as the group exchanged hellos. Without a word, he looked down at her leg and then up to her eyes; steady and unwavering.
"Well..." He glanced to Harry and then back to her. "I hope it was worth it." Maddie blinked and a wide grin stretched across her face. It had worked.

"It was," she nodded, reaching for her coffee. "It absolutely was."

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Chapter 127

When their entourage of cars pulled up the long drive to Highgrove, Maddie instantly felt that same familiar sense of home drift into her lungs. The sun was shining through a small break in the clouds and everything looked green and lush. Craving the fresh air, Maddie rolled down her window and sighed happily back into her seat. They had been back in London for a handful of days and were just finally getting a chance to reconnect with family and spend some much needed time with chubby little Arthur; his teddy bear from the Smithsonian was packed amongst their things. Will and Kate had been at Highgrove with their son visiting Charles and Camilla and on Saturday afternoon, after Harry had returned from base, he and Maddie loaded up their convoy and were excited to join them all for a night in the country.

As they pulled up, they could see the small group of their family headed up from what must have been a walk through the gardens. Charles was pointing out something to Kate while Will snuggled Arthur. Maddie smiled wide at the site of them; itching to hold the baby and knowing she was going to have to fight Harry for face time with the little guy. They pulled to a stop and the doors were opened. Harry was quick around the car to take Maddie's hand. Nathan stood close by with her crutches and both men made sure she was stable before they turned away. And as soon as they did, the family was upon them; kisses and hugs all around. Maddie watched as Will was quick to rib Harry for the state of his wife and she glared when Harry shrugged it off and scooped Arthur into his arms.

"Hey!" Maddie called out, lifting a crutch to poke him. "I am fairly certain I called dibs on the baby."

"Yes well," Harry adjusted Arthur in his arms, already pulling a ridiculously cute face as he greeted him. "I'm not entirely sure you can carry the little man and work those crutches."

"Come on dear," Charles was sweet and doting with her. "Let's get you settled inside and I'll distract him while you snatch Arthur."

"Distract him?" Harry snickered, shaking his head at the baby. "With what?"

"Perhaps a picture of your wife's arse," Will spoke in hushed tones, sending a rumble through the group. Kate was quick with a smack to his arm while Charles shook his head in fatherly disdain. Maddie couldn't help but note just how dapper the man looked, even in mudded up pants and Wellies. He stood to the side as his family filed inside and, following them up, Maddie could see the warm smile on his face and it put the final seal of hominess on their trip to Highgrove.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ Later that evening, long after dinner, Maddie and Kate found themselves alone in the sitting room while Will and Harry made good on a lost bet and took Arthur for his bath. Maddie watched as Kate took a few deep breaths, clearly trying to relax as her eyes kept darting towards the doorway.

"Are you okay?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows softly; a small smile on her lips.

"I am," Kate sighed again and rolled her eyes. "I feel bad that the boys are taking care of Arthur."

"Oh don't," Maddie shook her head. "Really. Harry thinks he wants eight children. Let's let him handle one squirmy little wet one before we get ahead of ourselves."

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"Ha!" Kate laughed, relaxing into the chair. When she blinked, her eyes stayed closed for a moment and Maddie noted just how tired her friend and sister looked. She must be exhausted, though she would never admit it and Maddie wasn't entirely sure it was okay to ask. Taking a chance, she smiled at the beautiful brunette and reached for her tea.

"How are you doing?" She pulled the mug close and adjusted her leg a bit. "I feel terrible that we haven't been around much to help out."

"Oh don't feel terrible," Kate pulled her eyes open and looked over to Maddie. "Everyone has been around so much...it would have just been overwhelming I suppose."

"It's been a lot?" Maddie asked.

"It has..." Kate reached for her tea and Maddie stayed silent, watching Kate's thoughts travel across her face. "You know...everyone has a 'right' way to do things and a 'bit of advice' for you..." She chuckled softly. "And of course I can do nothing right..."

"What?" Maddie let out a soft, careful laugh. "You seem to be doing marvelously."

"Sure," Kate shrugged. "On the surface that's true. There's just...a lot of pressure. You know?" Their eyes met and Maddie realized this was one of those conversations that was just for them; the wives of these two men. The ones who would understand.

"From the public?" Maddie moved closer to Kate, wishing she could take some of the stress from her.

"Yes," Kate shrugged. "And others...I don't know. You know...I'm just tired. I'm tired and Arthur is not. He wants to be up. There's pressure from outside not to hire a nanny. There's pressure from inside to hire a nanny. There's pressure to look 'natural' and there's pressure to look 'put together'. There's pressure to stay home with Arthur. There's pressure to get back to work. There's pressure to..." Kate let off, realizing she was rambling, realizing she was complaining and something inside of her, either born or bred, clicked. She shouldn't be complaining to Maddie, she knew that. But as she looked across the space between them, the small, sweet blonde was the only one she could talk to who didn't have 'expectations.'

"Hey..." Maddie moved to sit her tea on the table.

"I can't even..." Kate swallowed the lump in her throat as she chose to continue, looking down at her hands as she did. "After he was born, after the surgery..." She took a long, deep breath. "I was on so many medications that I wasn't able to nurse Arthur. I'm not able to nurse him. And there's a lot of pressure to..." She swung her eyes up to Maddie and she shrugged. "It's the most basic job of motherhood, right? To provide sustenance and nutrients for your child; for my only child. And I can't even do that...can I?"

"Kate," Maddie's head tipped to the side, her heart hurting for her friend.

"I just..." Kate took a deep breath and let it out, her smile pulling onto her lips. "It's exhausting some times."

"I would imagine that it is..." Maddie nodded. "Is there anything I can do? Anything I can..."

"No," Kate chuckled lightly, wiping at her eyes and settling back in her chair some more. "I do
appreciate you listening though. Sometimes I feel like I have nobody to talk to; nobody without an opinion anyway."

"Anytime," Maddie nodded, reaching out to put her hand on Kate's arm; wanting to see she was being honest. "Anytime Kate. I mean it."

"Thank you," Kate patted her hand lightly.

"And you know..." Maddie smiled. "If you ever want a night off...we could take him. Harry would love it and it would give us something new to fight about." Maddie winked as Kate allowed a laugh.

"Maybe," she blinked in that far off haze that came with sleep deprivation. "We'll see. You know..." Kate leaned in a bit but before she could finish that sentence, the men returned with a grand entrance; gusto befit an enormous fete.

"We have one squeaky clean and impeccably dressed young man," Harry held him out and Maddie rolled her eyes.

"Are you sure it wasn't you in the bathtub?" She poked at his wet shirt.

"Ha, ha, Aunt Maddie," he leaned to kiss her with a wicked grin. "And you're next."

"I'd like to see you try," she pulled Arthur from his arms and turned her entire focus from Harry to the bundle in her arms. "Hi there little man. You survived a bath with Uncle Harry?"

"Ha, ha," Harry leaned against the arm of the couch, watching Maddie hold Arthur in her arms.

"Would it be okay..." Maddie looked to Kate. "Would it be okay if I gave him his bottle and rocked him to sleep tonight?"

"Sure," Kate nodded, smiling genuinely at Maddie. "Would you like me to carry him up there for you?" She glanced at the crutches propped up next to her.

"No, no," Maddie shook her head. "Uncle Harry will carry him for me. You two sit...relax. We can handle this."

"Look at her saying 'we'," Harry spoke in a childish voice to Arthur. "She has me doing everything and she says 'we'."

"It will serve you well little Arthur to never, ever, ever..." Maddie cooed down at him. "Never listen to your Uncle Harry." She looked to her husband then. "Come on Captain. To the nursery."

"Bossy, bossy, bossy," Harry shook his head as he followed Maddie out of the room, his adoration for her clear even in his mocking.

For all the razzing Harry had been delivering that day, the moment he and Maddie were alone with Arthur in the nursery, he faded quickly into sweet and soft. With an expert ease that shocked Maddie, he held Arthur tucked in one arm while he helped Maddie get situated in the rocking chair. Tossing a cloth over her shoulder, he nestled Arthur into her arms and went for the bottle. Handing it off to her, he took a few steps back; more than content to watch her feed and rock and
love on the little boy.

"Look at you," Maddie looked up to him as Arthur's eyes finally closed. "My loud and raucous husband, quiet as a mouse."

"Shhh..." He pressed a finger to his lips. "There's a baby sleeping in here."

"Yes," Maddie grinned and nuzzled her face next to his, planting a kiss on his cheek before looking back to Harry. "He's fed and burped and changed and...he's asleep." She sighed happily. "He's beautiful isn't he?"

"You're beautiful," Harry countered and Maddie rolled her eyes, trying to suppress a laugh.

"Come over here," she nodded her head at him. "I need your help settling him in bed." Harry was quick to action, moving to scoop Arthur from her arms and taking him over to his bed before returning to help Maddie up from the rocker to her crutches.

"Would you like my help settling you in bed?" He waggled his eyebrows at her and she shook her head at him.

"Such a cad sometimes," she moved over to Arthur's bed. "I told Kate we would be happy to take him some night. I hope that's okay?"

"That's absolutely okay," Harry nodded, his smile pulling wide. "Did she pick a night?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "But I put it out there." They both sat in silence for a moment, looking down at the little bundle. And then Maddie took a breath and turned to him. "Okay Captain. Maybe I will take you up on your offer."

"Oh?" He shifted to his cheeky self. "The offer to give you a bath or the offer to settle you in bed?"

"Maybe both," Maddie cocked her head to the side. Harry bit at his lip and nodded.

"Anything you like, Doctor," he leaned to kiss her cheek and then, with a final glance at the little baby, the two of them left him to sleep.

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Their trip to Highgrove was much, much too fast. By the time they were loading in the car the next afternoon, Maddie felt like she barely had time to love on Arthur. She hadn't had much time with Kate and she hadn't even managed to look at the gardens with Charles.

"Next time," he smiled warmly as he kissed her good-bye.

"I'll hold you to that," Maddie smiled and turned to Will.

"When do you lose the third and fourth leg?"

"This week," she shined brightly. "I think they are going to take them from on my birthday actually."

"Wow!" He smiled at how excited she got. "That's a great gift."
"It absolutely is," Maddie nodded in agreement before she moved to hug Kate. "Let's get together sometime this week when you're in the city?"

"Yes," Kate nodded with soft eyes. "I'll call you when we're in London next?"

"Perfect." And then she dipped to press kisses to Arthur's cheeks; raking in the smell and the feel. "I'll see you soon muffin." Maddie heard chuckles as she pulled away from him, but she didn't care. With a final wave and light smack to Harry's arm for making fun, she slipped into the car waiting to take them back to the city. Harry had to be on base for the rest of the week and she had some work to do for the opening of The Delphinium Project in the beginning of September—fast approaching.

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Though Maddie had pouted only slightly when Harry left her for base that early morning, the week had flown by. It was Friday, her birthday. Harry had sent flowers but they were planning on celebrating later that night. She had spent the week working on her big project, looking forward to things to come and finally, she had gone to the doctor who took her splint and her crutches and set her free.

To say that she was ecstatic was a massive understatement. She felt so good walking around on both of her legs, with two free hands, she wanted to go out and celebrate. Knowing Harry wouldn't be home until later that night, she decided to do some shopping. Surely she could indulge in a small gift for herself; maybe some shoes for her newly freed feet. She rang Kate on the off chance she wanted to join her. Leaving a message, she decided to head out alone.

With Sampson walking next to her, Maddie spent more than a little time perusing shops and stores; buying a few things for Arthur, a funny card for her mother and a new pair of shoes for herself. Though she seriously contemplated having dinner out alone, she decided against it and headed home to wait for Harry.

The second the car pulled up to their place, she knew something was up. Harry was back. Jim was outside of their place, presumably changing shifts. Maddie stepped from the car, gathering her bags as she looked around; confused. She wasn't expecting him home until later that night. She moved inside, setting the packages to the side as she called out.

"Harry?" She laughed a little as she glanced from one side to the other. "Captain! Are you home?"

"Maddie..." Harry's voice came from the back of the house, towards the kitchen.

"Hey!" She hurried in that direction with a wide smile. "I wasn't expecting you to be home till..."

"Stop." His voice was low; serious, and drew her to a halt. "Just...stay where you're at."

"What?" She laughed, looking around the living room for some sort of hint. "Are you...I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"Yes," he laughed. "I just need you to stay put."

"But why?" She found endless amusement in this situation. The house was essentially closed up; curtains drawn, doors shut, and Harry was in another room telling her to stay there.
"I have..." He chuckled in that wicked way that told her he was up to something. "I have your birthday present in here."

"Well bring it out!" She clapped her hands together. "Come on Harry! I haven't seen you in a week and my crutches are gone and you're home early and you're going to hide out in the kitchen with..."

"Fine," he huffed. "I'll come out. But seriously. Listen to me. If you laugh...this is just...over."

"If I laugh?" Her forehead pinched up as she contemplated that. "What do you mean if I laugh? And it's...over? Harry, seriously. If you don't come out here, I'm coming in and..."

And then he stepped into the doorway. And her lungs stopped. Her blood pulsed hot and her jaw dropped.

Because there, in the doorway, was her husband—her gorgeous, unbelievably sexy husband—in full firefighter gear.

"Oh holy hell..." She breathed and he grew smug; cocky. The grin on his face tugged high and he swung an ax—where the fuck did he get an ax—up over his shoulder and nodded his head to her.

"Happy Birthday."

"Oh my God," Maddie couldn't believe her eyes as stun washed over her. It was so amazing, so unreal that a giggle bubbled up and she immediately clamped a hand to her lips—not wanting this to ever be over. "This is..." She shook her head, looking him over; head to toe and back again. "This is the best birthday gift...ever."

"Ever?" He cocked his head to one side; letting her look at him.

"Ever." She nodded. "Jesus Christ Harry you look...." She sucked in a breath and let it all wash over her. "I honestly don't know what to..."

"Me neither," he looked down at the get up. "Would you like to see my hose? Sounded too crass."

"Sure," Maddie shrugged, the flush of heat starting at her center radiating out.

"And then I thought maybe something corny about how hot it was in here..."

"Yeah?" Maddie watched him closely as he met her eyes and took a step forward.

"And then..." He let the ax drop from his shoulder as he moved in on her and for the life of her, Maddie didn't know what to do. She had known Harry for years, had been intimate with him in so many different ways but this—this moment he had put together off of something she had said to him during their tour—this was throwing her off center. In the most delicious of ways.

"And then?" She whispered; her neck and cheeks flushing red.

"Then I figured I could just toss you over my shoulder, carry you upstairs and..." He shrugged his shoulders with that smile on his face that drove her mad. "Maybe light this place on fire."

Maddie's eyes were bright and lively as she nodded her head. Harry, loving how she was responding, loving that although this was a very laughable moment, she was managing to keep
herself from falling over in giggles; moved forward. Setting the ax to the side, his hands moved to her face. With a flicker of desire in his eyes, he dipped to kiss her; long and slow and meant to move her closer to him. A tiny moan of a sound pulled from deep inside her and her mouth opened under his and he took his cue. Pulling his mouth from hers, he took a step back. And though his ego grew at the way her lips pulled into a pout to protest, he continued on. With a great ease and familiarity, Harry leaned over and lifted her off the ground; tossing her over his shoulder with a shriek and a laugh and he headed, quickly and steadily, straight for the stairs.

Later that night Maddie was snuggled up in their bed in nothing but his t-shirt and a wide smile. The remnants of Harry's fireman's uniform were strewn throughout their room and Maddie only hoped it was his to keep. Maybe she would be able to talk him into a repeat performance. As a slight flush rose to her cheeks, she could hear Harry in the hallway; his voice booming as he sang out.

"Happy Birthday to you...Happy Birthday to you..." He stepped into their room with his boxers on and a cake in his hand; complete with well lit candles. "Happy Birthday dear Maddie....Happy Birthday to you."

"Look at you!" Maddie sat up in bed, her hands clapping together in front of her. "Though...I'm not sure your new alter ego would appreciate the fire hazard."

"Well it's a good thing he's gone for the night," Harry winked. "Go ahead. Make a wish. Blow." Maddie grinned up at him, her eyes dancing in the candle light and she blew; taking out all the candles with one breath. "Happy Birthday baby." Harry leaned in to kiss her amidst the smoky haze.

"Thank you," she sighed as he leaned away, balancing the cake carefully as he climbed into bed and produced two forks. "Truly Harry..." She took a fork from him and cut into the cake. "This has been a great birthday."

"I'm happy to hear that," he took his own bite. "And you know it only gets better tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" She lifted her eyebrows, confused.

"Ha!" He laughed. "I can't believe you've forgotten that your best friend is returning to England. Tomorrow. Changing Bishop's life forever."

"Oh my God!" Maddie's eyes went wide. "You're right! That is tomorrow!"

"So forgetful," he shook his head. "It must be something that comes with old age."

"Old age!" She smacked his arm. "I think it was the fireman outfit that did me in. Seriously..." She looked to the floor next to her. "You get to keep that, right? It's not like it's due back at a costume shop..."

"No, it's mine," he smiled at his wife; at the memory of the look on her face. "I can't very well walk into a costume shop and rent a fireman's uniform, can I?"

"No," Maddie sighed happily. "No I suppose you can't. I guess..." She licked the last bit of frosting from her fork and smiled mischievously. "I guess this means that there will be a repeat performance?"
"Oh-ho..." Harry laughed, his smug grin returning in a flash. "You want to see it again?"

"You know I do," she arched an eyebrow seductively; unashamed at how much he turned her on.

"How about just the hat?" He took the cake from their bed and set it on his nightstand.

"How about the hat..." Maddie's whole body grew warm in anticipation as he moved from the bed, searching the floor. "And the pants and suspenders?"

"Wow..." Harry chuckled with a shake of his head; finding the items on the floor. "It's a good thing it's your birthday."

"Oh God," Maddie grew giddy as he put the hat on his head; her cheeks hurting from how wide she was smiling. "I was just thinking the exact same thing!"
"Okay," Maddie stepped into Harry's office at a quick clip; their relaxed, easy Saturday quickly filling with more and more apprehension. "Have you heard from Bishop?"

"No," Harry shook his head slowly, a chuckle moving from his mouth as Maddie began to pace the length of his office. "Ella?"

"No!" Maddie exclaimed, louder than she intended. "I mean....she landed over three hours ago and I haven't heard a word!"

"Well..." Harry let out a breath and tossed the article he was reading onto his desk. "Bishop was on an overnight flight from Japan. Maybe the flight took longer, maybe it left later. Maybe...maybe they are still talking about this momentous change in their lives."

"Maybe they are," she huffed into one of his large leather chairs. "That has to be a good sign, right?" She turned hopeful eyes to Harry.

"How would I know?"

"He's your best friend!" She waved her hand at him. "If he were going to tell her no, if he didn't want anything to do with her or the baby, it would come out fast...right?"

"Madeline," Harry leaned forward in his chair, his arms resting on his desk. "Bishop is not going to tell her no."

"You don't think so?"

"No. I don't think so. This is his baby, his child..." Harry's features softened as he spoke. "And he loves Ella. I cannot imagine him turning her away. Just give them some time. They have a lot to discuss, a lot to figure out."

"You're right," Maddie sighed, falling back into the chair. "Goodness. When did you become the rational voice in this family?"

"I don't know," Harry laughed, reaching for his article again. "But we need to switch it back. This is starting to weird me out."

"Harry..." Maddie lifted her eyes from her book, not bothering to move from her spot on the
"Not yet," he called out as he passed by on his way to the kitchen.

"It's been five hours since she landed."

"I know." He kept moving.

"Is he even on the ground yet?"

"Honestly Maddie," Harry laughed. "What do we need to do to get your mind off of Ella and Bishop for bloody sake!"

"I'm sorry," she exhaled and thought for a moment. "Hey. Any chance you want to put on an encore performance from last night?"

"Ha ha ha," she could hear him laughing from the other room.

"You know it would have been better if this had been a work day..." She closed her book and tossed it to the side. "I can't believe this is what I've been reduced to; sitting around waiting for a phone call that actually has nothing to do with..." She could hear Harry's voice in the other room; low and murmured as though he were talking, but not to her. Rising from the couch, she made her way into the room.

"Yes, yes..." Harry was standing tall; arms crossed over his chest with a focused look on his face. He glanced up to Maddie when she stepped into the room and nodded his head. "Absolutely. I'll be right over and...okay. Okay. I'll meet you there." As soon as the call ended, he stuffed his phone in his pocket.

"That was him." Maddie knew it by the look on his face.

"That was him," Harry nodded, moving towards her across the kitchen. "Listen. I have to go."

"Go?" She was surprised. "Is everything okay?"

"I think so," he continued through the door, Maddie following him as he moved. "He just...he needs me to meet him and I'm going to go ahead and do that."

"Of course," Maddie agreed, watching as he pulled on shoes.

"I don't know when I'll be back or..." He reached for a light jacket and turned to face her. "I'll let you know if we're leaving the country..." His lips tugged up in a smile and Maddie laughed.

"Did he say..."

"Nothing," Harry shook his head. "He just said he needed me." Harry's hands moved over her arms, rubbing smoothly over her skin. "I love you." He dipped to kiss her.

"I love you too." She hugged him, tight and quick, before she released her hold and watched him go. As the door closed behind him, she looked down to her own phone; no missed calls, no new texts and all she could think of was her best friend and what could possibly be going on in her life. It was a matter of minutes, seconds really, before her phone buzzed in her hand and she didn't even need to look in order to know who it was. "Hello."
"Maddie it's me..." Ella's voice was tired; teary. "Can you come over?"

"Absolutely," Maddie nodded, her heart already starting to hurt. "Where are you?"

"I'm at Bishop's," she took a shaky breath. "He said...he said he needed to think and..." She sniffed; clearly still unsure and upset. "He said to stay here he just needed to think and..."

"I'm on my way," Maddie shoved her feet into her shoes and headed for the door. "I'll be there in less than five minutes." With a quick text to Harry to let him know where she was headed, Maddie slipped into the car and was on her way.

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Earlier

Bishop was exhausted when he finally arrived back in London. Having been traveling for over a week, his final flight from Tokyo had been delayed and by the time his car turned up the street to his flat, he had been up for twenty-four hours. He was scruffy and wearing a wrinkled suit and simply ready to crash; in a shower, on his couch...wherever he finally fell flat on his face.

It must have been that sleep deprived state of mind that made him miss her; that made him not see her when the car pulled to a stop. It must have been that sleeplessness that kept his eyes from focusing on anything, much less the petite brunette who sat on the top step to his door. It had to have been that, because nothing else made sense. But he didn't see her. He took his bags from the driver, thanked him with a genuine, albeit wavering, smile and turned up the short walk.

Scrubbing a hand over his unshaven face, he forced his eyes open, forced his feet forward.

And then it happened; he saw her.

And he stopped walking. Blinking his heavy, sandy eyelids, he squinted to focus and then the corners of his mouth curled up.

"Ella?" Her name rolled from his tongue as she rose to her feet with a smile; bright and happy and more than a little bit nervous.

"Hi," she waved her fingers, her voice hitting his ears like a song.

"Wow..." He moved a hand to his chest with a shake of his head. "I must really be sleep deprived. My mind is just...taking over and giving me illusions."

"Bishop..." Her voice was shaky and, though he wouldn't know that at the time, her knees were even worse.

"Is that what's happening right now?" He grinned. "Is my mind showing me what I want to see most in this world?"
"Is this what you want to see most in this world?" She sniffed at the tears that threatened to spill, held tight to her pounding heart as she looked him over.

"Ella love," he dropped a bag next to him on the walk, his eyes sweeping over her. "Are you really here?"

"I'm really here," she nodded.

"Good," he laughed out into the still air; happy, unbelievably so, because he knew. He knew her better than most, better than he knew himself sometimes and, after their last conversation, he knew she wouldn't be there, sitting on his stoop, if she really didn't mean it. His heart swelled in his chest. "How long have you..."

"A few hours," she admitted, looking down at her shoes.

"A few hours?" His forehead crinkled. "What on Earth have you been doing here for hours? You could have gone to Maddie and...do Maddie and Harry know you're here? I mean...they didn't say you were coming and..." His mind was beginning to catch up with him. "You could have called...Don't get me wrong, I'm happy you're here. Fuck. You can show up on my doorstep anytime, I just..." He sighed. "I would have made sure I was here."

"I know," she smiled and blinked and he saw it; the tears in her eyes, the shake in her breath.

"Hey..." He softened. "Come on. Let's go inside. We can..." He took a step, his hand reaching out to show her inside but she didn't move; didn't budge.

"Wait, Bishop..." Her hand rested on his arm and both of them could feel the heat there. "I just...There's something I need to tell you and if you want to send me away after I do I just...I want that to happen here. I..." Her eyes lifted to meet his and they were dark and swimming with hope and expectation and tears. "I want to come in. I want to come in and never..." He sighed. "But before you do that, you need to know..."

"Need to know what?" He opened his hands in front of him, unable to imagine what she could possibly say to him that would change the desire he had to take her into his home and never let her go.

"Bishop...I'm pregnant."

"Whoa." Bishop's entire body registered the stun he felt.

"And it's yours," she wanted to be clear.

"God..." He felt a bit dizzy. "I assumed..." He nodded; knowing she wouldn't show up at his place to tell him otherwise. "I...holy shit..." He was having trouble grasping her words. "I just...how?"

"How?" She couldn't help the smile that cracked across her face. "I think you know how..."

"But..." He shook his head, swallowing at his dry, tight throat.

"But we didn't use..." She lowered her voice, realizing for the first time that they were still standing outside. "We didn't use anything."
"But you said that the timing was wrong for you to..." He fought to pull that night to the front of his mind without dipping into the amazing sex they had shared. "You said that the timing was off and that it wasn't possible..."

"I didn't say it wasn't possible," she corrected. "I said it wasn't likely and..."

"And you said trust me," he loosened the tie around his neck. "You said trust me, I'm a nurse. Ella...what happened..."

"I..." She blinked rapidly. "I was a nurse and I was in love and I was leaving and you were there taking off your clothes and seducing me and..."

"Seducing?!" He yelled out with a bit of a laugh.

"Bishop..." Her voice dropped low. "It happened. I..Obviously I didn't intend for this to happen and I know you didn't but..." She took a slow breath; trying for calm. "But it did. I can't take it back, I can't make it go away and...and I don't want to. I..." She shook her head as the tears won out; slipping from her eyes. "I'm going to have this baby. Our baby. I'm going to and...I wanted you to know. I...I don't expect anything from you but..."

"What the hell are you talking about?! You don't expect anything from..." His jaw grew tight and his eyes grew dark and Ella was sure that, even in all of their confusion and back and forth, she had never seen him quite like this. She had told him once that if she ever arrived at a place in her life when she wanted all those things, it would be with him.

"I don't expect anything from you," she repeated her words, holding strong against his glare; needing to say it. "But I want it." She watched him blink, watched him absorb the surprise he felt at that. "I want it all. I want you and I want this baby and I want to be with you and...I want to be parents...together. That's what I want...a family. With you. And I know I have no claim to you, no right to stand here and say this after all that's..." Her tears increased. "After all I've done and said and after how many times I've left you and...but...I love you." She wiped at her eyes, unable to see his features clearly at this point. "You know that I've always loved you and...I love this baby and...I wanted you to know. I wanted you to have all of that before you...before you invited me inside."

It was a full minute before Bishop's mouth opened wide, as though he were going to say something; but it clamped shut again. Everything inside of him was reeling. He had been so tired when he pulled up to his place; ready to crash and sleep till Tuesday. But here she was, Ella; his Ella. And she was pregnant with his child and with one, long, emotion filled speech, she was offering him everything; everything he had always secretly desired but never ever put words to.

"That is..." He squeaked, swallowed and continued. "That's a lot of information."

"I know," Ella softened instantly. "And I'm sorry to just...dump this on you, here on the sidewalk but...I've waited long enough. I couldn't wait any longer. I just..."

"A baby..." He lifted his eyebrows; his voice hoarse.

"Mmm Hmm," she nodded with teary eyes.

"How far along?"
"I just passed my first trimester," she managed a small smile. "Twelve weeks."

"Wow..." He took a step back, stumbled really. He ran two hands over his face, into his hair and he looked her over; his eyes sweeping to her tiny stomach, up to her sad, tear-streaked face and his instincts kicked into gear; his affection for her taking over. "Come on." He held a hand towards his door. "We...God..." He blew out a breath. "We have a lot to talk about. I have...a lot to think about but..." He cleared his throat. "But you should come inside. You've sat out here long enough. Come in?" He raised his eyebrows and she nodded; thrilled he wasn't sending her away in the car that had just left him.

"Okay," her voice was tiny, as though she were scared if she spoke to loudly, it would startle him.

"Okay," he nodded and took a step forward.

"Bishop," her hand fell on his arm and again, they were both aware of the heat that was there. His eyes flashed to hers, eyebrows lifted. "Your bags." She pointed to the bags he had been carrying when she had dropped the news.

"Ah yes," he chuckled lightly, moving back to snatch them from the walk. "Thank you."

"And when we came inside," Ella took a breath as she told Maddie what had happened. "He...ha! He played the generous host for a minute; bringing me something to drink, offering me something to eat and then he told me he needed some air. He needed to think and get some air. He asked me to stay here while he went and then..."

"He called Harry," Maddie supplied.

"Yes," Ella let out a sigh, her head tipping back on the couch she had been sitting on since Bishop had left her there hours ago.

"Well..." Maddie looked around the living room. "I think it's a good sign."

"Yeah?" Ella's eyebrows lifted sleepily.

"He didn't ask you to leave," Maddie pointed out. "As a matter of fact, he asked you to stay. He left you in his home while he went out. That's...that has to be a good thing."

"I suppose," her lips turned up in a small smile. "Maddie..." Her eyes welled with tears and she looked so young and vulnerable and Maddie's heart ached for her. "I just...I want this so much. So much. I don't...what if he doesn't?" Her breathing was jagged as she thought of that. "What if he just wants to co-parent and he doesn't want to be with me and..." She shook her head. "I would deserve that after everything that I've..."

"Shhh," Maddie reached for her hand. "This isn't about deserving, Ella. And even if it were, you deserve to be happy and have a family...just like the rest of us."

"Thanks," she wiped at her eyes and held onto Maddie's hand. "And thank you for coming over. Waiting here alone would just do me in."

"No problem," Maddie leaned closer to her friend. "And you know...even if it doesn't go quite like you hope it will, this baby will have lots of people who love it; including me...and Harry."
"I know."

"Speaking of Harry, you should know that the fact that he's with Harry is incredibly promising."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Nobody wants a family more than him. Nobody wants babies more than him. If he's getting advice from Harry right now then..." But before Maddie could finish her sentence, they heard noise at the door and their heads snapped towards it.

And in walked Harry and Bishop; both of them visibly tipsy. Maddie felt Ella tense next to her, her wide eyes focusing on Bishop who stood tall, though still wrinkled and scruffy, in the middle of the living room.

"Hey Blondie," Harry's voice called out as he pointed to Maddie; a smug, half grin pulling at his lips. "You're going with me." He turned his finger towards the door and nodded his head. And Maddie bit her tongue; he was so fucking cute she could slap him. But instead she squeezed Ella's hand, leaned in to kiss her cheek, and she rose to her feet. Following Harry to the door, she patted Bishop on the back as she passed, and they left the two soon-to-be parents to discuss their future.

Maddie giggled as she watched Harry slide into the car, following after him in amusement. "You are...wasted."

"I am," Harry sighed; his eyes hazy as he sloughed back in the car seat; his hand moving immediately to Maddie's knee. "But that's what you do when you're best friend is going to be a father."

"It is," Maddie nodded. "Is he excited?"

"He is..." Harry's lips curled up in a grin. "He is ecstatic."

"He is?!" Maddie clapped her hands together happily. "Oh God! He just seemed so...flat when he came home and you know he left her there with no hint or anything."

"I know," Harry squeezed her leg. "He just needed to take a minute; figure stuff out."

"And he figured it out?"

"He did," Harry nodded; his grin stretching higher.

"And..." Maddie nudged him, dying to know.

"You can't tell. Madeline. Look at me," he commanded her eyes to his. "You can't tell."

"I swear." She held up her hand in oath, biting at her lip.

Harry's eyes flashed the same sort of excitement Maddie knew she felt. "He's going to marry her."

"Ah!!!!" Maddie lit up; her hands clapping together, her entire face smiling because she knew, at that exact moment, Bishop was telling Ella the same thing; handing her everything she wanted.
"Oh my God..." She leaned in then, capturing Harry's face between her hands. "I knew when he went out with you that he would end up wanting to..."

"No, no," Harry shook his head in her hands. "I had nothing to do with this. He got there all on his own."

"You're telling me that can't-wait-to-be-a-daddy Harry had nothing to say about Bishop becoming a daddy?" Maddie's eyes danced as she looked at him.

"I'm telling you..." He leaned in to kiss her. "That can't-wait-to-be-a-daddy Harry has a lot to say..." He kissed her again; slower and deeper. "To you..." He moved closer, his hands sliding around her. "About becoming a daddy." And before Maddie could say anything, before she could toss back with banter, Harry's mouth was closing over hers in a heated, feverish way that drew her thought process to a close. Sighing into his mouth, she surrendered to his tongue, to his hands; to him. She could taste the whiskey on his tongue, she could feel the heat from his hands that were now sliding up her shirt, against her skin. And she knew. They were going to be lucky if they made it in the front door before they were taking each other with all they had.

Ella sat pensively on the edge of his couch, watching him as he moved further into the living room. His hair was a mess; tufts of hair sticking every which direction as a result of his night, of his fingers stretching through it over and over again. She watched, her breath held in her lungs, as he pulled off his suit coat and tugged at his tie. And she waited; waited for him to speak, for him to let her in on what was in his mind. With every step he took towards her, she could hear her heart pounding and then, with a ragged breath, he sat on the table in front of her.

"Ella, love..." He reached out to take her hands. "You know that I love you, don't you? I mean...you know that I've loved you more than anyone..."

"I do," she couldn't help the smile on her lips, the way her heart uplifted at that.

"I just..." He shook his head with a shaky smile; his breath pushing from his lungs in a long, drawn out sound. "I never expected something like this to happen."

"I didn't either," she moved to hold his hands in hers; her eyes wide and innocent. "You know that I would never have planned this or done this or..."

"Stop," he went soft then. "I know that. You don't have to...Ella..." He moved in a bit closer. "You don't have to say those things to me. I know that. I knew that this whole time..." He smiled and took a deep breath. "I would imagine this was quite a shock."

"It was," she chuckled softly. "I was...terrified. For a long time I was afraid and then I just...I knew what I wanted, I knew exactly what I wanted and that made it easier. All I had to do was convince you..."

"Ha..." Bishop ran a hand over the back of his neck.

"Is that what I need to do now? Convince you?" She lifted her eyebrows and tugged his hands closer. "Do you want to hear the reasons I want this? The reasons I want to be with you? Why I want to have your baby and a family and why I'm so incredibly happy that this happened even if wasn't planned and..."

"No," Bishop shook his head. "No. Ella. You don't need to tell me any of those things."
"Bishop..." Her voice cracked and her eyes teared and, for the first time that night, it sank in that maybe he just might tell her no. "Please..." She brought her hands together, still holding onto his. "Please just listen and..."

"Let's get married," he blurt out; his eyes were on hers and caught the flash of surprise.

"What?" She breathed.

"I said..." He blinked at the tears in his own eyes. "I said...that this is absolutely the craziest shit I've ever..." He shook his head. "This is the craziest thing that's ever happened to me, for sure but...damn it Ella. I've loved you for a long time and you think you're going to fly here from New York, tell me you're having my...my baby..." He choked up, his eyes moving to her belly—his hands aching to follow. "You think you're going to sit here and tell me you want to marry me and I'm not going to jump at the chance?" He laughed and shook his head. "I'm not an idiot."

"I..." Her heart was racing and her mind spiraling and she thought she was just going to burst from all of it.

"I would like for the record to show that, had I more time, and slightly less alcohol and...I would like it to be noted that this would have gone down much more romantic and grandiose."

"This?" Ella's eyes were wide; waiting.

"Ella, my darling..." He slid to his knees on the floor in front of her, moving so that his body was pressed to her knees, his head dipping to kiss her hands. "Let's make a family for this baby...let's...let's just do this. We've been dancing around each other for much too long and I'm tired of dancing...Let's get married. I don't have a ring but I promise tomorrow we can go and you can pick out whatever you want just...what do you say?" He turned his sexy smile and sweet eyes up to her. "Be my wife?"

Waiting around the next day for word from Ella was almost as hard as waiting the day before, though this time Maddie was a bit more relaxed and at ease. At least she knew that Bishop had gone home with good intentions.

It was well into the afternoon when her phone finally rang. Not bothering to move from where she laid with her head in Harry's lap, napping while he watched TV, she slipped her phone to her ear.

"Hello?" She grinned wide; warm with expectation.

"Maddie!" It was Ella; giddily happy and excited and Maddie's heart swelled.

"What's going on?" Maddie turned to look at Harry who was watching her instead of the TV. "Are you okay?"

"I'm...I'm perfect," she sighed.

"Yeah?" Maddie grinned into the phone. "What's going on? You want to fill me in or..."

"Yes," Ella exclaimed. "After you left last night, we talked and...Bishop...well. He proposed."
"Oh my God!" Maddie squealed, her excitement genuine, despite knowing his intentions. She could hear Harry laugh at her. "You're engaged?"

"No," Ella answered.

"Wait. What?" Maddie's face fell slightly and then, with a giggle, Ella dropped a bomb.

"I'm married."
As Harry prepared for a week on base, Maddie was looking forward to a week stacked nicely with family and friends. Harry would be leaving early Monday morning and that evening she was meeting Kiki and Sean at Leo's for drinks and dinner. On Tuesday she had lunch with Kate and hopefully some snuggle time with Arthur. Wednesday was a big day. She was opening The Delphinium Project with Charles at a well-publicized and buzzed about event. She would spend Thursday in the office going over upcoming commitments and potential patronages. And before she knew it, Harry would be returning on Friday and they would finally be having dinner with the newlyweds fresh from their honeymoon. The week was well lined up and though she would miss Harry, she was looking forward to what was coming.

But on Sunday night she stepped back into their bedroom after a long hot bath with a dampened spirit. Warm and comfy in her pajamas, she took a deep breath and made way for their bad. Harry, leaning back against the headboard as he flipped through a sports page, looked up in time to catch her sad face, her loose shoulders.

"Hey..." He turned to her, his eyes focusing to her as she crawled in next to him; snuggling into the blanket. "You okay?"

Maddie's eyes swung up to him and he could tell, she was debating what she wanted to tell him, if she wanted to tell him. So he waited, eyebrows cocked, as she took a deep breath and allowed a small smile. "I'm..." She blinked her eyes, feeling more than a little silly at the way her heart ached just a bit in her chest. "Jesus Madeline," she groaned as she rolled her eyes at herself. Harry watched as she took a breath and looked down to her hands. "It's not a big deal but...I'm..." She sucked in her breath. "I'm not pregnant."

"What?" Harry turned to face her, a flash of confusion drifting over his eyes. "Wait. How do you..."

"How do I know?" She laughed lightly. "I started my period Harry. I know. I'm not pregnant." When her eyes lifted to his, he saw it instantly; the slight smile, the watery eyes. She was sad.

"Hey..." Everything about him grew soft as his hands reached for her.

"Ugh," she groaned, frustrated with herself as her eyes welled over. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm..." She waved her hand in front of her face as she laughed at herself.

"Ah, come here." He tugged her to him then, wrapping his arms around her as she settled against his chest.

"This is ridiculous," she groaned against him, trying to calm herself. "I don't know what came over me." She chuckled and wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tight.

"It's okay," Harry kissed the top of her head. "It's okay to be sad baby."

"It's just..." She sniffed and wiped at her eyes. "We're married and we're trying and we've had a lot of sex and...nothing." And then she pulled back so she could look at him. "And then there's Ella and Bishop who have a one night stand and BOOM. Pregnant!"

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back in laughter. "So you DO want to beat them!" His eyes twinkled as
he looked back to her.

"I don't," she laughed; easier this time. "I don't want to beat them. I just...gosh. I thought for sure after the stables..."

"Or the bathtub..." He added with a wink.

"I thought for sure I would be pregnant."

"Yeah...Me too," he tugged her to his side, allowing his own disappointment to settle. After a beat, he shrugged and ran his hand up and down her arm. "So you're not pregnant this month. That's okay. That just means we'll try again next month. That's not so bad, is it?" He lifted his eyebrows playfully.

"No I suppose it's not," she sighed and Harry laughed.

"Wow," he shook his head. "You suppose? I'm not sure if I should be offended or not."

"You know what I meant," she nudged him, her tears having slipped completely away as she sighed. "Okay. We'll just...keep trying?"

"We'll keep trying." Harry nodded.

"Maybe..." A genuine, flirty grin pulled across her face. "Maybe we'll have to try harder?"

"Harder?" He raised his eyebrows to her, a low, loud chuckle vibrating in his chest. "I do have to work, you know."

"Ha!" She laughed.

"And I have military commitments..." He smiled wide at her laughter, happy she was pulling out of the momentary sadness. "But I will...I will try my best."

"That's all I'm asking," she winked at him.

"And you know...If you want, I could call and reserve a room at Buckhouse for next week. It worked for Bishop and Ella..."

Saying good-bye to Harry that Monday morning was a tiny bit harder than it usually was but with his hands holding her flush to him and warm breath in her ear, he promised they would continue their efforts as soon as he returned home. And with a bright smile and a pat to his ass, she guaranteed him they would.

Maddie didn't want to let herself sit alone and be sad; about Harry being gone, about the baby—or lack of baby. So she dressed and set out. She went shopping. She needed a wedding gift for Ella and Bishop. She needed a baby gift for Ella and Bishop. And she wanted something for Kate and Arthur for Tuesday. After her shopping was finished, she stopped at home to drop off packages and change her clothes and then she was back out; meeting Leo, Sean and Kiki for drinks and dinner.

Somewhere between the second and third drink, Maddie decided to tie one on. Harry was gone,
she wasn't pregnant—and she wouldn't be for at least another week—so she was going to go all out. The friendly laughter and easy atmosphere made it easy for her to cut loose. Hours later; many, many drinks later; with her equally tipsy friends, a reliable Leo and her steadfast protection detail, Maddie was home safe and sound in her large, empty place at Kensington.

She walked slowly through their home; beautiful and expansive and so ready to be lived in; fully lived in. She smiled at the pictures on the wall. She laughed at her pristine running shoes at the door next to Harry's well-worn pair. She kicked off her heels and climbed the stairs; peeling off clothes as she went. When she finally reached their room, she had everything but her underwear and bra in her hands. Dumping the pile off to the side, she moved through their large master suite.

She pulled off the rest of her clothes and moved right past her on pajamas and straight to Harry's side of the closet. Pulling open a drawer, she sought out her standard; t-shirt and boxers and, for nostalgia, a pair of polo socks. She was quick into his clothes, quicker into their bed. And when she reached his pillow, her nose nuzzled in and she inhaled; bliss.

It didn't matter that she had seen him only that morning. It didn't matter that she would see him at the end of the week and that the entire time he was away from her, he wouldn't be in harm's way.

It didn't matter. She missed him all the same. Sighing into his pillow, she tugged the blankets up around her and the smile didn't fade from her lips as she drifted off to sleep.

Maddie was a tad overly giddy when she knocked on the door to Will and Kate's Kensington home. She had the gifts for little Arthur tucked into her bag and was ready for a little girl time with her friend. But when Kate pulled the door open, something inside of Maddie drew back just a tiny bit. Something seemed off.

Kate had always been a beautiful woman in Maddie's eyes; so bright and vibrant and she had this smile that would make the room brighter. And she still did—look bright and vibrant—but something was different. She looked tired; more tired than she had the last time they had been together and her smile, though it was there, was not quite the same. And when she stepped out of the hug, she pressed a finger to her lips and with a tad of desperation in her eyes, she told Maddie that Arthur was asleep and then she ushered her inside.

And something was off. Will and Kate's place was darker than normal; quieter, less bright. And although it was clean—incredibly so by most standards—something about it felt...off. It felt as though they had just arrived, or were just leaving. It felt as though they weren't firmly entrenched there; only passing through. Though Maddie knew they had been back at Kensington for nearly a month.

"Where's Will?" Maddie asked quietly as they moved through the space, towards a sitting room off the kitchen where Kate had requested lunch be set up.

"Anglesey." She was quick with the answer. "He'll be back tonight."

"Oh good," Maddie took a seat across from where Kate sat. She watched, easily slipping into observant mode, as Kate offered her some tea and sandwiches and as Maddie filled her plate, she smiled sweetly at her friend who was so clearly still handling all that had fallen upon her since Arthur's birth. She felt her heart ache just a bit for her, wanting to help her; wanting to force her to take her up on her offer for help. And just as Maddie was about to bring it up, to press into it, Kate folded her hands in her lap and spoke.
"Have you heard the news?" Kate looked up to Maddie with tired, soft eyes.

"News?" Maddie's eyebrows slid up; not having any idea what she was talking about but curious.

"The story is going to drop on Monday." Kate's lips pressed together tightly and when she spoke, Maddie thought they looked like stretched rubber bands; nearing a snap.

"What story is that?" Maddie smiled, watching as Kate adjusted in the seat; seemingly uncomfortable in her own home.

"About what happened when I had Arthur..." She looked down at her hands in her lap. "How I cannot have any more children."

"Oh," Maddie's voice fell low and quiet. "I..."

"The whole world finds out," Kate cut her off with a smile on her face that didn't seem to fit. "The whole world gets to know the horrible truth..." She shook her head and looked out through the large window just over the back of the couch. And then with tear filled eyes and a dark sort of sound in her voice, "I can produce an heir...but no spare..." She chuckled then; bitter and not at all humored. "Did you know that's what they called Harry? He was just a baby, just a boy and the world called him the spare..." She shook her head again, the smile fading, her eyes drifting away from Maddie and off to the distance. "As if he weren't a person deserving of..." Maddie watched as something washed over Kate, something that made her snap back; her spine straightened, her face softened. "I suppose I owe you an apology."

"An apology?" Maddie's voice cracked, her forehead wrinkling in confusion. She hadn't been expecting this conversation at all. In fact, it was such a surprise that it was taking her longer to absorb it than it normal did.

"Well, since we're all about to know the barren state of my affairs," she ran a hand subconsciously over her middle as she met Maddie's eyes. "My child will forever be the heir and yours...your first..." She gulped and cringed. "They'll call him the spare."

"Kate..." Maddie took a breath, unsure how to proceed.

"They will. I can't have any more so once again, the weight of being the second falls to Harry. Harry and his first." She shook her head. "I'm sorry Maddie, I really am. Now your family is destined to this, now your babies will be tied to the throne because if something ever happened to..." She gulped then, fresh tears springing up. "I'm so sorry."

"Hey..." Maddie could feel it, that twist in her stomach that told of red flags and warnings. "You know you don't need to apologize. I really don't want you to, Harry wouldn't want you to. And you know...we're all in this together."

"Ha!" Kate's head tipped back in laughter; a laughter punctuated by her wiping tears from her eyes. When her gaze returned to Maddie, there was something there; something sad and before Maddie could reach out to soothe it, Kate shook her head. "No. We're not. Because...when this story runs, when the world catches it...it won't be all of us. It will be me. It won't be William who has mucked up the line. It will be me; not meeting expectations, not living up to duty and responsibility and..." She stopped herself, having said too much, having shown her cards. And she pulled back; tall and straight in her chair as she shook her head slowly. "It doesn't matter, right?"
She pulled a cup of tea to her lips, a small, misplaced smile appearing. "This is what I signed up for, this is what I walked into..." She took a sip and then a breath and she shrugged. "What can I do? Right?"

And just as Maddie opened her mouth, ready with a few ideas, a few suggestions, Arthur woke from sleep and let them know, in his loud, shrieky fashion, that he was ready for some attention. And just like that, with an apologetic smile, Kate slipped away from the table; leaving Maddie's mind at work. And when she reappeared, she brought with her a wide smile and a cooing baby and it was as though all that had occurred just prior, was forgotten.

But Maddie took note. She watched the interaction with Arthur, she watched Kate's mannerisms and her eyes and she could see—she was tired. This had been harder on her than anyone knew but Maddie knew now. So with the refreshed excitement that comes with being an aunt, Maddie scooped Arthur up into her arms and asked to take him for the afternoon. And though Kate had relented at first, she gave in; wanting the sleep—needing the break. She packed up a bag and sent Maddie on her way.

And that evening, after playing at the park, after a walk around the gardens, after listening to story after story from Aunt Maddie, Arthur was back home with his parents; both of them. As Maddie turned the chubby little baby back over to Kate, she made it a point to let her know she was there.

"Listen..." Her voice was soft, her hand resting on Kate's arm. "I can't imagine what it's like to..." She waved her hand around. "I know that the attention and the pressure and the expectations can be a lot for me so they must be just...enormous for you. If there's ever anything I can do, anything at all...you know all you have to do is ask. Right?" She met Kate's eyes and held onto them. "I won't ever judge you or think less than I do of you...you just have to ask. And I'm here. Okay?"

Kate blinked and Maddie watched as she struggled; her eyes welling up with tears and her teeth biting at her lips and then she watched as it faded. "I know." She whispered, patting Maddie's hand on her arm as her smile returned. "I know." And then she slipped away, back to her life; back to her duty. Maddie hugged her close and kissed Arthur's little cheeks and then, as Kate took him for a bath, Maddie showed herself out. And she made it a priority to check back in with her in a couple of days; not wanting to jump to conclusions, not having enough information for make an educated assumption. And she knew that the story about Kate being unable to carry any more children was responsible for a lot of the hurt and sadness she saw. But she was worried about her and she would absolutely be checking back in with her.

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When Wednesday rolled around, the summer had sufficiently given way to the fall and the air was cooler, the clouds overhead. And when the phone rang out into their room, it jarred Maddie from a warm, comfortable sleep. Her hand slapped at the nightstand, searching aimlessly for the offending sound before she found it and pulled it to her ear.

"Mmmph." She breathed into the phone, pulling her eyes open as she dragged herself from sleep.

"Good Morning darling," Harry was smiling, she could tell through the phone. And though the early hour made her grumpy, the drawl of his voice made her body warm.

"Good Morning Captain," she smiled into the pillow before she turned over a bit. "Or should I start calling you Commander?"

"Ha!" He chuckled over the line. "You already heard?" Just that week he had qualified as an
"Thomas told me yesterday. Congratulations baby," she opened her eyes; slowly drawing from sleep. "I'm very proud of you."

"Well, it's not official until Friday so..."

"So I start calling you Commander then?" Maddie raised her eyebrows and he laughed.

"I think I rather like Captain," his smile grew soft; he missed her more and more every time he left. "But that's not why I called. I called to wish you luck today. I'm sorry I won't be there for the opening," he hated that he was going to miss it.

"Me too," she sighed, turning to her side and snuggling the blankets up around her. "But when I married a Captain, I assumed I would occasionally surrender him to the Army. It goes with the territory, no?"

"Only for the week," he reminded her. "I'll be back on Friday. And I promise we'll celebrate."

"Perfect," she yawned. "Besides, I won't be alone. Your father is coming with me. It's actually really sweet of him to do that."

"Please," Harry snickered. "He's opening an urban garden project with one of his favorite people. My father is elated. You know that."

"Yes," she did know that. She was quite tickled herself to be spending some quality time with him. "And...Don't forget. James Bond will be there."

Harry groaned. "Oh here we go..."

Maddie could hear him roll his eyes and it made her giggle. "I cannot believe you get this way about him. As if he's a threat to you. As if he would ever be interested. Have you seen his wife? She's unbelievably beautiful."

"Have you seen mine?" He huffed. "She's unbelievably beautiful."

"Smooth," Maddie sighed. "I'll be sure to give him your best."

"You give him nothing from me," Harry chuckled at himself. "Listen. I need to go but good luck today. I'll be thinking of you."

"I'll be thinking of you too," she grinned.

"You had better be." He cut in with half sarcasm, half warning and they both shared a laugh. "I love you Maddie and I'm terribly proud."

"Aww..." Maddie grew soft and felt a bit of blush to her cheeks. "I love you too Captain."
people, smiled wide for the photos. It wasn't her first time and, in truth, it had gotten much easier since their boot camp of a tour to the US. But this project had special meaning and for that, her stomach was a bit aflutter with nerves.

The car rolled to a stop and her door was pulled open—she never would get over just how fast they could be—and she was being escorted inside to meet her father-in-law. Charles, abundant with smiles and warmth and that deep, soothing voice of his, was quick to pull her into his arms; kissing her cheeks and holding her to him. As Maddie rose from her quick dip of a curtsey, her eyes looked him over and her smile pulled sentimental.

"You're wearing delphinium in your lapel," her hand rested on his chest just next to it and she took a breath.

"Of course I am darling," he smiled that eye crinkling grin and patted her hand. "Today's a big day for you."

"It is," she nodded.

"Well you should be quite proud of yourself," he took her hand and linked it through his arm; the car was waiting, it was time to go. "I was in a meeting this week with the Director and everything seems to have turned out marvelously."

"Thank you," her fingers squeezed his arm as they stepped outside. "It means a lot to hear that from you."

"Well I cannot imagine I will be the only one you're hearing it from," he patted her hand once more before they parted ways, slipping into the car that would take them to the event.

The opening of The Delphinium Project was like many other undertakings. There were throngs of people there to greet them; photographers, fans, community members. They were waving flags and holding signs and snapping photos with their phones and their expensive cameras, respectively. As they stepped from the car, Maddie's smile pulled wide and she offered a small wave to those who had gathered and, when she rounded the car to meet Charles, following him to the rope line. They shook hands, smiled wide and fielded all kinds of questions and comments.

She was asked about her leg, asked where Harry was. She was handed a small bear for Baby Arthur. Eventually they made their way back to the center of the action. They were greeted by the Director of The Delphinium Project and several of the children who had played a role in the creation. They offered curtseys, bowed heads, and a small bouquet for Maddie. She accepted all with grace and aplomb and she was touched by the way Charles stood next to her; going against protocol just a bit as he let her be the principle on this particular day.

And then it happened. Daniel Craig—James Bond himself—stepped forward to greet them. He was just as Maddie imagined he would be; charming and debonair and suave and she just knew her cheeks flushed a tiny bit pink when he bowed his head over her hand tucked in his. And when his deep, rich voice told her just how happy he was to meet her, to be involved in such a project, Maddie's inner fangirl wanted to giggle. But she kept her wits about herself, returned the sentiments and she stepped forward into the urban garden project and into this important day.

The three of them; Charles, Maddie and 007 were given a tour. They were escorted around by a lovely young woman who knew what she was talking about. They laughed, they asked questions and then they all took center stage as Maddie stepped to the podium. Her speech was heartfelt, citing her long held appreciation for agricultural sustainability—something she was gifted from her
father, something that was supported by her father-in-law. She spoke of her history of watching communities come together through projects just like the one they were standing amidst. She spoke of the youth coming together to better their neighborhood, to feel the pride that came with growing the food they ate. She spoke of her excitement over the project and then, as she thanked them all again and asked them to stay for a few demonstrations, the applause sounded out and it was time to cut the ribbon.

Along with Charles and Mr. Craig, Maddie smiled wide for the cameras, cut the ribbon and applauded the group of people who had worked to put it all together. Slipping out of her heels and into her wellies, she lead the way towards the demonstration. And finally, it was photo opp time.

As Maddie stood next to Daniel Craig, he complimented her on her work as a Duchess so far, he wrapped his arm around her waist and he leaned into her as the cameras snapped away. And Maddie couldn't deny the way it made her cheeks flush, the way it made her body warm with heat. But she pulled it together and smiled wide, calling out to the photographer, "Can I get a copy of that for my husband?" And the crowd chuckled; endlessly humored by the back and forth between them.

"God I've missed you..." Harry's mouth was nuzzled in Maddie's neck as she tried, for the second time that night, to dress for dinner with Ella and Bishop. She was standing in front of the mirror in their bathroom, buttoning up her blouse as Harry stood behind her, dropping kisses along her shoulder, into her neck.

"Ohhhhh..." Maddie groaned, her head dipping back towards him. "Harry..." Her fingers twisted up into his hair, debating between pulling him away and forcing him closer. He had returned from base just hours before. They had talked about his new promotion. Maddie had told him of her concerns for Kate. He had listened thoughtfully and promised to keep an eye out for her too. He had praised her for the success of The Delphinium Project, rolling his eyes at her stories of Daniel Craig and then he had pulled her into the shower with him for their own little reunion. "We can't do this again..."

"Maybe we can," he grinned against her skin.

"We can't," she shook her head. "We're meeting Ella and Bishop in like thirty minutes and..."

"They can wait," his hands slid around the soft fabric of her skirt; wrapping around her waist and pulling her back into him. "They are the ones who took off for two weeks..."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed out, finishing her buttons and moving her hands over his. "They went on a honeymoon, Harry. It's not unheard of for newlyweds."

"Yes well," Harry sighed and lifted his eyes to catch hers in the mirror reflection. "I'm still a little mad at them."

"Mad at them?" Maddie snickered. "Why are you mad at them?"

"Because!" His face grew more serious. "I got married and I had a wedding. I had a reception. I invited them and fed them and gave them drinks and...they were a part of my day."

"Your day?" Maddie lifted her eyebrow with a smirk.
"Our day," he corrected, his lips turning up. "And what did they do? They ran off and eloped! They didn't even tell us! They just up and did it and yes...I'm mad at them."

"Okay," Maddie chuckled lightly; wildly humored by Harry's upset with their friends. "Well, we're going to see them tonight and we aren't going to make them wait..." She turned in his arms then, her arms moving around his neck as she kissed him. "And you should remember that in about six months those two friends of ours are going to give you another little baby to snuggle and play with and..."

"Okay," Harry rolled his eyes; softening. His arms tightened around his wife as he kissed her again. "Fine. I'll keep my hands out of your skirt."

"Oh baby..." Maddie's eyelashes lowered as she leaned into him. "Nobody said anything about keeping your hands out of my skirt..." She pressed a kiss to his lips and then moved from his arms, heading back towards their bedroom. "In fact...Commander..." She paused in the doorway, tossing a grin over her shoulder. "You should check your jacket pocket for a little...something...I need you to hold onto for me."

And though something inside of him warned him against it, something inside of him knew that if he did as she told him, he would be battling himself for the rest of the night, he did it anyway. He met his own eyes in the mirror and slipped his hand into his pocket and the soft lace tucked inside drew a breathy groan from his lungs. His eyes pressed closed and he took a deep breath.

"Madeline," his voice was low, held warning. "If you think this makes me want to be on time for Ella and Bishop, you are terribly wrong."

"Come on Captain!" Maddie called from their room. "We have dinner plans!"

And though it drove him crazy, though he was already trying to steady his breathing and calm his pulse, he loved that she did this to him. He loved that she could surprise him, that she could rile him up. He loved that she was such a match for him.

"Come on Wales," he spoke to himself. "Pull it together." And then, pulling away from the mirror, away from the sink, he turned towards their room; towards her. "I hope you remember how this turned out for you last time..."

"I hope you do," she called back, already headed down the stairs.

"Jesus..." He hissed, stalling in his spot. Then, with a chuckle, a small shake of his head, he patted his pocket and continued on; happy they were jumping right back in.

With a smirk on Maddie's face and Harry's hand inching slowly up her thigh, they made it to Bishop's place in time for dinner. Maddie held close to Harry's side as they waited for the door to open and when it did, they saw the happiest version of Bishop either of them had ever seen.

"Your Royal Highnesses," he was quick with the smirk, fast with the jokes. "Welcome to The Bishop Family home." He stepped aside dramatically as Sampson stepped past him to sweep the house. And though Harry had put on quite the pout at home, the second he saw him, he smiled wide and offered his sincerest, heartfelt congratulations.

"Congratulations Daddy," Harry stepped forward and pulled his lifelong best friend into a tight, firm hug.
"Thank you," Bishop hugged him back, his own emotions still raw from Ella's announcement, from their decisions. And then he turned to Maddie with arms open. "Madeline."

"Bishop." Her lips were tight, her voice small and quick as she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Are you okay love?" Bishop looked between the two of them, searching for a hint.

"No!" She stepped forward; shoulders squared and jaw set. "I am not okay."

"Maddie?" Harry snickered, turning surprised eyes to her.

"I am not okay." She shook her head, stepping right up to Bishop. "You...you...you just took my BEST friend and swept her up and flew her off and you just...you went right on and married her! You didn't even tell us! You didn't even think that the people who love you the most would want to be there!" She reached out a hand then, a hand that seemed to be acting on its own, and she pinched his arm.

"OW!" He cried out, more shocked than anything as he rubbed at his arm.

"Madeline!" Harry couldn't help the laugh that was bubbling through him. "I thought you were fine."

"I'm not fine," Maddie moved to pinch Bishop again.

"Sampson!" Bishop called out into the house as he swatted her hand away; chuckling as he did. "What do you want me to say?"

"An apology wouldn't be out of line." Maddie shrugged as Sampson reappeared, giving them the go-ahead.

"Hey listen," Bishop's smile grew soft and warm as they all stepped inside. "If you think I'm going to apologize for marrying the mother of my child, well...you're going to be disappointed."

"The mother of your child..." Maddie's heart tugged just a bit and she softened just as Ella rounded the corner to join them.

"There she is," Harry clapped his hands together as he moved around Maddie and Bishop to hug Ella close, to kiss her cheeks. The feeling in the entryway shifting as they all came together. "Congratulations love."

"Thank you," she hugged him back and nobody in the room, hell—nobody in London—would be able to deny how happy she looked. She was beaming. "Now...what was all the raucous?" She stepped from Harry's arms and looked to the other two.

"Nothing," Maddie shook her head, taken by how happy their friends were; remembering why she hadn't had an issue before. She turned to Bishop and shrugged one shoulder. "I was just telling Bishop how lucky he was."

"And..." Bishop tossed a wink in her direction, accepting her wordless ceasefire. "I was just telling her how I already knew that."

"Congratulations daddy," Maddie moved to hug him then, her hand smoothing over where she had pinched. She really didn't know what had come over her, but she was glad it had passed.
"Thank you," he hugged her tight and let out a sigh; of relief, of happiness.

"And you..." Maddie turned bright eyes to her best friend, her voice full of humor as she put her hands on her hips. "I get married and you get to ride in a carriage and wave from Buckingham Palace. YOU get married and I get a late night phone call and...what exactly are we having for dinner?" The four of them lit up in laughter as Maddie hugged Ella to her.

"Well," Ella hugged her back. "Why don't we start with drinks and then we can tell you about the party we're planning."

"Party?" Harry perked up. "I like the sound of that."

"I thought you might," Ella nodded to him and, with Maddie's hand tucked into hers, she led them all into Bishop's home—her new home—and off to dinner.

There were more hugs to be had, a few kisses and then champagne; for all but the new, expectant mother. They had a wonderful time reconnecting; talking about Harry's rapidly approaching birthday, about a reception that would be held in October for the newlyweds. And then, after the short ride home, Maddie and Harry continued on in their own efforts; happily, blissfully.
Chapter 130

Harry knew something was up right away. From the time he woke up on the morning of his birthday, he knew something was up. The slight, sly smile on Maddie's face, the telling gleam in her eye. He knew she had something in her mind that she wasn't going to share. It amused and tickled him to watch her move about her day, about their home; thinking he couldn't read her just as well as she could read him.

"So..." He stretched out next to her on the couch after breakfast. "You're sending me to lunch with Bishop."

"I am," Maddie nodded, settling further down into her seat.

"And what are you going to be doing while I'm eating?" His hand dropped casually to her leg, tugging her knee up so that he could pull her leg over his.

"Nothing," she shook her head, an air of casualty around her. "I'm going to sit here in my sweat pants and maybe nap." She sucked in her breath and he knew she was lying.

"Nap?" His eyebrow arched, his lips twitching up.

"Mmmm," she nodded, leaning closer into him. "I've been exhausted lately."

"Is that so?" He chuckled, his thumb rubbing against her thigh.

"It is," she sighed and tried to turn the conversation. "So tell me. It's your birthday. Is there anything special you would like for dinner? A cake perhaps?"

"No, no," he shook his head, his eyes scanning her once more before he let it go with a shrug. "I told you before, a quiet night at home is perfect."

"Fair enough," Maddie mimicked his expression; shrugging her shoulders and dropping the subject. And Harry, turning his attention to the TV, was more certain of a hidden master plan than he had ever been.

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His best friend, however, was not nearly as transparent as his wife. Throughout lunch Bishop gave not even a slice of a hint that anything was up. He gave not one single clue to the effect that he may have been employed by Maddie to get Harry away from home. He was his normal, casual, relaxed, every day self. And as much as Harry was certain there was something going on when he left with Bishop—he was beginning to doubt his stance by the end of lunch. At least he was nearly certain Bishop wasn't involved.

"So...are you going to tell me?" Harry had asked about half way through lunch.

"Tell you what?" Bishop tossed back across the table as he reached for his drink.

"What's going on tonight."

"Ummm..." Bishop swallowed and looked around, confused. "Ella's not entirely unpacked so I
think we're going to finish that up and figure out which room I want to sacrifice for a nursery..."

"What?" Harry's eyes narrowed.

"Yeah. The baby has to sleep somewhere..." Bishop chuckled at his friend's expression. "What do you think? Do I lose the room with the books or the room with the mirrors on the ceiling?"

"You don't have a room with mirrors on the ceiling," Harry rolled his eyes and laughed.

"How can you be so sure?" Bishop countered with a smirk.

"Seriously though...Maddie's not...up to something?"

"Like what?" Bishop sounded interested, like he wanted to know more. And it threw Harry.

"I don't know..." Harry shrugged. "Something for my birthday."

"How would I know?" Bishop leaned in, taking a bite of his sandwich. "I mean really. You think your wife would hand over secrets? To me? Come on..." Harry watched him for a moment; his wide eyes, confused expression.

"Yeah," he nodded; Bishop knew nothing. "You're right. You're right. Okay..." He took a deep breath. "The room with the mirrors on the ceiling..." With a bark of laughter, the conversation shifted and the men moved on to lunch.

It was a relaxed, casual afternoon. After lunch, the two men stopped by Leo's for a drink with him and Sean and then they called it a day. As Harry stepped from his car, he felt good; happy and at ease and actually looking forward to a quiet evening at home with his wife.

And then he stepped through their door and his suspicions were confirmed.

He had been right. Something was up.

"Madeline?" He called out as he shut the door behind him. He squinted as he looked around the entryway; darkened from pulled curtains. Moving to sit his keys on the table next to him, his eyes focused downwards and there on the table was a mixed Martini and a note. With a knowing chuckle, Harry pulled the paper into his fingers and read it with a smirk. "Have a drink and head to our room for your next assignment. You have one hour to be ready. Happy Birthday Captain."

Harry traded the note for the glass and took a drink. His lips twisted just a bit as he swallowed and he looked towards the stairs; towards his next clue.

Finishing the drink in a few large swallows, he abandoned the glass and took to the stairs; taking them two by two. His hands moved together in front of him as he hurried down the hallway; antsy to find out what was happening, to find his next clue.

"Maddie, baby," he called out loudly as he approached their room. "If you're in here dressed as a firefighter, you should know that it doesn't have quite the same effect on me as it does you!"

Though he laughed at the notion, he knew she wasn't there. There was something bigger than that happening and he loved the parallels it was drawing to their Valentine's Day plans not too long ago. When he stepped into their room, he sought and quickly found the next clue. Laying draped across their bed was a black suit bag and another note.
"Put this on. All of it. And meet the car waiting for you downstairs."

With a shrug, he unzipped the bag and found his tuxedo; immaculately pressed as always. He thought about it for only a second, letting his mind wonder for a beat, and then he laid it back down and pulled at his shirt. It was time to get ready.

Less than an hour later Harry was showered, shaved and dressed. He was ready—for whatever she had for him. He took one last look in the mirror, tucked his phone and wallet into his pockets and then, sliding his ring and his watch back in place, he moved down the stairs to meet the car. Though he wasn't surprised to find that Maddie wasn't waiting for him, he was a little disappointed. He wanted to see her, wanted to be with her. He had no idea what was about to happen, but he knew one thing for sure—he fucking loved his wife.

"Good Evening Sir," Jim, dressed similarly, smiled a nod to Harry.

"Jim, my friend!" Harry clapped his hands together in a jovial spirit. "What do we have here?"

"There's a note from the Duchess in the backseat."

"Of course there is," Harry grinned and moved past him and into the car. There on the seat was a slim, flat, gift wrapped box and a card. As the door shut behind him and the car rolled into motion, he read the card first. "I've trusted you. More than once. Now it's your turn." Harry flipped the card over, a tad bit confused and reached for the box. Pulling at the wrapping, he lifted the lid and then let out a laugh; amused and entertained.

There in his fingers was a long, black slip of fabric. A blindfold. And in the bottom of the gift wrapped box was a note. "Put it on."

Harry bit at his bottom lip, shaking his head at the piece of fabric as he chuckled to himself. Whatever it was, it was going to be good. Trusting his wife, trusting his security team, he threw caution to the wind, embraced the spirit of adventure, and he tied the blindfold around his eyes.

At first Harry tried to follow the turns and stride of the car, trying to pinpoint where they were going. But eventually there were just too many, there was too much gap; he couldn't do it. So he resigned himself to be patient and wait—not something that came easily to him. It wasn't long until the came to a stop and, not knowing if he should remove the blindfold or not, he kept it in place and his ears perked up. The door opened and he waited for a beat before he called out.

"Can I take this off now or..." He chuckled at the sheer absurdity of it all, hoping like hell that there weren't any reporters nearby.

"Yes," a voice called out; a voice he recognized. With quick fingers, he pulled at the fabric. The blindfold fell from his eyes and he looked out through the opened door.

After a few quick blinks, he focused and...

"Bishop?" Harry stepped from the car, his face twisting up as he took in his best friend dressed in a tuxedo and a smirk.

"Who were you expecting?" Bishop lifted one eyebrow as he smoothed down the front of his tuxedo jacket.
"Really...anyone but you," Harry chuckled and looked around. "Finished taking mirrors off the ceiling?"

"I did," Bishop grinned.

"You want to tell me what's going on yet?"

"Nah," Bishop shook his head. "But I will tell you what we need to do next."

"And what's that?" Harry couldn't deny it; he was intrigued.

"We're getting in that," Bishop nodded to a spot over Harry's shoulder and Harry turned to see. Just beyond the car that was stopped behind him was a helicopter. Jim was already over speaking to the pilot and Harry's eyes went wide.

"Where are we going?" He swung his gaze back to Bishop.

"I don't know," Bishop shook his head, walking towards Harry, towards the helicopter.

"Bullshit," Harry called out as Bishop passed him; knowing better.

"Fine," Bishop shrugged, turning to look at Harry as he continued towards the helicopter. "You want to find out what's going on man? Let's go," he nodded his head to the helicopter. "I promise you're going to love it."

"Jesus..." Harry sighed, taking a second to look all around him, and then he was moving towards the helicopter at a quick clip—ready to find out what was in store for him. Climbing aboard with Bishop and two agents, Harry buckled in and watched as the ground disappeared. They were up in the air and in no time, they were circling out over the water. He flashed his eyes to Bishop who shrugged with a smug grin on his face and before Harry could call him out, they were nearing a small, private island off the coast. And this time when he turned to look at Bishop, Bishop held something out to him.

"Go ahead," Bishop waved the card out to him. "You're going to want to read this."

Harry plucked the card from his fingers and, while the helicopter began to lower, growing closer and closer to the ground, he read his wife's handwriting.

"Once you touch ground, the game begins. Use that brilliant mind, that stunning charm, and that unmatchable skill of yours to bring the two of you to me. Look out for those who are after you and stay quick on your feet and know this...James Bond has nothing on you Captain."

Harry's entire face lit up, his grin stretching from ear to ear and he wanted more than anything to find Maddie and just kiss the hell out of her. But first—according to her note—there was a game to be played. Folding the card in half, he slipped it into his jacket pocket and, as they neared landing, Jim spoke up across from him.

"The island has been secured," he wanted to talk logistics, safety, before they jumped into the game that awaited. "All participants have been cleared...

"Participants?" Harry's eyebrows lifted and Bishop chuckled next to him.
"All have been cleared and should be wearing a badge like this..." He lifted a bright, neon orange name badge. "You have your panic button in your pocket," Jim nodded to his side. "Mr. Bishop has one as well in case you need us as does the Duchess. I'll be on your tail the entire time but I'll give you some distance." He took a breath and leaned in. "It is imperative that you not try to leave this island unless I'm with you. It is imperative that if something seems awry, you come right back to me. It is imperative that if you think there might be a real threat, you let me know. And if you see somebody without the orange badge...game over."

"There are tasks along the way," Bishop spoke up, finally giving him more info. "We will have missions to complete all while under surveillance and enemy fire."

"What?" Harry laughed as the helicopter touched down.

"We need to get from here, to the other side of the island, to Maddie, without getting shot..." Bishop's smile pulled wide. "It's a paintball match my friend. A well dressed, espionage sleuthing paintball match."

"Over the island?" Harry's blood was pumping with excitement as he undid his seatbelt.

"Yes sir," Bishop clapped his hands together and did the same. As they all emerged from the helicopter, they approached a table already set up with a variety of paint ball guns, protective eye gear and other paraphernalia. Harry's face brightened like a child in a toy store given permission to run wild.

Jim stepped up next to him, nodding to Brad who had been waiting for them at the table. Turning to Harry, he gave one last warning. "A lot of work has gone into putting this together. Mr. Bishop knows how things are supposed to roll. So stay safe. Have fun and..." Jim's lips twitched into a grin, leaning closer as his voice dropped. "Don't get lazy. People are gunning for you. Stay low, stay alert."

"Will do," Harry grinned in return and Jim stepped back, letting Bishop and Harry take in the table. "Maddie did all this?" He spoke to his best friend as he began to collect items off the table, sliding his glasses into place; feeling the urgency and excitement in the air. He was more than ready to jump into this enormous game Maddie had orchestrated—more than ready to get to her.

"She did," Bishop grinned wide, sliding guns into place. "Now. What do you say we go find her."

Three hours later, the sun was setting over the coast of the island and the two men; rumpled and well worked with a few paint splatters here and there; had finally reached the other side. They had taken a car, they had jumped on a train, they had even spent time on a speedboat in the water. With their guns still drawn and mile wide smiles on their faces, they hurried up the stone stairs towards the massive, beautiful, abandoned building where their clues had lead them.

"Okay," Harry's voice was low as they slipped in through the doors. Their heels clicked against the marbled floors and his eyes scanned behind them, checking to see if they were followed. "What's next?"

"I guess that would be me." Her voice sounded out, warm and inviting in the massive room. Harry and Bishop both spun towards the sound of her voice. "Well played gentlemen." And then they saw her and Harry literally took a step back as he took her in. Her hair was styled, her make up
darker, smokier; sexier. Her dress—he sucked in his breath as he looked over her dress, cut low—and high—in all the right places and the heels she was wearing made her legs look amazing as she moved towards them.

"Oh my God..." Harry breathed and, without looking, his hand reached out beside him; searching to cover Bishop's eyes.

"What are you doing?" Bishop swatted at his hand with a laugh.

"This is my birthday and my wife. This is for me. Not you..." He clapped his hand over his friends face and pushed it to the side.

"You found me," Maddie smiled as she stepped up to him.

"Did you doubt that I would?" He lifted his eyebrows, his face full of charm and seduction and ego.

"Never," her grin tugged higher and her lashes lowered; her eyes scanning him from head to toe. Her fingers reached out then, running along his lapels and down the front of his jacket; wiping away dust as she went. Wrapping her hand tight around both sides of his jacket, she tugged him towards her. And Harry groaned. Without moving her eyes from his, she instructed. "It's time to tell Bishop good-bye."

Without turning his eyes, without blinking, Harry did as she asked. "Good-bye Bishop." And though neither of them looked, they could hear his laughter; a deep, friendly chuckle.

"Good-bye man," Bishop called out, patting Harry on the back and moving away from them; the sound of his shoes fading into the distance. Once Harry was sure they were alone, he moved in and dipped his face to hers; wanting to kiss that red lipstick right off her lips.

"No no," she pulled back with a smile, surprising him. "Not yet."

"Maddie..." He moaned, moving a step closer to her.

"We're not finished." She warned with her eyes and beckoned him closer with her hands on his jacket. As Maddie took a step backwards, Harry took a step forward.

"No?" He whispered, unable to hide how much he wanted her, unable to control his desire for her in that moment.

"No." She shook her head and then, with another appreciative look over him, she dropped her hold on him and reached for his hand; turning around and pulling him with her.

And then Harry saw the back of her dress—or more accurately, the lack of back on her dress.

"Holy Shit..." He groaned, his feet stopping, his hand pulling her back. But Maddie couldn't be swayed. She had a mission, a goal. And she was taking him with her. And he followed; like a child into Hamelin—he would follow her anywhere.

"Have you enjoyed playing Bond so far?" She called out to him, leading him by his hand through the room to the other side of the building; towards a door.

"You have no idea," he tugged at her fingers, wanting her to look to him. And she did, flashing
her bright smile and her smoky eyes. "You really outdid yourself Madeline."

"Oh Captain..." She sighed and stepped closer. "We're not even finished yet."

With a turn of her heel and a pull to his hand, they were back in motion. And though Harry wanted to pull her back to him; to stop her in her tracks and take her in his arms and show her just how much he loved what she had put together, he followed. His curiosity, his trust in her, kept him moving. And soon they reached the door. Maddie turned around to face him, his hand still in hers as she leaned her back against the strong wooden door.

"Something wrong?" He asked; knowing the answer.

"Hmmm..." She smiled and shook her head. "Nothing's wrong." Leaning into him then, she pressed her lips to his; soft and gentle and too quick for him to trap them in his. "Happy Birthday Harry..."

With a push to the door, Maddie turned around and together they stepped outside. And Harry's eyes went wide.

"Oh my..." His voice trailed off as he took it in; his hand finding home over his heart. "Is that an..."

"Aston Martin?" Maddie supplied, stepping towards the black, slate piece of art. "Yes it is."

"And it's..." He couldn't find a way to put sentences together.

"Yours?" Maddie smiled wide and held out her hand; keys dangling from her fingers. "It is." She nodded and shrugged; coy and sweet and innocent as her other hand ran along the profile of the car. "Bond isn't really Bond without the car...is he?"

"Oh my God..." Harry moved towards it then, walking around it, looking it over. "I can't believe you did this. This is..." His eyes swung to her then and he grew soft. "Maddie...this is amazing. This whole thing has just been..." He lost hold of words and his fingers tightened against the fabric over his heart.

Maddie felt her eyes grow a bit teary at how happy he was, but she blinked them away and took a breath. "Would you like to drive it?"

"Are you kidding me?" He laughed.

"Jim said the island was secure," she stepped closer, holding out the keys. "You can go wherever you like; run it wild for a bit."

"You're serious." He reached out for the keys.

"I am," she nodded and watched as he took them from her. He glanced over them in his hand for a moment and then his focus shifted; from the slate black car beside him to the stunning blonde in front of him.

"Maddie..." His voice dropped into that deep, heavy place where she knew exactly what was happening in his mind. He took a step towards her and Maddie's breath sucked in as she moved back just a bit; leaning against the car behind her.
"Yes?" She breathed.

Harry moved closer, his arms bracing around her, resting on the roof of the car as he pressed her against it. "I'm going to kiss you now." Her mouth opened to offer something, but he hurried ahead of her. "No no. I don't care what else there is," one of his hands slid from the car, to her waist. "I'm going to kiss you now."

"Well sure," she shrugged, leaning her body into his. "Because Bond really isn't Bond without the..."

And his mouth closed over hers; lips hot and firm, tongue strong and persistent. And all of Maddie's words fell from her mind. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her tight and close to him; so blissfully happy, so thankful.

"This..." He kissed her again. "Has been..." And again. "The best birthday..." Once more. "Ever."

"Ever?" She arched her eyebrows, running her fingers down his shoulders, down his arms, to his hands that were clutching her to him.

"Well..." His voice was rough. "Last year you agreed to be my wife, so that was top of the list...but this year..." He bit his lip and his eyes twinkled as he smiled down at her. "This year you are my wife. And you're in this dress and these shoes and...fuck, Maddie. This car." He looked behind her then.

"Come on," she squeezed his hands. "Let's drive it."

"Yeah?" His eyebrows perked up.

"Yeah," she nodded, pulling his hands from her then. "Let's take it out, tear it up."

"God, I love you," he laughed, moving to open her door for her. As she moved past him, his eyes swept over her dress, over her skin, and he had to take a deep breath to control the shudder. Closing her door, he rounded the car quickly; sliding into the driver's seat and settling in. It felt amazing; the entire day, this moment—it felt amazing. Sticking the keys in the ignition, his hand moved to her; sliding up along her thigh, drawing shivers to her skin. "You ready baby?" He rubbed heat into her as he met her eyes.

"Yes," she nodded; almost as excited as he. Harry grinned and pulled his hand back; starting the car with wild eyes and a laugh full of joy. And Maddie couldn't have been happier.

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Harry tore it up. With a wild, carefree look in his eyes and a smile that rivaled any Maddie had seen, he drove the car all over the island. It handled like a dream; hugging the curves, sticking tight to the road when he pushed the speedometer just as far as he felt comfortable with having her next to him. It was a dream. And he loved it. And he loved her for giving it to him.

So when Maddie suggested they take a side road leading closer to the coast, Harry gladly did as she asked. He turned them off and relaxed a bit; settling into his new car; into the moment. The road twisted and turned, drawing them further into trees, away from the main and, as they neared a clearing over the ocean, surrounded by trees, he glanced in the rearview mirror and was shocked to find the tail car had dropped off.
"They know where we're going," Maddie noticed him noticing the change.

"They do?" He lifted his eyebrows to her.

"They do," she nodded, her hand sliding over to his thigh. "I've cleared everything through them first. They know exactly where we'll be in case there's a problem..." She leaned forward in her seat a bit, her eyes squinting. "There." She pointed. "Turn off there."

His hands slid over the leather covered steering wheel and he turned the car where she had pointed. It was less than a mile before they drove out of a tunnel of trees and into the clearing. And the road stopped. Harry brought the car to a stop, slid it into park and looked out at the view.

It was spectacular. The sun had just about disappeared over the horizon and the colors that were cast over the water were brilliant. It was fall and the sky was hazy and cloudy and it felt like it might rain. But the view was unbelievable.

"What a day," Harry let out a breath, turning to look at her, to really take her in. "The notes, the drink, the tux...the paintball guns. All of the obstacles and..." He shook his head with a laugh. "Bond for a day, huh?"

"Well..." Maddie's smile was coy as her hand moved lightly up his thigh before she pulled it back. "If this were really a Bond movie..." Her movements were deliberately slow as her hands slid to the hem of her dress, moving up underneath. Harry's breath hitched, his wide eyes following her every movement. "Then right about now..." She was so bold, so cocky in that moment that it almost felt like she was a different person. Her hands slid higher and then, as Harry felt that strong, familiar tug in his stomach, he watched her pull tiny, black panties down from under her dress. He swallowed at the lump in his throat, trying to wet his dry mouth as she slid them down her legs, over her heels and up between them. "Right about now, you would be getting very lucky." Holding onto every ounce of gumption she had, she looped her panties around the rearview mirror and moved.

Rising in her seat, she watched Harry's eyes flash wide and when she hitched her skirt up and moved into his seat, into his lap. It was a small, tight fit; but it brought them close, pressed them tight. And neither of them would dream of complaining.

"Am I?" He breathed, his eyes scanning over her as she sat in his lap; her knees settling on either side of him. "About to get very lucky?"

"You are." She grinned wide; her head nodding as her hands moved to his chest.

"Really?"

"Really."

"But we're..." He glanced around, his hands moving instinctually to her hips. "In a car..."

"In a secluded clearing," Maddie was focused, determined, as her fingers tugged at his bowtie. "On a secluded island."

"But..." Harry's breath drew a little jagged as he watched her hands move to the buttons of his shirt. "Jim and...Arthur and...Jesus Maddie..." He looked up to her face, scanning her body as he did, as his eyes caught sight of the panties she was no longer wearing.
Feeling high from the night, from the way he was looking at her, Maddie made quick work of the buttons, pulling his shirt open and exposing his t-shirt clad chest. Tugging the white cotton up from where it was tucked into his pants, she grinned wider at the sight of his stomach; his soft, hot skin with the fan of red hair. "Jim and Arthur know to stay back." Her voice was low and sultry and it matched her mood and her hair and her eyes and Harry could feel the heat in the car intensifying as her fingers slid over his skin. "I cleared everything with them..."

"Everything?" Harry's hands moved up from her hips then, wanting more than anything to plant in her hair and tug that mouth of hers to his.

"It's just the two of us Captain..." She bit at her bottom lip and held his eyes. And there they sat, breathing altered, pulses pounding and then Maddie's hands lifted from him, sliding up his chest, over his shoulders and resting on the seat behind him; locking his head between her arms. "You've survived the gunfire. You've made it across the island. You've saved the girl. You've driven the car..." The corner of her lips twisted up and her voice dropped. "The way I see it, you have only one thing left to do..."

And that was all he needed. His arms wrapped around her then; bringing her tight against him. His neck stretched to kiss her, to move his lips and his tongue hotly against hers. Maddie moaned into his mouth, bringing him closer; making him grow and harden underneath him. His hands, gripping at her dress, at her skin, found their way to her exposed back; his heart jumping at the contact and suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to rid her of the hot little number she was wearing. So his hands moved higher, trailing fire over her skin as he moved up and over her shoulders.

As Maddie pushed down into his lap, his hands pushed at the neck of her dress, bringing it down over her shoulder where his lips landed. Hot. Wet. Maddie's head tipped back and his mouth slid across her shoulder towards the column of her neck; his fingers tracing down over her collar bone, towards the top pink skin of her breasts. A small moan fell from her lips as she rocked against him.

"Hold on..." Harry's mouth left her skin, his eyes smiling up at her with a smirk. Maddie's eyebrows lifted in question, her lips parting slightly. "You don't have an orange name badge." He held the loose fabric of her dress in his fingers.

"No," she grinned, her head shaking back and forth. "I don't."

"Well..." Harry's hands rounded over her ass, pressing her closer to him; his cock pulsing underneath her. "Jim told me not to trust anyone without one."

Maddie chuckled in his arms, her hands moving over his exposed chest, across his flat stomach, straight to the growing bulge in his pants. "Well I suppose you're living on the edge tonight Captain."

"Oh God," he groaned, arching into her hand. "Maybe I should..." He trailed off as Maddie's lips found his neck, her hand tightening around him. "Maybe I should..." He gulped. "Call for help." He managed to bite off the words before his hands moved to her neck, to the side of her face; pulling her back to him. His lips smeared against hers, her tongue teasing at his lips.

"Maybe you should," she nodded, her breath coming in pants as she moved against him; wanting more of him—more of his hands, his lips.

"Jim!" Harry called out into the car, his voice low and mocking as he moved a hand down her neck, back to her shoulder. "Help! Jim!" He grinned wickedly as his fingers tugged at the dress, exposing her braless chest to him. His breath hissed into his lungs and his eyes swung up to hers.
"Help..." He let one more smug grin fly her way before he leaned in and pulled her round perky nipple into his mouth.

"Oh..." Maddie groaned, her hands pushing him closer, wanting him to take all of her into that hot, glorious mouth of his. And he did; opening his mouth wider over her. "Harry..." She breathed and her hands returned to his pants; tugging at the zipper, pulling the fastener—needing him free. And when she found him, stiff and hot, her fingers wrapped around him and he groaned against her breast. When she slid her hand up and down him with a few quick strokes, he moved back; his mouth sliding slowly off of her.

"Oh God..." His hands slid down her body, over her hips. He passed over the tops of her thigh high stockings, over the garter clips that held them up, over the bare skin he found and up to the hem of that dress. He was quick underneath the fabric, pushing it higher up her legs; bunching it at her waist and his eyes focused down.

Not able to help himself, unsure if he would hold out for very much longer, his fingers were quick to her center; sliding into the hot, exposed wetness that was there and they both moaned into the car, they both ached to be closer.

So Maddie took control. Rising up on her knees, she pulled him from his boxers and positioned him below her. "Harry..." She called his eyes to hers and holding them with her own, she lowered onto him and her smile pulled wide and loose. "There we go..." She sighed at the feeling of completeness, of fulfillment, she felt having him so deep inside of her.

What happened between them in that car was hot and fast and just a little bit rough. With Maddie in his lap, controlling the depth and the pace and the teasing way she made him beg for her to move, the way she made his hands clutch at her body, all Harry could do was sit back in that exquisite seat of that beautiful car and hold tight to his gorgeous wife. There was a part of him, a teeny, tiny part that felt bad for the way he pulled at her dress, the way her lipstick had smudged and her hair had loosened. But the larger part of him, the part she was riding to the edge of the world, found her so fucking sexy, he could barely hold on long enough to bring her to the edge with him. But he did. With his mouth on her skin and his fingers stroking where they were joined, Maddie moved quickly and blissfully and wildly to orgasm. And as she clenched around him, calling his name out into the hot interior of his new Aston Martin, Harry growled into her neck and pulled her roughly down on him.

And he lost himself inside of her.

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After their breathing calmed and their hearts returned to a normal pace, Maddie and Harry separated, cleaned up, and readjusted their clothes. And after they pulled back onto the road, Harry's hand resting peacefully on her thigh, Maddie let him in on a little secret.

The night wasn't over—far from it in fact.

And though he was tired, though he was more than a little spent, Harry was up for anything. So he smiled, took a deep breath, and drove in the directions she dictated; the tail car sliding into place behind them as they emerged from the clearing. The drive back was beautiful; stars shining through the night sky, trees bending slightly in the breeze. And the two of them felt more connected than ever. Before they knew it, he was pulling up outside and immaculate building; clearly alive with people and music inside.
"Look at me..." Maddie commanded gently as he pulled the new car into park out front. Harry killed the ignition and turned to look at her. She smoothed down his buttons, she tugged at his jacket, she checked and double check his pants and his face and his hair. And then she smiled. But for the untied bowtie, there was no hint of their transgression. Maddie turned to look in the mirror; her hair, her makeup and after she reapplied her lipstick, she was ready. "Okay Captain. Are you ready?"

"Can I confess something?" His hand was soft on her legs, his smile sweet as she nodded. "Maybe I'm tired or...maybe I'm just getting old but...there's a large part of me that just wants to take you home and put you in pajamas and fall asleep with you tucked right here..." His hand moved to his chest, right where she loved to lay her head. And every single thing about Maddie softened.

"Harry..." She scooped his hand into both of hers. "After this is over...we can absolutely do that if you want to."

"Promise?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Promise," she nodded, squeezing his hand.

"Okay Your Royal Highness," Harry kissed the top of her hand and dropped it. "Let's find out what awaits us." And just like that he was out of the car, rounding to her side with a confident, sexy swagger. He pulled open her door, offered his hand and helped her from the car.

When Maddie stepped out, she could see the security team had caught up with them, she could hear the slight buzz of music and conversation coming from inside. She looked over her husband one last time, noting how sexy he looked with the loose tie and the rumpled tux—complete with a few specks of paint from his wild expedition. And then she tucked her hand in his arm and they began up the stairs.

"Madeline," he called out to her as they walked. "Thank you for tonight."

"You're welcome," she tucked in closer to him.

"And you must know..." He reached for the handle to the door. "You're the best fucking Bond girl in history."

"Ha!" Her head tossed back as she laughed. "Exactly how many Bond girls have you had Captain?" Harry laughed then, shaking his head and pulling on the door.

"Just you baby. Just you." With wide, matching smiles, they stepped forward into the revelry. And it was just what Maddie had hoped it would be.

All of their friends were there, most of their generation of the family and there was music—striking up a fanfare when they entered, drawing applause from the already tipsy and raucous group. There was food and an open bar and best of all, there was Harry; happy and satisfied and so incredibly complete. There was only one thing in the world that could have made him happier—and there was a good chance he and Maddie had taken care of that in the front seat of his new Aston Martin. He chuckled to himself at that.

His life was complete.

As he stepped into the room, Maddie's hand still in his, he made it a point to mark this moment.
Even as Bishop and Ella rushed forward to hug them. Even as his brother made wise cracks at the state of his tux. Even as Beatrice pressed kisses to his cheeks. This had already been a chart-topping birthday and he knew—even as everything moved around him—it was going to be one he remembered for the rest of his life.
Chapter 131

As they moved into October, embedded in the London fall, Maddie couldn’t believe she had only been married to Harry for four months. It felt like they had been doing this back and forth for so long—it felt old hat. Their life, though well publicized and chronicled, was relatively simple. And incredibly happy.

He would put in time on base. She would go to events; ribbon cuttings, celebrations. She would make speeches and pose for photos and poke light fun at her husband. And the people continued to fall in love with her. He would come home on the weekends or for extending breaks; and they would go out together—for work and for play. He would miss her terribly and she would cope with the separation by spending time with Ella; helping her prepare for the reception they were having, helping her shop for baby stuff, helping her turn Bishop's former Bachelor Pad into a family home.

And she would grow increasingly concerned about her sister-in-law. It started small, with her casual observations, the time she had teared up over lunch. Maddie had talked to Harry about it and Harry had listened but dismissed it after they both saw Kate in considerably lighter spirits. But Maddie made a point to keep an eye on her and it all started out small; little, easily justifiable moments that alone amounted to just a passing sadness or upset. But altogether—amounted to a growing concern. She had said something, more than once, to Harry, to Will. But it had faded and Kate seemed to be getting better.

Until one night it all came to a head.

Harry had been home from base for only a few hours. He had showered and dressed in comfortable clothes. Maddie had been feeling sluggish and tired so they had cancelled plans to go out. They were going to have a night in with Bernard's pizza and beer and a movie they had finally both agreed on. And just as they slipped into relaxation mode, just as Maddie had snuggled up on the couch next to him, the phone rang.

And changed everything.

"Hello?" Harry answered it, winking at the scowl Maddie sent to him as she reached to pause the movie they had just started. Just as she opened her mouth to mumble a groan of a protest, he stiffened next to her. His eyes flew wide and his tone shifted completely. "Wait. Will. What do you mean she's...Yeah. Yes. We're on our way." Harry rose to his feet and turned to a confused Maddie. "Come on. Something's going on with Kate..."

"What?" Maddie's heart jumped in her chest as she stood, watching Harry as he seemed to move with a frantic nature; looking for shoes and keys. "Harry..."

"I don't know," he shook his head. "But they are at their apartment and Will needs us over there right now."

"Did he say what it was?" Maddie slipped on her shoes and hurried towards the door. Harry ran his hand over his face into his hair and reached for the handle.

"No. No he didn't but he sounded...God Maddie, he sounded really scared."

"Okay," her hand ran along his arm, seeing the fear in his eyes. "Hey. It's okay. Come on, let's go
find out what's going on."

In a quick, brisk clip, Maddie and Harry moved across the lawn. The closer they drew to Will and Kate's, the more panicked Harry looked; his eyes wide and his hands fidgeting together in front of him. He felt Maddie's hand steady on his arm as they stepped up to the door. With a small smile in her direction, a smile that was meant to thank her for being there, he knocked on the door and his attentions re-focused.

"Will," he called out; his voice low but urgent. "It's us." He knocked again and the door swung open and when Maddie looked up at her brother-in-law she could see the visual representation of what she was sure Harry heard in his brother's voice.

He was distraught.

His eyes were wide and scattered. And scared. With a wobbly voice and shaky hands, he stepped to the side. "Come in." They were all silent as they hurried inside and the second the door shut, Will's shoulders slumped and Harry moved towards his brother. He was a mess.

"What's going on?" Harry seemed to grow bigger than his big brother as he looked around them; taking control. "Where's Kate?"

"She's..." Will gulped, his eyes flashing to Maddie for a brief second before they moved back to his brother. "She's locked in the bathroom." He blinked and pressed his lips together for a moment, his entire face flexing with the stress. "With Arthur."

Three Weeks Earlier

The news of Kate's surgery dropped one chilly Autumn Monday and suddenly the entire world knew the horrific details of her struggled labor, of Arthur's tension filled delivery. Suddenly the entire world knew the sad, final outcome.

Arthur would be an only child. There would be no 4th or 5th "in line" from the Cambridge household. Maddie made it a point to call Kate that day; made it a point to track her down in Anglesey in order to offer support and love and a friend who wasn't talking about what everyone else was talking about.

When the announcement was made, the Palace asked for privacy, asked for understanding—asked for people to embrace their humanity and allow the young Duchess and her family to recover from the events and to continue on with their new, wonderful family. And at first, the world did just that. The articles were sympathetic; painting the closest to the truth—the sadness that came with it. The loss.

And then the speculations began. Kate had known they would come, she had predicted it long before the news dropped. And she had been right. There were articles written, news segments produced and the internet was amok with discussion and debate. People may have been well-meaning when they asked their questions, but they hurt all the same. Maddie would never, in her entire life, forget the moment Kate looked up from a stack of magazines and tabloids and blinked widely as she asked. "Do you think it was something I did?"

And though Maddie launched right into all of the reasons that wasn't possible, though Maddie moved to sit on the floor next to Kate, her eyes meeting and locking with the beautiful brunette's, though she was strong and passionate in her rebuttal, Maddie could see it.
It didn't work.

No matter what she said, Kate was already going down that rabbit hole. She was already questioning and blaming and there was nothing any of them could do about it.

Present time

"What do you mean she's locked in the bathroom with Arthur?" Harry's voice grew louder as it registered in his brain.

"I mean..." Will's voice was harsh; stressed. "I mean she's in the fucking bathroom with Arthur and the door is fucking locked."

"She won't let you in?" Harry knew the answer, but he had to ask.

"No," Will gulped at the lump in his throat. "She will barely talk to me. She's crying and upset and..." He took a breath and his eyes swung to his sister-in-law. "She asked me to call Maddie. She said...she said she's the only one she would speak to."

"Oh my God..." Harry breathed; his hand rubbing at the back of his neck.

"What happened?" Maddie didn't blink, didn't flinch; her mind shifting gears.

"She thinks I'm going to take Arthur from her," Will tried to explain. "We started talking about how she's been acting lately; depressed and withdrawn and I told her I thought she might need some help and..." He choked up. "And she panicked and told me I wasn't going to take her....I wasn't going to take her baby and send her away and..."

"Where is she?" Maddie's voice was soft and comforting, even as the two men grew more anxious and scattered.

"I would never do that, Maddie," Will's eyes rose to Maddie's; serious and genuine. "I would never...I just want her to get better and..."

"Where is she Will?" Maddie stepped forward, resting her hand on his arm.

"She's in the bathroom off of Arthur's room and..." Before he could finish, Maddie was moving; her steps steady and purposeful as she walked down the hall; Harry and Will right behind her. Pushing into the room, she didn't even look back at the boys as she stepped right up to the door.

With soft knuckles to the wood, Maddie took a deep breath and called out. "Kate? Kate...it's me. Maddie. Will called and said you wanted to see me. And I'm here. Kate..." Maddie put a smile to her lips, knowing that people could tell the difference in a voice said with a smile and that said with a frown. "Kate. I'm here."

Two Weeks Earlier

"Harry..." Maddie called out into their bedroom as she stepped out of the shower; a bathrobe tugged snugly around her, a towel in her hair.

"Yes?" He called back over his shoulder; shedding his watch, his ring, his wallet and dropping them on the dresser.
"Tonight at dinner..." Maddie moved into their room, sitting down on their bed as she continued to dry her hair. "Did you think that Kate seemed a little...off?"

"Off?" His voice sounded twisted, just like his face. "What do you mean off?"

"I mean..." She took a deep breath and leaned back onto her pillows. "She made very little conversation, she really didn't meet my eyes. She barely laughed at your jokes..."

"Is that really the new standard for determining somebody's mental stability?" Harry chuckled and turned to face her; his shirt untucked as his hands worked the buttons.

"Come on," Maddie grinned. "I'm being serious. I'm a little worried about Kate."

"Personally worried or professionally worried?" Harry's smiled faded a bit as he studied his wife.

"Both," she shrugged. "Personally, definitely but...tonight my professional feelers went up and...I don't know. I'm just a little worried about her."

"Well, did you want me to check with Will?" He crossed his arms over his chest.

"No, no," Maddie shook her head. "Thank you though." She smiled up at him, tossing her towel to the end of the bed. "Are you going to take a shower?"

"I am," he nodded, shrugging out of his shirt as the topic of Kate was all but dismissed. At least for the night.

The very next day, Maddie called her up and made lunch plans for later that week. And it was those plans, that meeting, that made Maddie press forward with her concerns.

Present time

"Maddie?" Kate's voice was small and weak and it made Maddie's heart ache for her friend in pain. "Are you really here?"

"I'm right outside the door Kate." Maddie's eyes glanced to Harry and Will, standing near the doorway to the room; seemingly afraid or at the least uncertain about stepping in. "Are you okay in there?"

"No..." Her voice hitched with sobs and Maddie saw Will move into the room; Harry right behind him with a stalling hand to his arm.

"What do you mean, Kate? Are you hurt?" Maddie held up her hand and gave Will a small, reassuring smile.

"No," she answered and everyone in the room took a breath. "I'm just...God Maddie. What if I'm losing my mind?"

"Oh honey..." Maddie shook her head. "You're not losing your mind. I promise. Listen...is Arthur in there with you?"

"Yes," she answered. "I just...he needs his mother..."
"Of course he does," Maddie agreed.

"And I'm afraid that..." Kate grew more and more teary as she spoke. "I'm afraid Will thinks I'm crazy and I'm afraid he'll take my baby and send me off and I'll never see him and...Maddie...I'm not okay..."

Maddie met Will's eyes across the room and she wanted to cry; for Will, for Kate, for their family. "Okay," she reigned in her own emotions. "Okay. Kate...is Arthur okay? He's in there with you and I just want to make sure he's okay. Is he okay?"

"Yes," Kate answered quickly. "I would never hurt him."

"I know that," Maddie was fast with the assurances. "I know you would never hurt him. Will knows you would never hurt him. I just wanted to check on him, make sure he was okay."

"He's sleeping..." Kate sighed heavily. "He's...he's finally sleeping." And Maddie could hear it in her voice; the exhaustion, the depression, the stress.

"Good," she offered sweetly. "Good. Let's let him sleep. Listen Kate...I'm a little worried about you in the bathroom and me out here. It's hard to talk to you and I know you called me over here to talk. Do you think...I don't know. Do you think you could come out here with me?"

"No." Her reply was strong and swift.

"Okay," Maddie accepted that, even though the two brothers were itching for more. "What if...what if I come in there with you?"

"In the bathroom?" That seemed to throw Kate just a bit, bringing something else into her mind other than the despair she was sitting in.

"Yeah," Maddie allowed the tiniest of laughs. "What do you say? Can I come in with you and Arthur?"

There was a long, pregnant pause as they waited for her response. Maddie looked to Will and Harry, both with their fingers in their mouths; chewing at their fingernails as they watched it unfold from this side of the door.

"Maddie?" Kate called.

"Yes?" Maddie snapped her eyes back to the door.

"Will you promise me something?"

"What would you like me to promise you?" She wanted to know before she made that kind of commitment.

"Promise me it will be just you? Promise me you won't bring Will or Harry?" Maddie caught the pain that flashed across Will's eyes and she hurt for him too. But knowing she needed to get inside, she nodded.

"I promise you. It will be just me." Her eyes locked with Will's and he nodded. He really would do anything to help his wife, including being left out.
"Okay..." Kate agreed. "Okay. You can come in."

"Thank you Kate," Maddie sighed, looking up to the boys and waving them away. And she got it, she knew how hard it was for either of them to step away from this moment. She knew how hard it must be for Will to be shushed away. But this wasn't about him. This was about Kate. And she needed Kate to let her inside. So the boys stepped out of the room, out of sight—though Maddie would bet money they were still right around the corner.

And then she heard it; the rattle of the doorknob, the click of the lock. She turned around to watch, moving a small smile to her lips. Kate pulled the door open just a bit and peeked out; wanting to make sure Maddie had held true to her word. And when she saw that she had, she pulled the door open wider.

"Come on in," she whispered and stepped aside. And Maddie did; quickly and confidently and Kate shut the door behind her.

The first thing Maddie did was look her over; head to toe assessment. Her hair was askew and her eyes were puffy from crying and she looked thin—way too thin; even for her. But that was it. She was dressed; clean and pressed. And she wasn't hurt. Maddie felt great relief at that.

And then she looked to Arthur. He was there, snuggled up in his comfy little chair with a pacifier in his mouth, sleeping—just like Kate had said he was.

"Look at him," Maddie let her voice rise just a bit, hoping the men on the other side of the door were listening. "Sleeping soundly." She stroked his little hand and then turned to face Kate. "Okay sister..." Maddie offered a friendly smile. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

One Week Earlier

As Maddie made her way through St. James Palace, she realized that this was really the first time she had ever come into the offices to meet with Will. She had been there to see Harry before. She had been there to do some work herself. But she had yet to come with the specific purpose of seeing her brother-in-law. And she wouldn't be coming to see him, coming to take time from his day, if it weren't important.

And it was important.

She had come straight from lunch with Kate; straight from their Kensington Apartment. She had been there with Kate; Kate who had dark eyes and seemed to be only half engaged in their conversation, in what was happening around her. She had been there when the news had arrived about a new baby to be expected in the Tindall home. As happy as Maddie was to hear the news about Mike and Zara, as much as she wanted to celebrate another little bundle of cuteness coming into her new family, all she caught in that moment was the way Kate's face shifted. The way her eyes grew hazy and focused far off, the way her lips turned down just a fraction before she forced that hollow smile.

And Maddie knew.

Something was wrong with Kate and she needed some help. Maddie asked a few questions, she took a few mental notes but when she broached the subject with Kate, she shutdown and withdrew. For fear of alienating her, Maddie backed out. She knew that Kate wasn't of immediate threat to herself or anyone else, so she backed up. She let Kate know she was there for her if she needed her and she moved the conversation away from the subject of babies.
At least for the time being. Maddie knew enough to know that Kate needed to speak to somebody. But she also knew that it couldn't be her.

So she was on her way to see Will. Harry was on base so she couldn't talk to him about it and what she really wanted to know was who she should refer Kate too. Who the brothers trusted to see somebody they loved, who they trusted to hear those deeply held secrets; fears. So there she was at St. James Palace, on her way to see Will.

"Your Royal Highness," his assistant rose to his feet; his head falling in a small bow when he saw her.

"Good afternoon," Maddie smiled warmly. "I'm so sorry for the last minute call."

"It's no bother," the young man smiled. "He had some free time this afternoon anyway. And he told me to send you right in."

"Oh thank you," Maddie nodded and moved forward; following him as he pulled open the door for her.

"The Duchess is here to see you," he alerted Will to his new visitor and stepped away; closing the door behind him.

"The Duchess," Will threw his charming smile to her as he rounded his desk. "Fancy."

"I think so," Maddie chuckled.

"Come on in," he waved her further into the room. "To what do I owe this visit?" He was happy to see her, not having had much alone time with his sister-in-law. "It sounded urgent over the phone."

"It is," Maddie nodded, schooling her features to calm and collected. "I was just at lunch with Kate..."

"That's right," he pointed to her, taking a seat across from her in the sitting area. "She told me she was having lunch with you."

"Yes," Maddie smiled. "Listen...I know this may not be my place but, I'm worried about Kate."

"Worried?" His forehead creased and his smile faded just a bit.

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "I think she might be experiencing some depression. I've noticed it since after Arthur's birth and when the stories began to drop..." She trailed off, watching him process it. "I was there today when Zara called with the news and the look on her face was..." Maddie waved her hand and took a breath. "I'm worried about her. As a professional. I think she needs to talk to somebody. I think she needs to see a doctor..."

"A Shrink?" Will's eyebrows lifted.

"A therapist," Maddie offered. "A psychologist. I would be happy to recommend somebody but I didn't know if maybe you already had one that the family uses or..."

"You think she's sick?" He settled further into his chair; his mind at work processing the new information.
"I think she needs to see somebody. I think that she might be depressed. I think that the surgery and the loss and the pressure...I don't know," Maddie took a deep breath. "I think it's a lot to handle and I think that talking to somebody might help her handle it."

"Did you talk to her about this?"

"I did, but only a little bit. Before I jump into it, I want to have a plan, somebody for her to call but I just didn't know who to refer her to or..." Maddie stopped. "I'm sorry. Is this way out of line?"

"No..." Will shook his head. "We all have to look out for each other, right?"

Maddie nodded and continued. "I would have said something to her if I had known where to send her...I will be happy to talk with her. I just need to know who she can..."

"Sure, sure," Will nodded, a wave of his hand dismissing that. "I can find the name of somebody but...would you mind if I were the one to talk to her? If I spoke to her about it?" His voice was soft and his eyes were kind and Maddie could tell that he was worried about his wife. "I've noticed she's been...down, a bit."

"You have?"

"Yes," he looked down at his hands in his lap. "I just thought it was the baby blues or something she would pull out of. I had no idea how serious it was."

"Oh and I don't know for sure either," Maddie leaned forward, seeing the guilt flash across his face. "I just want her to talk to somebody."

"You got it," Will nodded. "I'll get some numbers and I'll speak to her about it this week. Fair enough?"

"More than fair," Maddie nodded. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

"Anytime, Maddie," he smiled to her. "Thank you for coming to me...and for looking out for her."

"Of course. And...if you need anything from me; names or numbers...or support...just let me know."

Present Time

"Will came home today with a list of doctors to see because he thinks I'm going crazy." 

"Did he say that?" Maddie asked. "That he thought you were going crazy?"

"No," she shook her head. "But I know he thinks that."

"Do you think that?" Maddie asked, leaning back against the counter that Arthur's little chair was sitting on. "Do you think you're going crazy?"

Kate's jaw slackled, her mouth opening with the quick reply but she stopped. Her eyes glanced away from Maddie and filled with tears. "Sometimes I think so."

"Yeah..." Maddie breathed, noting the shaky way Kate answered her. "Can you tell me more
about those times?"

"Right now," Kate laughed through her tears; wiping at her cheeks with the back of her hand. "I feel that way right now. I...I can't stop crying and I don't know why. I feel like my brain is just...scrambled sometimes. I feel like I'm a bad..." Her face twisted up as the sobs took her over for a moment.

"You're not a bad mom," Maddie jumped ahead.

"But I..."

"You're not a bad mom." She repeated, focusing on Kate as she shook her head, as she tried to calm her breathing.

"Maddie..."

"You're not a bad mom."

"But I am!" She yelled at Maddie, her entire face opening up. "I am a bad mom! I haven't been able to be the mother he deserves since the day he was born! I wasn't able to hold him because I was in recovery! I wasn't able to nurse him because I had too many drugs in my system! Now I'm not able to sleep or eat or pacify him or soothe him! Do you know what that's like?! To not be able to help him quiet and feel better?! And look at me Maddie! I'm locked in the bathroom with my baby like I'm..." She caught herself; caught her reflection, caught her voice and she stopped. Her face calmed, her voice evened and Maddie watched as Kate's eyes drew blank again. "I'm losing my mind."

"You're not," Maddie shook her head.

"How would you know?" Kate retorted without really thinking.

"I have a PhD in Clinical Psychology from Columbia University. I'm a Licensed Professional Counselor. I'm certified in Couples and Family Therapy, not to mention children and individuals and..."

"Okay," Kate held up her hand.

"I'm telling you that you're not losing your mind. You're not," she took a deep breath and jumped. "But you do need some help."

"What kind of help?" Kate's eyes flashed wide.

"I think you need to see somebody. I think you need to see a professional."

"Oh so you're on their side?" Kate's arms folded over her chest, her jaw hardening.

"Whose side?" Maddie asked.

"Will's. Harry's."

"I'm worried about you Kate. I love you and I care about you and I'm worried. I want to help you get better. And that's exactly what Will and Harry want."
"He wants me to see some palace doctor who can report back to him and the Queen and..."

"Is that what's holding you up?" Maddie caught the way her voice twisted around the word 'palace'.

Kate took a long moment before she answered; debating within herself the answer to that question. She trusted Maddie, she really did. She, out of everyone, understood the pressures that came with this role; the expectations. And she had kept her secrets before.

"Maybe," Kate whispered.

"You would talk to somebody if they weren't on a list from the palace?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows.

"I..." Kate gulped and looked down at her hands. "I want to stop being sad, Maddie. I want to stop feeling...unhappy."

"I know you do, Kate," Maddie pushed away from the counter, moving towards her friend. "Would you talk to somebody if they weren't on a list from the palace?"

"Yes." She whispered, her eyes clinging to Maddie's as though they were holding her up.

"Tonight?" Maddie pressed forward, wanting to get the process started.

"I..." Kate grew a little shaky, her mind spiraling a bit in her head. "Really?"

"Really," Maddie nodded. "If I could get somebody here...would you talk to them? Tonight?"

"Would you stay here? With me...and Arthur?" Kate was still teary, still nervous; still a little anxious about Arthur disappearing from her arms—even though she knew rationally that would never happen here.

"Yes. Absolutely yes," Maddie nodded. "I could call somebody I know..."

"Somebody you trust?" Kate cut in. "Somebody you would trust with all of your secrets?"

"Yes," Maddie answered; quick and certain. "I could call them and have them come over right now. I could sit with Arthur and you could talk to my friend and Kate...we can start feeling better tonight. We can start that tonight. What do you say? Will you talk to my friend?"

"Yes." In Kate's eyes Maddie could see a trust, a reliance...a faith that she wasn't about to break.

When Maddie stepped from the bathroom, Will and Harry who had both been leaning against the crib, stood to attention. And when they saw that she had Arthur in her arms, they both moved forward.

"Is he okay?" Will reached out to the baby, but Maddie halted in her tracks.

"Hold on," Maddie held out her hand. "Listen to me for just a second," she looked to Will, turning just a bit so that Arthur was tucked in her arms. "He's absolutely perfect. I just need you to listen to me for a moment."
"Maddie?" Harry was confused at her positioning.

"I want you both to understand that Kate is...she's in a really fragile place right now and for whatever reason, she's choosing to trust me with helping her and hear me when I say this..." She leveled her gaze to Will's. "She needs some help. She's willing to get it, she's willing to start now and she was willing to let me bring Arthur out to show you he's okay and...to change his diaper." Maddie took a breath. "But she wanted me to make sure that you...I'm sorry..." Maddie softened, her eyes welling up a bit as she looked to her brother-in-law. "I'm sorry. She wanted me to make sure that you didn't take Arthur away from her."

"Oh Jesus Christ," Harry breathed; his hands running through his hair.

"But I would never do that," Will insisted; emphatically, passionately. "Maddie. I want my wife to be better. I don't want to take him away and send her off and..."

"I know that," Maddie nodded with a smile. "Will, I promise you I know that. And she does too, deep down. But right now she's trusting me to bring him right back to her. Please...I know this is hard but if you make me violate her trust in me..." Maddie shook her head. "I don't know what happens next."

Will looked from Maddie to Arthur who, despite all that was happening around him, was smiling and comfy in his aunt's warm arms. With a heavy nod and a breath of resignation, Will stood down. "Fine." He blinked and took a step back. "Fine. Whatever you think is best."

"Thank you," Maddie swallowed and moved forward to Arthur's changing table and went right to work. "Harry..." She called to her husband, who moved his focus from his brother to her. "I need your help for a second."

"Yes?" He moved closer to her, in awe at what was happening; nervous and upset for his brother, but amazed at the way she had taken over this moment.

"I need you to take my phone and call Gerald at St. Joe's. I worked with him when I was there and I need you to tell him that you're my husband. Tell him I'm calling in a favor and then..." She finished up the diaper change. "Then you do whatever you need to do to get him here."

"Wait," Will stepped up again; a flash of nervous taking over his face. "I have a list of people who she can see and..."

"She doesn't want to see somebody on your list," Maddie lifted Arthur back up into her arms. "She's afraid of...listen. I know it doesn't make sense to you and...that's okay for now. She doesn't want to see somebody on your list but...she agreed to see somebody I know."

"Somebody who hasn't been cleared by the palace," Will stood tall; protective as he countered Maddie. "Somebody who hasn't been vetted, somebody who hasn't proven loyalty to keeping our secrets and..."

"Somebody who I trust," Maddie spoke up. "Will...I know you're afraid right now; for Kate and your family and I get that. And I know that you don't fully trust me with this..."

"It's not that I don't trust you," he tried to clarify but Maddie continued.

"This man is a professional."
"And this wouldn't be the first time our privacy was violated by a professional," Will's gaze narrowed as he remembered all of the times their secrets had been sold. And while that was one thing, the thought of somebody selling out his wife for cheap entertainment made his blood boil.

"I trust him Will. I really do. And he's really great with depression; he's really great with trauma work. It's his specialty and...I would tell him my secrets." She took a deep breath. "I know this is scary and I know it's hard for you to trust and I get it but right now, your wife is trusting me with this; with your son and her well-being and...I would tell him all of my secrets. I would tell him all of Harry's secrets."

Will watched Maddie for a good long second and then he looked to his brother, their eyes locking as a silent communication passed between them. "Harry?" He lifted his eyebrows and Maddie could see—how much they loved each other, how much they protected each other. She just hoped Will understood that was what she was trying to do; protect them. Harry understood and Harry trusted her with his whole life. So he nodded to Will and Will took a deep breath before he turned to Maddie. "Okay. Okay..." He turned away then, his voice fading as he retreated; relinquishing control. "We can use your guy."

"Thank you," Maddie wished that she could hug him, wished that she could make him feel better. But her first priority was Kate. "Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry stepped up; falling into action as he picked up her phone.

"Call Gerald from St. Joe's and get him here. Tell him I owe him." She caught her husband's eyes then and she smiled reassuringly. "It's going to be okay. Okay?"

"Okay," he breathed and, with a flicker of a smile, he turned from her and dialed.

And Maddie, with a changed and smiling Arthur tucked in her arms, slipped back into the bathroom with Kate, where she would wait for Gerald to arrive.

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"How long has it been?" Will groaned into the room from where he sat in a chair; his head tipped back against the cushion, his eyes closed.

"Just over two hours," Maddie's voice was calm and quiet as she rocked a sleeping Arthur in her arms. "They've been in there for two hours."

Gerald had arrived quickly and, seemingly unaffected by the famous faces he encountered, he had moved right to the bathroom door. When Harry called him, telling him he was Maddie's husband, telling him she needed him, he hadn't needed any more explanation. He had come straight over. With very little convincing from Maddie, Kate allowed Gerald into the room with them. It took a little more to convince her to let Maddie step out with Arthur. And it took even more to convince her to step out of the bathroom into the bedroom. But, with Gerald and his warm, friendly voice and Maddie's reassurances, Kate agreed. Maddie went first; asking the brothers to join her in the living room and then, with a leap of faith, Kate stepped into the empty bedroom and took a breath of relief.

She was already feeling better. The fact that everyone in their apartment had done as she had asked, had acted as she hoped—it made her feel less tense; less like somebody was out to get her. So she could settle in and talk to Gerald. And Will, Harry, Maddie, and happy little Arthur had
been waiting together for whatever came next.

"Are you doing okay?" Harry's voice was low and soft as he looked to his wife; knowing it must have all been a drain on her too.

"I'm doing fine," Maddie smiled to him. She was tired, they all were. But it was nothing in comparison with what was happening in the other room.

"Do you want me to rock him for a while?" Harry nodded to his nephew.

"Thanks," she grinned. "But Kate told me to keep him in my arms and..."

"Okay," Harry held his hands up in surrender. So far they had been following Maddie's directives and so far they had been working gloriously. So he was going to continue to follow her. And just as he was about to suggest she let him rub her feet, the door to the nursery opened and Gerald stepped out.

And right behind him was Kate; eyes tired from crying but a small smile on her face. All three of them rose to their feet with caution in their movements. Her eyes slid first to her husband, her emotions for him taking over just a bit.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered shakily.

"It's okay," he took a step towards her but stopped. "It's okay."

"It's not," she shook her head, pressing her lips together to keep from crying. "I'm so sorry I didn't tell you how I was feeling and I'm so sorry I took Arthur and..." Her eyes swung around the room to find her baby boy sleeping in Maddie's arms; just as she had promised. Kate's eyes welled over and she let the tears come, taking deep breaths as they all watched her. "I'm sorry I scared you," she looked up to Will. "It's going to be okay. I...I've talked to Gerald and I'm going to see him again..." She glanced over to Gerald who nodded and smiled. "I'm going to see him once a day for a little bit and then..." She took a deep breath. "We're going to go from there but...I'm sorry I scared you."

"I'm just really happy you're okay," Will's words were tugged by the emotions in his heart and Maddie could see in him the deep love he had for Kate; for his family. Yes, he had royal responsibilities. Yes, someday great weight would rest on his shoulders. But Maddie could tell that none of it was as heavy as the responsibility he felt here. None of it was as big as the love these two held. And it made Maddie want to cry. So she tore her eyes away and looked down at the little boy in her arms.

"I'm not one hundred percent okay," Kate offered. "But I will be." She took a deep breath and let it out; long and slow. "But in the meantime..." She moved to Maddie, lifting Arthur carefully from her arms and turning back to her husband. With wide, trusting eyes, she held him out to him.

"Would you mind taking Arthur to bed while I make plans with Gerald?"

"Of course," Will blinked at the tears, swallowed at the lump, and held out his hands; unbelievably thankful his wife was coming back to him; that he still had his wonderful little family intact. Kate watched as he moved away from her, pulling their son close to his chest as he walked back down the hallway from where she had just come. And then she turned around and took Maddie by surprise; wrapping her arms around her and holding her tightly to her.

"Thank you..." Kate whispered into her blonde hair, blinking at tears. "Thank you for coming
over, thank you for watching out and thank you for...for everything." She choked up then and her
words grew silent and the two women stood in the living room, each embracing the other with
tears on their cheeks.

"Hey..." Maddie's voice croaked as she tried to bring it back. "I'm here. You know that. I've got
your back."

"I know," Kate smiled and pulled away, her hands smoothing to Maddie's cheeks for just a
moment before she released her and they both stepped back.

Letting the room settle for just a moment, Gerald stepped forward and looked to Maddie.
"Catherine and I have discussed meeting once a day for a little while," he pressed his hands
together and his lips tilted up. "But she clearly cannot just walk into my office at St. Joe's."

"Clearly," Maddie nodded, thankful he was the first to broach it, the first to put out that he
understood the sensitive nature of what was happening in that room.

"So I was thinking maybe you and I could start meeting, officially, about the possibility of
working together on a project for our returning veterans," he shrugged. "We've worked together in
the past, it's a cause you've supported for a while now, and I could come to your office..." He
looked to Kate. "Where Catherine could just happen to be."

"That makes sense," Maddie nodded and looked to Harry; wanting his support.

"I think that would work," he nodded.

"Would you mind?" Kate looked to Maddie. "Would you mind if we used you that way?"

"I wouldn't mind at all," Maddie shook her head with a smile. "I think that it's a really good plan."

"Excellent," Gerald smiled and looked to Kate. "Tomorrow at eleven?"

"Tomorrow at eleven," she nodded.

"And you know what to do if you have any more issues tonight?"

"I do," she brought her hands to her chest; covering her heart as she looked at him. "I can't thank
you enough for coming out."

"You don't have to thank me," he shook his head and smiled wide. "You're going to be okay if I
go?"

"I am," she nodded; her head already sitting higher, her shoulders already sitting straighter.

"Good," he held his hand out to shake Kate's and then he turned to Maddie. "If you need me, call
me. It doesn't matter the time."

"Thank you Gerald," Maddie stepped forward, hugging his shoulders, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

"Of course," he nodded; happy to help. Then with a handshake to Harry and one to Will who had
just returned, he excused himself and left the four of them.

And then it was Maddie and Harry's turn to take leave. They hugged and kissed and it wasn't lost
on Maddie that when Will hugged her, he held her tighter, he held her longer and he thanked her again and again. Certain they were going to be okay, certain Kate felt safe and secure, Maddie and Harry stepped from the apartment and on their way back to their own home.

They walked in silence across the cold, dark lawn; Harry's warm hand rubbing the back of her neck as his arm slid around her. His lips pressing to the side of her head as he tugged her into his side; their feet falling in step with each other.

When they stepped inside their home, the pizza sat cold on the coffee table, their beers had warmed, and the movie was still paused—right at the beginning.

"So..." Harry's voice was soft as he watched her step inside, shutting and locking the door behind him. "Did you want to finish the movie? I can warm up the pizza and..."

And his lips were pressed into silence by hers. Overcome with her own emotion from the night, with the kind of weight that came with taking on somebody else's feelings, with being the steady in a time of chaos, Maddie moved into his space, against his body with a heavy, deep passion. And Harry caught her; wrapping his arms around her opening his mouth over hers. With a moan she pressed closer and with a groan, his hands moved over her body. It was going to be one of those nights; those nights when they lost their clothes in the entryway, when they couldn't pull their lips from the other, when they barely made it up the stairs, when the passion between them could light the house on fire. It was going to be one of those nights when tears pressed from her eyes as he pressed into her, when he held her so close to him she could feel his heartbeat, she could feel his deep, heavy breaths as though they were her own. It was going to be one of those nights when his fingers held tight in her hair, holding her face to his as they both found an explosive end to an intense night, to all of the emotion that had flowed in and around them.

That night, hours after they had arrived at Will and Kate's, long after they had returned home, Maddie and Harry wrapped their bodies around the other and, feeling safe and secure and the kind of relief that comes with pulling somebody back from the edge, they drifted to sleep; together.

It was only the beginning of recovery for Kate. It was only the beginning of this new chapter in the Cambridge's lives. It would be a long road; one of understanding and patience. One that involved Kate taking a step back from public life for a bit, one that would involve Maddie taking a step forward. But as they moved on, as they all moved on, not one of them could deny the way they all felt a little closer; a little strong, a little more impenetrable.

And it was a good thing; looking back, despite it all, this night would serve a great purpose. Because as heavy as things had felt, their lives were about to get heavier and when it all came down, they would find themselves holding tight to each other, to this bond that had only been strengthened on this night that only the four of them, and Gerald, would ever know about.
When Maddie was younger, she had a music box. It was a small, ornately painted box with a lid that snapped open and closed with a force that could take fingers off—of this she was certain. But the inside was her absolute favorite part. When the music began to play, a series of small, paper people would stand up and begin to move about on a track in an intricate dance. The paper people were beautiful; hand painted and delicate and she loved the way they moved about the box, over the soft pink fabric that lined the inside. When she was younger, she had imagined a day long in the future when she might be in a moment like the one in her box. Beautiful music, people dressed in lovely soft tones and smiles and a feeling of carefree blissfulness. And that was very much what her life had become. This intricate dance among beautiful people. And everything about it made her smile, seemed to fit within the dance she was doing—even the harder points.

As they drew further and further into October, they had another tiny setback. Maddie finished up another week of her period, another week of realization that she and Harry were yet to join nearly everyone around them in being parents. This time it wasn't as difficult to absorb and this time Harry made quick and serious promises to double his efforts. Though Maddie joked about needing to start taking vitamins and taking up yoga, she loved him so much for being so great to her in those moments. So she wallowed for a few minutes and then she sucked it up and carried on.

And before she knew it, she and Harry were on their way to Bishop's father's country estate for Bishop and Ella's reception. It was going to be quite the affair; Tattler's list of Who's Who were turning out in droves to celebrate the marriage of the only son of Sir Ian Bishop the Second. And Their Royal Highnesses were at the top of that list. And, given the fact that she was not pregnant, Maddie had every intention of tying one on.

It had been a long few weeks. Since Kate's near spiral that night in the bathroom, Maddie had found herself stepping up more with her royal duties; attending a few events with Will in place of Kate, being at St. James Palace for her 'meetings' with Gerald. But the happy point was that Kate was doing better. She would have moments of back sliding, moments of weakness, but overall she seemed happier; brighter and it never really neared what it had been that night. Maddie only imagined that she would continue to blossom and recover as time passed and her sessions continued.

But this night, this night of celebration and revelry, this night was going to be a chance to kick back, have some champagne, flirt with her husband and catch up with old friends. And Maddie was more than looking forward to it. So was the handsome man sitting next to her; smiling wide as he watched her watch the scenery pass by them.

"You look amazing," Harry held her fingers in his as they drove through the countryside.

"Thank you," she turned her smile to him; unsure if he had forgotten that he had told her that already or if he was just trying to secure himself a spot in her bed for the night. Either way, she would take it. "You look quite dashing yourself."

"Dashing?" He lifted an eyebrow; the beginnings of a chuckle on his lips.

"Isn't that the appropriate word for a man in a morning suit?" She grinned, looking him over from head to toe.

"Maybe," Harry smirked and shrugged, content and at ease as they neared the estate. He turned
his eyes to her neck and nodded. "It looks beautiful on you."

Maddie's eyes grew soft and her fingers rose to her neck, running lightly over the pearls, circling the sapphire. His mother's necklace—her necklace—he had given her in the US. It went perfectly with the dress she had chosen and he was right. As much as she didn't like blowing her own horn, the necklace looked beautiful with her outfit and it made her feel feminine and elegant.

"Thank you," she took in a breath and squeezed his hand. "I'm happy to have a reason to bring it out."

And what a reason it was.

Bishop and Ella were married. The estate was immaculate and Maddie knew from the planning that the reception was going to be elegant and rich and full of all of the pomp one might expect at "The Social Event of the Season". The buildup had been quite the turn of events and Maddie had enjoyed watching it all unfold. When the news hit that Ian Bishop the Third had married, women across the country were surprised, the business community he worked with sent congratulations from all over the world. And, as it turned out, Bishop had a small cult following of fans who had seen him out with Harry throughout the years and had developed their own little club. Watching Ella discover the disappointment that hit some and the excitement that hit others was comical for Maddie—especially after her own engagement and marriage.

But this night was all about celebration. And that's exactly what the air was full of when Maddie and Harry finally stepped from their car. Maddie thanked the driver, linked her arm through Harry's and offered a smile for the press that were stationed across the street from the Bishop Family estate. Of course the press was there; the famous faces were abundant. But even better for Maddie and Harry, there were familiar faces. Khenda and Collins assured them they would be making the trip and that made the night just that much more special; a reunion of sorts.

As guests stepped inside the home, they were greeted with friendly attendants; taking their coats, directing them further inside. With bright smiles and high spirits, the newlyweds, along with their parents, were lined up to greet all of the guests. Bishop looking sharp as ever and Ella looking blissful and happy and more settled and at peace than Maddie had ever seen her before.

"You came!" Bishop turned to Maddie first with mock surprise and a gleam of wicked in his eyes. "You do love us." He kissed her cheeks and released her, turning to offer the same love to Harry.

"Hi there beautiful," Maddie smiled to her best friend, taking in her hair and her dress and the brilliant smile on her face. "You look stunning."

"Thank you," Ella kissed Maddie's cheeks. "I feel pretty good. And you..." She scanned Maddie with wide eyes. "That's a great necklace. Is it new?"

"To me," Maddie grinned; knowing by the look on Ella's face that she had recognized it. Of course she had. "It's been in the family awhile."

"It's beautiful," Ella whispered.

"Thank you," Maddie whispered back, loving that she had a friend who could be grounded and giddy at the same time.

"Speaking of family," Bishop cut in as Harry moved to greet Ella. "When are you two ever going to get on board with the rest of us and have yourselves a baby?"
"Bishop!" Ella swatted lightly at his arm as she stepped out of Harry's.

"No, no," Maddie's lips pulled higher. "That's a fair question. I'm thinking maybe..." She tossed a wink and a sexy glance to her husband. "Now. Now? What do you say Captain, should we find ourselves a room?"

"I have heard it's the thing to do at receptions these days," Harry's hand slid around her waist, smirk in place. "I'm in."

"Lovely," Ella rolled her eyes just so as Bishop barked out a laugh.

"Hey, you know what..." He leaned closer to the both of them, dropping his voice as his hand waved behind him. "You go ahead and take your pick."

"Nice," Maddie shook her head with a laugh.

"Anything for the cause," Bishop joked. With another round of hugs and some all too short words of congratulations, they were moving down the line.

First they found themselves saying hello to Ella's mother who looked happier than the last time Maddie had seen her. She seemed to feel a little out of place among all of the lavishness that surrounded them. Maddie made it a point to be extra sweet with her and to check in with her that night—she would hope that somebody would do the same for her mother. As they moved further along in the line, Maddie paused for just a moment.

"You okay?" Harry was right behind her; hand at her waist, breath at her ear.

"Mmm," she nodded, her lips smiling as she leaned closer to him. "That man. Is that Bishop's father?" Harry glanced up inconspicuously and nodded.

"It is."

"Jesus..." She whispered, shaking her head as they took a step forward in the line. "That man is incredibly good looking."

"Oh yeah?" Harry's eyebrows shot up, his hand at her waist growing a bit stronger.

"Are you kidding? I can't believe how..." She paused as they inched closer; the guests in front of them taking more time with Bishop's parents. "Oh my God. Is that his mother?"

"Ha!" Harry laughed to himself. "Let me guess, incredibly good looking?"

"Hell yes," Maddie shook her head again. "She's flat out gorgeous."

"Oh God," Harry chuckled; low and rumbly. "Do me a favor. Next time we see Bishop, tell him that...exactly like you just did with those big eyes and that smirk."

"What?" Maddie snickered. "Why?"

"Cause it's going to be amazing I promise." Harry whispered to her just in time for them to step up to Bishop's parents. Maddie watched her husband as he faded into business mode; smile in place as he stretched out his hand. "Mr. Bishop, it's great to see you again Sir."
"Henry," a warm, wide smile spread across the older man’s face and Maddie honestly felt a stir in her stomach at how handsome he was. "I'm so happy you were able to make it."

"Anything for Bishop, Sir." Harry hugged the older man and then turned to Maddie, bringing her into the mix. "This is my wife, Madeline. Maddie, this is Sir Ian Bishop the Second."

"Your wife," when Bishop's father turned to Maddie, his eyes crinkled in the corners as his smile tugged higher. Dropping Harry's hand, he reached for Maddie's. "It's fantastic to meet you, Your Royal Highness." And when that man dropped his head in a small bow, lifting her hand to his lips for a kiss, Maddie was absolutely certain her cheeks had flushed pink.

"Oh wow," she couldn't help herself, couldn't stop the words. It was unnatural. "It's wonderful to meet you too Sir."

Holding her hand in his, he stood tall and took them both in and then turned to the handsome, younger man next to him. "This is my partner Michael," he turned a warm smile to him. "Michael, this is Madeline, the Duchess of Sussex."

"Good to meet you Michael," Maddie smiled to him.

"The pleasure is all mine," the young man took her hand, offered a quick drop of his head, a wide smiled and then turned to greet Harry. "Harry."

"Good to see you again, Michael," Harry hugged the man hello.

And Ian Bishop the Second, took Maddie's eyes back into his smoldering gaze and turned to the tall, beautiful woman standing next to him. Maddie watched as she turned to face them and Maddie honestly wasn't sure who made her more nervous; Bishop's father or his mother. She was stunned nearly into silence. So she smiled and shook hands and watched as Harry hugged the woman close; pressing kisses to her cheeks. As they continued cocktail reception, Maddie noticed the way Harry's cheeks were flushed pink; the way he smiled.

"Look at you," Maddie nudged him lightly. "You're all..." She couldn't find a word so she waved her hand over his face with a grin.

"Please," Harry rolled his eyes, swiping two glasses of champagne from a waiter as he passed.

"You are..." Maddie glanced back at Bishop's mother and then to Harry. "You're acting like...I don't know..." Maddie's eyes narrowed as her mind went to work. "Henry Charles..." Her tone dropped as she took a glass from him.

"What?" He snickered.

"Tell me that woman never slipped you her phone number." 

"Oh God no!" Harry laughed and leaned in to speak only to her. "I slipped her mine."

"Harry!" Maddie nearly choked on the champagne in her mouth. "You did what?!"

"Easy," Harry took a breath. "She never used it."

"You're terrible." Maddie shook her head.
"I'm sorry," he shrugged. "She is just...stunning. I was young and infatuated."

"You would think that best friends' mothers would be off limits," Maddie found great humor in this new revelation.

"They are," Harry agreed, his head shaking as he remembered razzing Bishop about his mother. "Mothers, Sisters, ex-girlfriends..." Harry took a deep breath and shrugged his shoulders. "I just couldn't help myself."

"Yeah..." Maddie sighed, her eyes slipping over to look at Bishop's father. "There's something about those Bishops."

"Exactly," Harry nodded once and then snapped his eyes to her. "Wait. Hold on."

"You started it," Maddie snickered into her champagne glass; loving the reaction she had just garnered from her husband. "Come on Captain, let's find Khenda and Collins." Without giving the Bishops another glance, without acknowledging her husband's territorial stance, Maddie moved further into the party—and Harry followed right behind her. It was going to be a fun night.

Everyone was there; all of their friends from London and beyond. Kiki and Sean were there, well ahead of them in champagne consumption and more than a little tipsy. Leo waved from the bar where he was fetching drinks for Anna and Penelope who were already at their table. Bishop and Ella had been graceful in their seating arrangements, putting Maddie and Harry with their regular group of friends—and adding in Khenda and Collins for good measure.

Swapping her empty champagne flute for a full one from a waiter, Maddie clinked her glass to Harry's and lead the way through the room. No sooner had she spotted their table, no sooner had she seen the white of Collins' toothy smile and the gorgeous kink of Khenda's hair, both of them were on their feet. Khenda was pinching Harry's right cheek as she kissed his left. And Collins was hugging Maddie tight to him, her feet lifting just inches off the ground as her head tossed back in a laugh that came from deep inside of her.

"Oh God," she groaned through her smile as she moved to hug Khenda. "It's so good to see you!"

"I was just thinking the same thing," Khenda held Maddie's face in her hands for just a moment as they shared an endearing smile before they pulled apart. "We saw the coverage of your US tour. You looked amazing."

"Oh thank you," Maddie grinned; realizing it had been entirely too long since she had seen them. "I had a really great time."

"You could tell," Khenda assured her.

"Now..." Maddie glanced around the table as they all took seats; settled in. "Everyone's met at least once, no?"

"Yes," Kiki answered. "At your hen party and then at your wedding."

"Ah yes," Maddie nodded. "God, that seems so long ago." The table chuckled at that. "You know what I mean. A lot has happened."
"Yes," Penelope reached for her wine glass. "For instance, Bishop is married."

"Ha!" Harry laughed, holding his drink out to Sean. "A noble club."

"Cheers," Sean chuckled; clinking and drinking.

"And Ella's having a baby," Maddie turned to Khenda who was smiling wide and brilliant. "Can you believe Ella's having a baby?"

"Before you?" Khenda's gaze grew pointed and her smile stretched. "No, I can't believe it." She leaned forward in her chair a bit, narrowing her gaze to Harry. "I'm actually stunned."

"Hey!" Harry held his hands out. "What would you have me do? Keep her locked up in a bedroom all hours of the day and night? My God." He swallowed a mouthful of champagne and retired his glass, ready for whiskey. "I'm trying my level best, love. Cut a guy a break." His eyes twinkled with laughter as he dropped the words and the chatter at the table stalled for just a moment. Maddie turned wide eyes to him, her lips curling into a smile as she watched him realize what he had just said.

"Hold on..." Collins leaned forward just as the rest of the table erupted in laughter and a smattering of applause.

"Henry Charles..." Maddie shook her head at him.

"Sorry baby," he turned on the charm, his hand sliding to her knee as he leaned closer.

"Get that face away from me," she turned his chin playfully with her fingers.

"Are you two trying?" Kiki's voice dropped low, keeping the conversation at the table.

"Oh God," Maddie moaned into a sigh. "Harry Wales."

"Forgive me?" He lifted his eyebrows to Maddie, focusing only on her as he pulled her hand into his, to his lips for a kiss.

"Would you stop with this?" Maddie rolled her eyes and pinched at his lips. "This sad puppy stuff doesn't work with me."

"Well..." He took a deep breath and pulled his hand into his pocket. "It's a good thing I know what does." Holding out his palm, he offered her a piece of her favorite candy. And despite her very best efforts, it worked.

"Fine," her lips tugged into half a smirk as she plucked the candy from his palm. "I forgive you."

"Yes!" He lifted his hands in the air in victory and, turning back to the table, he very nonchalantly answered all of their questions. "And yes. We're trying."

The laughter, the applause, and the pink to Maddie's cheeks all returned.

"Well, not tonight we aren't," Maddie held up her champagne with a giggle.

Maddie managed to sneak in a few quick questions about Isaiah, about work, before Bishop's
father rose to his feet. As Maddie expected, he exuded charm and charisma as he toasted the newlyweds, as he welcomed Ella and her mother to the family, as he asked guests to join him in his well-wishes. Maddie beamed as she clinked her glass against Harry's and took a sip.

And then it was Bishop's turn. Maddie had known Bishop was happy. She had known that he was over the moon to be married to Ella, to be on the road to fatherhood. But she hadn't known that the speech he gave, the way he spoke of it, would move her to tears. But it did. She sniffed at her tears and took the handkerchief Harry offered her with a warm smile. Dabbing at her eyes, she took a deep breath and rose her glass with Bishop and the rest of the room; toasting his new bride. And his new baby.

True to who Bishop and Ella were, the party went strong and well into the night. Dinner was scrumptious and the cake was amazing and by the time the party was moving into the less inhibited, more dancing part of the evening, Maddie and Harry had both taken in their share of champagne and they were taking full advantage of their friendly, fun-filled table. And when the newlyweds finally made it through their relatives and business associates, when they finally let out a deep breath and joined their favorites, the table burst into applause; hoots and hollers.

"Finally!" Leo sighed, rising to his feet to hug Bishop.

"You look amazing," Khenda kissed Ella's cheeks for the second time that night.

"Oh thank you," Ella smiled sweetly, slipping into the chair Bishop had pulled out for her.

"It's been a lovely night," Maddie looked around. "How are things going?"

"Good," Ella nodded. "I mean...Bishop's mother still hates me but..."

"She doesn't hate you," Bishop interrupted; his hands rubbing over her shoulders. "She's just still in shock."

"She didn't expect you to get married?" Maddie looked up to Bishop.

"I think she expected me to be the Duchess of Sussex," he tossed a wink and smirk in her direction.

"Ha!" Maddie lead the rounds of laughter. "Well I think you missed that train."

"I think so too," Harry nodded emphatically and looked up to his best friend. "What do you say? Whiskey for the groom?"

"God yes," Bishop nodded but held up a finger. "But first, I have one last thing I need to do..." His hands rested on the back of Harry's chair as he leaned down between him and Maddie. "Listen. You can say no, I promise. But there are some people who would like to meet you."

Maddie snickered into her glass and nudged Harry. "Go ahead Captain. Your fans are waiting."

Harry smirked as he shook his head to her; his cheeks already pink.

"Sure," he shrugged. "Why not."

"No, no," Bishop shook his head with a smirk. "They don't want to meet him. They want to meet
"you." He turned his attention to Maddie whose eyes went wide in surprise.

"Me?" A hand fell to her chest as she absorbed it.

"You." Bishop repeated as Harry laughed to himself; loving the look on her face.

"Who?" She was shocked as she glanced around. "Who could possibly want to meet me?"

"Some men I do business with in Peru."

"Okay. Hold on," Harry snapped to attention, his hand raising into the conversation as Maddie giggled just a bit.

"Nice," Ella snickered, nodding to the look on Harry's face.

"Well I suppose I could meet them." Maddie smiled and held her drink out to Harry, mildly amused at the look on his face. "Would you mind watching my drink?" She asked; very well aware of the laughter coming from around the table.

"Where are these men?" Harry looked to Bishop who was already laughing at his best friend.

"Aw come on man. You've been meeting sorority sisters for years. Can't let your wife meet some of my business associates?" His eyes twinkled as he poked at Harry.

"Yeah Harry," Maddie teased. "You've been meeting sorority sisters for years."

"Wait a second..." Harry shook his head.

"Here..." Bishop pulled his flask from his pocket and slipped it into Harry's patting his chest as he pulled his hands back and rose to his feet. "I'll just leave this with you..." He turned to Maddie then, offering his hand. "Your Royal Highness?"

"Thank you," Maddie smiled and winked at Harry, her hand sliding into Bishop's as she stood. "I'll be right back baby."

"Have fun," Ella winked at the two of them, her eyes settling on Harry's flushed red face and narrowed eyes. It really was hilarious to watch the tables turn.

"That was amazing to watch," Bishop smiled at Maddie as she walked along with him; her arm tucked into the bend of his.

"Yeah?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows feeling an unexpected desire to not let Bishop get one up on her husband. Remembering their walk through the receiving line, she grinned. "Oh, you know...I've been meaning to tell you. Your father is just...an incredibly handsome man."

"Yeah?" Bishop smirked. "Did you think this happened on accident?" He waved a hand over his body and Maddie rolled her eyes with a laugh.

"And your mother..." She sucked in a breath and shook her head; biting back the wicked smile on her lips. "Flat out gorgeous."

"Alright." Bishop drew to a stop. "Now he told you to say that didn't he?"
"Come on Bishop," Maddie laughed and tugged at the crook of his arm. "Let's go meet your associates from Peru."

Her cheeks warm from the champagne and her spirits high from the levity of the evening, Maddie snuck up on Harry. It had been a while since she had left their table to meet Bishop's associates, since Harry had 'inconspicuously' joined them no long after. They had continued on with the party; drinking and dancing and laughing as the spirit held up well into the night.

Maddie had been out on the dance floor with Collins and while he went to secure them more drinks, she went back to their group of friends; now sitting around a comfortable sitting area with couches and tables and plenty of space to have a conversation. Harry was sitting back on a long, ornate sofa speaking to Khenda about something that had them both laughing animatedly. Maddie watched from her spot off to the side for a moment before stepping into the room. Moving quietly behind the sofa, her fingers tickled at the line on his neck where skin met hair. He was quick to reaction, his hand flying up and catching her fingers as his head whipped around. Seeing her he softened and Maddie giggled.

"A little jumpy there Captain," she smiled down at him as he pulled her fingers further into his hand.

"Where have you been?" He kissed the tips of her fingers and tugged; wanting her to come around and join them.

"Dancing..." She sighed, moving around the corner of the couch; her hand still tucked in his as she moved.

"With?" Harry grinned up at her, pulling her into his lap and wrapping her up in him.

"Anyone who was willing," she sighed dramatically; bringing a roll to Harry's eyes and a laugh to Khenda's lips.

"Well with those feet..." Harry began.

"Watch it," she warned, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and leaning in to kiss him. "I was dancing with Collins..." She sighed. "And he didn't seem to mind my feet."

"Well he's a bigger man than I," Harry teased, leaning his lips to her shoulder.

"He is," Maddie nodded.

"Did you leave him on the dance floor?" Khenda glanced around.

"He's bringing us more drinks," Maddie explained and turned to include their friend in the conversation. "What were you two talking about?" She watched as Harry turned a smile to Khenda, watched as Khenda met his wide nostalgic grin with one of her own.

"I was just telling your husband what a great friend I've been to him." Khenda leaned forward a bit, nudging Harry with her elbow as she sipped from her drink.

"And I was agreeing wholeheartedly," Harry winked to Khenda and tightened his hold on Maddie.
"You were reminiscing," Maddie concluded, a wistful sort of haze settling in her eyes and they all embraced the warmth in the room; the love between them.

"Do you remember the night you gave Harry the tour?" Khenda looked to Maddie.

"I do," she nodded, her lips pulling wide; remembering their first conversation.

"And I had something I needed to take care of so I asked you to take him around..."

"Yes," Maddie's mind shifted as she pulled up those moments from so many years ago.

"The something I had to take care of..." Khenda laughed into her glass; eyes flashing with a devious sort of sparkle.

"No," Maddie shook her head, understanding washing over her.

"Yeah..." Khenda sighed. "I had nothing to take care of."

"You're such an ass," Maddie nudged her friend with her shoe. "A tricky, sneaky, manipulative ass."

"I know!" Khenda laughed. "What can I say? I was trying to help a friend out."

"By pimping out another?" Maddie raised her eyebrows.

"Hey!" Harry cut in with a smug look on his face. "That's my wife you're talking about."

"And you!" Maddie tightened her arm around his shoulder. "Is it impossible for you to work alone?"

"Hey!" He called out, his hands sliding up and over her curves as he tilted her closer and lowered his voice. "I would be happy to work you over alone right now."

"Harry!" Maddie was only half shocked at his lines.

"Oh God I didn't need to hear that," Khenda groaned, looking away.

"Hey, hey," Collins spoke up as he approached them; drinks in hand, Bishop and Ella next to him. "What's so funny?"

"We're just..." Maddie shook her head with a grin. "We're reminiscing. Join us?" She glanced to the three of them.

"In hearing hilarious and embarrassing tales about all of you?" Bishop lifted his eyebrows with a smirk. "Absolutely I'll join." He took a seat on a small sofa, Ella tucking in next to him with a tired sigh.

"You okay?" Maddie nodded to her best friend.

"Yes," Ella smiled softly, her hand rubbing over the non-existent bump on her lower tummy. "I've been having just a little bit of cramping..." Maddie felt Harry sit up underneath her; his humor fading for just a beat as he grew concerned.
"Cramping?" He leaned around Maddie to look at Ella. "That can't be good."

"It's fine," Ella assured him; touched by his worry. "It's normal to have some cramping."

"It is," Khenda nodded, her hand reaching out to pat Harry's arm in the motherly way she had with him. "But you're awfully cute right now."

"Easy," Harry turned eyes to Khenda.

"I'll keep an eye on it," Ella sighed again, resting her head against Bishop's arm as his hand found home on her knee. "If it gets any worse, I'll go in. Otherwise...it's fine. Now come on..." She waved her hand around the group. "We were reminiscing."

"Ah yes," Maddie held Ella's eyes for just a moment before she blinked and followed suit; changing the subject. "We were just talking about how I was basically tricked into dating Harry."

"That's some amazing wizardry my friend," Bishop nodded to Harry who laughed.

"You know what I'll never forget, as long as I live?" Ella smiled sleepily at Maddie. "The way you just straight up ordered him to unload that truck."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "I'll never forget the look on your face when I did."

"Me neither," Harry joined in.

"Oh!" Maddie leaned forward, reaching for her drink as she looked to Ella. "Remember the night we met Bishop?" Both women giggled as Bishop's eyebrows shot up.

"I do!" He exhaled sharply. "Maddie took all the money I had!"

"Yes she did," Ella nudged her husband in the side.

"But you took my heart," Bishop turned sweet eyes to her and the group groaned; Maddie nearly choking on her champagne as she giggled.

"Oh please!" Ella snickered with a roll of her eyes. "We both know the part of you that was interested in me that night wasn't your heart."

"Ouch," Collins chuckled.

"Eh," Bishop shrugged. "It's true. But soon thereafter..." He leaned to kiss her and, feeling sentimental and in love, she kissed him back.

"I have one..." Khenda's eyes sparkled. "Do you remember when Collins tried to teach you two to dance?" Khenda waved her finger between Maddie and Ella as everyone around them snickered; even Collins.

"That must have been a disaster," Harry chuckled, swatting at Maddie's hand as she moved to smack him.

"It was," Collins nodded, laughing into his glass.
"I remember..." Ella's eyes were shining as she spoke; her heart so full of love and family. "You know what else I remember? I remember when he pulled us from a pile of rubble." And though the laughter faded, the smiles did not; a warm, love flowing through the group.

Maddie was the first to move; stepping from Harry's embrace to go to Collins. With a strong, loving hug, she kissed him; smack on the lips.

And then came Ella; doing just the same.

And then Harry.

And before anyone could start to cry at the memory, at the intensity in the group—they were laughing.

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"Look at you..." Maddie smiled up at Harry. "Dancing with your wife..." She sighed and leaned closer in his arms; the slow music moving them together. "You're such a brave soul."

"A hero, really," Harry chuckled, tightening his hold on her; his hands sliding over her hips, across her ass in a way that had well documented on their trip to the US.

"Maybe the Queen will award you a medal," Maddie winked, her fingers at his neck slipping up into his hair. "Did you want me to talk to her for you? I'm sleeping with her grandson."

"That would be lovely," Harry's lips graced over hers. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Maddie's voice grew softer as she closed her eyes; tipping her lips to his again.

And she should have known better. She should have known better than to open her mouth to him, than to wrap her arms tighter, than to sigh into his mouth. They were on a dance floor, in front of everyone. But she couldn't help herself. And, from the way he was responding to her, he couldn't either. So they both took steps, small fractions of steps, towards the other; wanting to be closer.

"Madeline..." He groaned as their lips pulled apart.

"Yes Captain?" She looked up to him through lowered lashes, her pink lips swollen from his.

"Follow me upstairs?" One reddish eyebrow peaked as he propositioned his wife; his hands sliding over her body as they continued to sway together.

"Henry Charles..." Though her voice carried that tone, though her eyes narrowed, there was something in her smile, something in her stance that didn't quite match her protest.

"Come on Maddie..." He tugged her closer; his voice growing conspiring. "I know you want to."

"I really really do," she sighed, biting at her bottom lip; her eyes scanning over him appreciatively. The champagne had gone to her head.

"And you know..." He smirked. "They did it at ours."

"You make an excellent point." Maddie took that in, considering it for a paused moment in his arms before she made a decision. "Okay. I'm in. Where do you want to do this?"
"Follow me," Harry dropped his hold on her and reached for her hand, leading his tipsy, flushed wife from the dance floor, down a corridor and up a set of stairs towards the back of the house. Maddie giggled as she held tight to his hand, her eyes adjusting to the darkness upstairs.

"Where are we going?" She whispered to him as they hurried along.

"I don't know," he whispered back. "Bishop's old room?"

"That's...a little creepy," Maddie admitted.

"You're right," he agreed, glancing at the door to his left. "The gift wrapping room?"

"There's a gift wrapping room?" Maddie's eyes went wide. "I want to see."

"You know this isn't a tour," Harry's voice dropped low.

"Well that's a good thing because your tour-guiding skills are tragically lacking."

"Ha," Harry laughed, pulling her with him to another door. "Well, lucky for you I have an abundance of skills in other areas." His hands found her waist as she stepped up to him.

"Is that so?" She grinned.

"It absolutely is," Harry grinned in return, backing her up against the wall as his lips found hers again. Their kisses were hot and deep—too hot and too deep for a semi-public place—but neither of them had the wherewithal to pull away. "God Maddie..." He breathed against her skin. "You have no idea how much I want you right now."

"Hmm..." Her grin turned wicked as her hand reached between them, rubbing over the sizable bulge in his pants. "I have a little idea."

"Little?" He smirked. "Check again."

"Ha..." Maddie chuckled as his lips moved to her neck, blazing hot on her skin. "You're so cocky..."

"You love it," he breathed into her ear. "Tell me you haven't been wanting to..."

"Since we arrived," Maddie cut in, answering his question. "Since Bishop told us to take our pick..." She tugged his face from her neck and pulled his lips back to hers. "I nearly handed you my panties an hour ago when..." Harry's lips covered hers again, unsure if he could hear the end of that sentence and not take her there in the hallway.

"Jesus Madeline..." He groaned, his hand reaching for the doorknob just to his left. "You're..."

"Naughty?" Maddie offered with a sweet, innocent bite to her lip. "I'm naughty?"

"Yes..." He exhaled; breathless and exhaustively turned on. "Yes you are." With a turn to the knob and a push to the door, Harry opened up the guest room he used to occupy when he would stay with the Bishops. His eyes grew dark, his expression serious, as he took in his wife. "After you."
"Thank you," she took a breath, running her fingers down the center of his chest before she turned; stepping out of his arms and towards the room.

And as Harry followed her in, he didn't even think twice about reaching out with his hand and smacking her round, amazing ass.

Maddie gasped, then giggled.

And Harry locked the door.

Sneaking back into the party was a breeze; it was late into the night and nearly everyone was tipsy and happy and enjoying the lavish evening to its absolute fullest—to its absolute end. Maddie held tight to Harry's hand, smiling contently as they slipped back into the room; nearly unnoticed.

"Where have you two been?" Sean looked up from his seat at the table with a loose tie and an even looser smile.

Feeling punchy, Maddie shrugged and bit back a smirk. "Making babies." Leo howled out into the room as Kiki giggled.

"Jesus!" Collins choked on his drink as everyone burst into laughter. "Did you really need to say that?"

"What?" Maddie's eyes went big and innocent as Harry shook his head, cheeky grin in place as he pulled out a chair for her. "Is that inappropriate?"

"Where were you really?" Bishop asked, dismissing Maddie's words.

Maddie giggled as she looked around the table seeing that nearly everyone assumed she was kidding; everyone except for Ella whose sober gaze was fixed on her. With the slightest of winks to her best friend, Maddie smiled. "We went for some fresh air."

"Was it cold?" Ella asked; her eyes narrowed playfully, the conversation flowing silently between them.

"A little bit," Maddie nodded and broke eye contact; needing to pull away from the back and forth before she fell apart in laughter. She loved that nobody believed her initial blunt honesty; loved even more that Ella did. She knew her so well. "Hey Bishop..." Maddie moved the conversation.

"Your Royal Highness?" He looked to her through hazy eyes.

"It's the end of the night..." She looked around and leaned closer. "Tell me. Is there a pool around this place?"

"Ahhh..." Bishop's face brightened as he sat up; his grin set on her. "See. I knew there was a reason I kept you around."

"You?" Harry laughed, leaning to glare at his best friend. "There's a reason you kept her around?"

"It's like you've been a part of the group forever," Bishop kept his attention on Maddie, holding his hand up to Harry.
"It feels like that for me sometimes too," she tilted her head to the side as the group laughed.

"Come on..." Bishop tore his eyes from hers and rose to his feet; his hand extending to his new wife. "It's time."

"For?" Khenda raised her eyebrows; confused as everyone around her seemed to understand, rising to their feet as though they were headed somewhere.

Bishop's voice was solemn, resolute as he smiled to Khenda and answered her question in two words. "The Pool."

When Maddie was younger, she had a music box. It was small and beautiful and meticulously painted and designed. The song it played had been light and sweet and whenever she heard it, she would smile and drift off to a place; a place where the small paper people were real. She remembered the way her fantastical brain would paint elaborate pictures of people dancing and laughing and enjoying life.

And that night, as this group of friends slipped from the reception and made their way in a huddled mass towards the outdoor, heated pool, she remembered that music box. She could see the beauty in the way Bishop cared for Ella, taking the stairs instead of plunging in. She could see the laughter in the way Collins didn't even think twice before wrapping Khenda in the biggest of hugs, the way he didn't even bat an eye before he hauled the two of them into the pool with everyone else. She could see the light, sweet way her friends dove into this carefree moment of levity...blissfully happy each own their own accord. She could feel the same sort of fantastical musings her brain had imagined as a child—playing out in front of her, around her; within her.

"Are you coming in love?" Harry called to her from the pool's edge.

"I don't know," Maddie shrugged with a wide, shining smile as she kicked her shoes to the side. "I'm not sure I know how to swim."

"Yeah?" He arched an eyebrow and beamed as he watched her. "It's okay. I'll have you." He was so damn cute, the way he smiled at her, the way he was looking at her, that what she really wanted to do was take him back upstairs and try round two. But instead she held her hand out to him and let him pull her into the pool.

Diving head first into the party.

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Three weeks later

"Okay..." Maddie watched as Harry stretched out another long yawn from his end of the couch. "That's the fifth time you've done that. You should go to bed. You have an early morning..." She closed her book and sat it to the side; her toes wiggling in his lap. It was late on a Sunday night and the last three weeks had been pretty busy for both of them and things didn't look like they were going to slow down anytime soon. They were gearing up for Remembrance Day and then diving into the holidays and all that came with them.

"I know," Harry's head rocked back against the couch before he took a breath and turned a smile to her. "What about you? What's on your agenda?"
"Mmmm..." She thought for a moment, warming as he moved closer to her; her legs sliding over his lap. "I am going to have breakfast with Kate before her session with Gerald."

"Ah yes..." Harry's face grew serious. "How is she doing?"

"She's okay," Maddie's smile was small, reassuring. "She's working through it and that's what's important. She's showing up, she's giving it her best...that's all we can ask." Maddie rubbed his shoulder as he moved closer still. "I know you're worried but she really is doing better. I mean...it doesn't help that the press is all over her right now..."

"I know," Harry groaned, his hand rubbing at the back of his neck; clearly stressed by it all. "Will's up in arms about it."

"Yeah?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows.

"Yeah..." Harry sighed, his hands moving to her thighs, now draped over his lap. "He told me last week that if it didn't stop, he'd remove himself from the line."

"The line?"

"Of succession," Harry's eyes met hers. "He would hand it all over and move to the Bahamas with Kate and Arthur."

"Oh..." Maddie exhaled, understanding. "Was he serious?"

"Only a little bit," Harry shrugged, amusement dancing into his eyes. "Why? Does it make you nervous? The thought of being my Queen?" His fingers ran up and down her legs; soothing and warm.

"No," she smiled simply. "I just worry about them too."

"He'll be okay," Harry assured her. "If she's going to be okay, he's going to be okay."

"Well I think she's going to be okay," Maddie nodded.

"Well there we go." He took a deep breath. "What's next? After breakfast?"

"I'm going to the doctor with Ella."

"You are?" He turned concerned eyes to her. "Is she okay?"

"I think so," Maddie nodded thoughtfully. "She's still having cramping and she's finally decided to check it out. I think she's a little nervous..."

"Sure."

"So I offered to go with her."

"You're a good friend," he reached for her hand, playing absentmindedly with her fingers.

"Yeah well...I love her to pieces."

"I know you do," Harry pulled at her hand then, wanting her closer; wanting to snuggle into her
and fall asleep there on the couch. "Are you sleepy at all? Are you coming to bed with me?"

"Nah," she shook her head. "I'm going to finish this chapter and call Kyle back. He's called about twelve times since noon."

"Twelve?" He chuckled.

"Well maybe twice but..."

"You'll be awhile," Harry finished for her; tired smirk in place.

"A little while, yes," she moved then, pulling her legs from his lap so she could sit up and nuzzle in next to him. "Is that okay?"

"Of course. Come here..." Harry wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tight as his lips bent to hers. "Kiss me when you come to bed?"

"Absolutely," she nodded, nudging his nose with hers before she kissed him again.

"Good night," Harry kissed her once more and regrettably moved from the couch.

"Good night..." Maddie watched him as he walked away; her teeth biting into her lip as she debated for the hundredth time that day if she was going to talk to him about the thing that had been on her mind for a while. She had started to think about it the night before and then when she had woken up that morning...she couldn't shake it. She had tried. She had tried to think about other things but this just kept on nagging at her and... "Harry!" She blurted it out before she could stop herself.

"Yeah?" He turned around, nearly through the doorway and smiled at the look on her face. "You okay?"

"Yes..." She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding; long and slow. "There's one more thing I want to talk to you about."

"Shoot," he nodded to her; growing more and more curious as she grew more and more smiley.

"Okay. Well." She took a breath and clapped her hands together in her lap. "You know how we've been having lots of sex...of the unprotected variety?"

"Yes..." The corner of his mouth tugged up, humored at her choice of words.

"And you know how...we've been trying to have a baby?" The smirk faded from his face just a bit and had he been a rabbit, Maddie was certain his ears would have perked up, his nose would have twitched.

"Madeline," his tone grew serious.

"I just want to know..." She sighed and rolled her eyes. "At some point I'm going to be late, someday I'm not going to get my period and...I'm wondering at what point you would like to...know that. I mean...do you want me to tell you when I'm one day late or do you want me to wait a week and..."

"Yes," Harry cut in, stepping back into the room. "Yes. To the one day question. I want to..." He
sucked in a breath and his lips twitched up. "If you know, I want to know...even if it's just one day."

Maddie couldn't help but giggle at how serious he was; how excited. "Okay. But you know that it's not entirely uncommon to be a day or two late and..."

"I don't care," he shook his head, looking down at her with a warm expression. "I want to be in on all of it."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, her eyes wide and her smile bright. "Okay." And then Harry watched as something happened. He watched as her eyes shifted from his, as her bottom lip pulled into her teeth and his heart skipped in his chest.

"Maddie." His voice held new warning. "Madeline...are you...are you late?"

"Oh come on," she waved her hands in the air dismissively. "Don't be ridiculous. I was just asking a question and..."

"Maddie..." He moved closer. "Don't play with me. Are you late right now?"

"No," she shook her head, her grin stretching and he could see she was holding something back; something that made her giddy. And then she whispered. "But I will be tomorrow."

"What?!" His eyes flew wide.

"I may be tomorrow." She was quick to the correction but it was too late. He was already at her side, already sitting next to her, already pulling her face in his hands, already kissing her with the same sort of excitement she had been fighting all day. "Harry! I could start tonight! I could start in a few days...we know nothing..."

"I don't care," he shook his head, his smile the most brilliant thing she had seen. "Oh wow...I don't care." He kissed her again.

"You're insane," she laughed as she hugged him tight.

"Yes," he nodded. "Yes. And I want to know. I want to know...everything..." He held her face in his hands, meeting her eyes in a moment of tenderness. "Everything."

"Okay," she nodded, blinking back some unexpected tears. "I'll tell you everything." She promised; swore. And then she kissed him again. "Okay Captain. Go to sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

"Ah...I'm not even tired now."

"Yes you are," she laughed.

"Wow..." Harry let his hands fall from her face, running down her arms to her hands. With another yawn, he pulled her hands up and kissed them both before he nodded. "Okay. Okay. I'm going but...if anything happens..."

"Like what?" She snickered.

"Anything," he continued. "You wake me up."
"You got it," she agreed.

"Good night love." His hand fell over his heart as he looked to her; nothing but love in the room.

"Good night," Maddie held his gaze for a beat longer and then she watched as he slipped out of the room. And she swore she could hear him skipping up the stairs. With a wide, warm, happy laugh, she settled back into the couch and reached for her book.

Just a few more pages.

A few pages that turned into another chapter.

That turned into two hours.

And before she knew it, time had gotten away from her. As Maddie stood up to stretch her legs, her arms, her neck, she glanced at the clock and was genuinely shocked. She had been reading much longer than she had planned and as a yawn pushed from her lips, her phone rang out into the room.

Reaching for it, she glanced at the screen and a smile pulled at her lips; happy, content.

"Well hello there..." She pressed the phone to her ear and sank to the couch.

When Maddie was younger, she had this music box. It was beautiful and lovely and luxurious and soft and sweet and striking and every time she thought of it as an adult, she seemed to only remember all the idyllic daydreams it had brought to her childlike mind.

What she had forgotten, what must have faded over time, was that occasionally, as the music box aged and grew dusty, the heavy duty spring would malfunction. It would recoil and snap back, bringing a loud whack of a noise and blinding pain to any fingers in its path.

And the people; the fancy, intricately painted people, would fall over and flutter to the ground.

"Wait." Maddie's face went stark white at the words on the other end of the phone. "No...nonono. Wait." She shook her head; her eyes welling instantly, her throat closing up. She couldn't breathe. She could barely see. And the ringing in her ears made it nearly impossible to hear the voice on the other end of the line. "But...but...I just...I was going to...what do you mean...she's...No. She can't be..." She gulped as her eyes gave and the tears began to slide down her cheeks. And the world around her changed. "She can't be dead."
When Maddie finally opened her eyes again, when she pulled her head up from her own lap and wiped at the mess on her cheeks, minutes had ticked by; minutes without her. She took a deep, shaky breath and she looked around her; trying to pull it together, trying to bring her mind out of the fallout from her broken heart.

Her phone sat on the couch next to her; silent.

Her pajama pants with dark wet circles from her tears—tears that had already been cried; tears that weren't going to stop.

Her heart hadn't hurt like this since her father had died; her stomach hadn't twisted like this since her mother had stepped from their room with wide eyes and her hand extended. Since she had told her it was time.

Maddie hadn't felt like this in so, so long.

But just like the flip of a switch, it was back; heavy and hard and sweeping through her body like flooded waters, taking down everything in its path.

And now she had to go upstairs and wake Harry up and bring him into this nightmare. She had to tell him; he had to know before the world did. From somewhere deep inside, she pulled forth her will and she stood. Leaving the phone on the couch, leaving her book knocked to the ground, leaving all the lights on, she moved up the stairs; deep breaths trying for calm.

And suddenly Maddie wanted to be anywhere in the world other than there; other than outside their bedroom with the message she was about to deliver. She didn't want to do it. She didn't want to rouse her husband from slumber only to drop this tragedy in his lap. She would have given anything in the world to not have to do this, to not have to tell him. She stood there outside their door for a few minutes, trying to control her own sorrow, her own devastation; her own tears. But she couldn't.

It was too much; for her heart, for her mind. It was simply too much. Too much sorrow.

So she went. With a deep breath and a prayer, she stepped into their room and moved to their bed. And suddenly she needed him; his warmth and safety, his strength. She needed him just as much as she knew he was going to need her. Without thinking about it, she climbed in next to him; latching to his side and wrapping her arm around him and she stayed there; tears on her cheeks and a crack in her heart, until he felt her—even in his sleep. His hand moved lovingly over the arm she had wrapped around him as he woke.

"Maddie?" His voice was a bit hoarse as he pulled his eyes open. "Are you okay?"

And in the beat it took her to answer, he knew.

"No," she shook her head against him, her voice shaky and teary and Harry sat up. Taking her in, he knew instantly that something was wrong—something was very wrong.

"Maddie..." He watched as she sat up, watched as she took a few breaths, wiped her eyes; he watched as she readied her body and her heart for the blow she was about to deliver.
"There's been an accident..." She blinked once and his entire expression changed; like she had punched him in the gut.

"Who?" His breath sucked in, his body flinching.

"I just got a call from..."

"Maddie." His jaw clenched. "Who."

"A call from..." Her eyes welled over and she cursed herself. And she cried as she told him. "Collins. Harry..." She wiped fists at her eyes. "It's Khenda."

"Khenda?" His face went white with surprise and panic and disbelief. "But..."

"She's dead Harry," Maddie's voice cracked and her vision went blurry; her shoulders slumping.

"No." He whispered.

"She was walking across a street and a car..."

"No," he shook his head, holding his hand out to her, wanting to stop it.

"He said they took her to the hospital but that she was already gone and..."

"NO!" Harry yelled out; his loud voice echoing around their room, frightening her as he rose to his feet. "No! Maddie..."

"I'm so sorry," she held her hand out to him, wanting to erase it; to make it go away.

"Maddie...please..." His eyes turned down, just like his smile, like his shoulders and it tore Maddie more than her heart was already torn. The tears welled in his eyes and he looked like a sad, lost little boy and Maddie thought she might be sick. "Please..." He was pleading with her. "I can't..." He shook his head.

He couldn't. He couldn't lose somebody else. He couldn't lose somebody else who had known his mother; had spoken with her, hugged her, loved her. He couldn't lose the connection they shared. He couldn't lose her.

Not her. He shook his head again, not wanting to comprehend it.

"I'm so sorry," Maddie repeated, moving towards him, wanting to hold him; selfishly needing the contact, needing what little strength they each had to be shared.

"Please," he blinked, hoping.

Kneeling on the edge of their bed, Maddie took his face in her hands; her palms against his trembling cheeks, her fingers in his hair and with a devastatingly final voice, she repeated. "Khenda's dead Harry. She's..."

"No..." And whatever dam that had been holding him up, holding him back, gave way. His knees gave out and he sank to the floor next to the bed. His eyes flooded and there he was, her strong, hero husband, falling apart at her feet; his head in her lap.
As she sat back on her heels, her hands moved over him, over his head and his shoulders and her body folded over him, hugging him to her; covering him, protecting him. And as his hands moved around her, burying himself in her, the emotion overtook the room.

And they fell apart; together.

Going to Paris that night was an unspoken decision; one that was never really up for debate. Maddie had slipped down to the carpet beside Harry and they had cried into the other for some time. And there they still sat; tight against each other with quieter tears still fresh in their eyes, coming to the conclusion together.

"We have to..." Harry's voice croaked out into the deep darkness of their room.

"Go..." Maddie whispered, clearing her throat with a cough.

"To..." Harry swallowed back the ill in his stomach. "To Paris." Maddie felt his hand flex underneath hers. "To Collins."

"And Isaiah," she blinked as her eyes flooded again.

"Oh God," Harry groaned, his head shaking slowly as he pulled her hand closer to him; his head bowing under the weight of this great sadness. "Isaiah..."

"I know," Maddie nodded, turning her forehead onto his shoulder. "I know...Harry. I...I don't even know what to..."

"I know," he agreed. And the silence embraced them; the dark, cool silence held onto them there on the floor for a bit longer. They clung to the other for just a bit longer before they moved.

"I..." She sniffed. "I have to call Ella." And the mere thought of breaking the news, of breaking another heart, made Maddie's stomach clench and her tears began again.

"Do you want me to do it?" Harry asked; even in his own heartbreak, wanting to keep her from more.

"No," she shook her head, turning sweet eyes up to him. "No baby. I'll do it." She kissed his shoulder and wiped at her tears and took a deep breath. "I think I'll call Bishop's phone and wake him up before I..." She sucked in a shuddery breath. "I think somebody should be awake when she finds out."

"Yes," Harry nodded, collecting both of her hands in his as he let his mind wash over the information; over and over. "I can call Thomas. I'll cancel tomorrow and see what I can do to get us to Paris and...can we just show up at their place? Is that...is that okay?" His eyes were wide as he looked to her; wide and innocent. And wrecked.

"Yes," Maddie nodded, her thumbs running over his hands as he held hers. "If it had been me they would be here. They wouldn't wait to be asked...if it were..."

"Shhhhh..." He shook his head; his eyes welling up as his heart pleaded. "Don't even talk about..." He wiped at his eyes and took a breath. "Don't say those things."
"Okay," she blinked and nodded. "I'm going to call Ella."

"And I'll call Thomas."

And there they sat; both with something to do, something to do right then. Neither able to pull from the other. Releasing her hands, Harry wrapped his arms around her, bringing her into his side. Maddie went; willing and wanting, and she held tight to him for the longest moment. She was lost, so lost, and in his eyes she could see—he was lost too.

Holding on by the slimmest of threads.

When Maddie pulled from Harry, when she finally summoned the strength to step from him, he held tight.

He wasn't ready. He wasn't ready to move, he wasn't ready to let go. He wasn't ready to face this yet. So he pulled her back to him. And she went.

And he cried.

And there they sat; fused together in their sadness, in this new devastating shadow that would hang over them for much longer than they were ready for.

Eventually Maddie and Harry rose from the floor and while Harry made plans for them to get to Paris, Maddie dialed Bishop and woke him from sleep. After making sure he was with it, she had him hand over the phone and she brought Ella into this nightmare that didn't seem to end.

As soon as the call ended, they were in motion. Bishop and Ella would be staying behind for her appointment, wanting now more than ever to make sure she was doing okay. Maddie and Harry were on their way to Collins, to Isaiah and Bishop and Ella would be following behind as soon as they could. While Harry firmed things up to leave in just around two hours, Maddie slipped into the bathroom, needing the hot water from the shower to prepare her for how things were now; for how things would be when they got to Paris, to Collins.

As she shut the door behind her, she let out a long breath and leaned back against it. She didn't want to turn on the lights, didn't want to deal with the harsh light in that moment. But she couldn't take a shower in the dark, so she surrendered to practicalities and flipped on the switch. Pushing away from the door, she turned the shower on to let the water warm up. And she caught her reflection in the mirror.

She looked sad and lost and so, so tired. Once the steam started to fill the room, she shed her clothes and climbed into the shower. She closed her eyes and allowed the hot water to envelope her. She stood still and felt the water cascade over her; pinking her skin, heating her muscles.

She couldn't believe Khenda was gone. The idea seemed so strange, so foreign. She had just seen her at the wedding reception. They had sat together and laughed and remembered all of the wonderful moments they had shared over the years; the day Maddie arrived in Bendal, the friendship that had forged. Maddie had been prepared to grow old with Khenda in her life, she had been prepared to introduce her and Harry's eventual children to Khenda and Collins and Isaiah—to introduce them all to Bendal; together.
But she had not been prepared for that phone call. She had not been prepared for the emotion that was brewing inside of her. She had not been prepared for the look in Harry's eyes and the sadness etched on his face. She had not been prepared for the devastation that had settled over them.

Maddie started to cry; her tears mingling with the water as she let her head fall forward against the tile; giving into the sobs. She cried for Khenda. She cried for Collins, for Isaiah. She cried for their families, their friends; all of the people whose lives were less than they were that day—sadder, darker. She cried for Ella who was across town sobbing to Bishop. She cried for Harry. Harry who had lost so much in his life.

"Maddie," she hadn't heard Harry come into the bathroom.

"Yes..." She sniffed, lifting her forehead from the tile. Harry stepped further into the room, moving to the shower; his hand pressing against the glass.

"Can I come in?" His voice was soft. He knew she was crying, he knew she was sinking just like he was and he felt his heart drop. With water in her eyes; from the shower, from the sadness; she nodded her consent, her hand pressing to the glass where his was. Harry disappeared for a brief moment, peeling off his t-shirt, his boxers. And then he opened the shower door and stepped inside with his wife.

She moved over a bit, allowing him some space under the heat from the water. Harry closed his eyes under the steady stream, his head tilting back as the droplets pattered against him. Without speaking they began to clean themselves and each other; washing faces, rinsing hair.

"Harry..." Maddie called out his name into the steam and he lifted his eyes to hers in question. "I just...I'm so sorry." Her hand rested on his arm and she moved in closer. "I know how much Khenda meant to you and I know you must feel just...." She shook her head then, trying to keep it together for just one damn second. And failing.

Harry's heart thumped in his chest. She was amazing. He knew she was hurting. He knew this was tearing her apart too. She had loved Khenda, just as much as he had. She had been family to her too. But there she was, offering herself and her support to him. He loved her so much in that moment.

"Thank you," he whispered, unable to bring volume to his voice; unable to bring ease to his tone. "Thank you." Maddie squeezed his arm gently, sensing correctly his inability to expand on that, to do anything other than move numb through this day. When she moved to step out of the shower, to let him finish his, he quickly reached for her hand and held her there.

"Don't go," he shook his head and pulled her back to him. His arms were tight around her, wrapping her up and holding her to him. "I love you." He spoke into her neck, the water falling around them.

"Oh baby..." Maddie's tears returned. "I love you too." And his arms closed around her even more, his lips pressing a kiss to her neck.

"Don't go..." His hands stretched out over her back, pushing her into him as he continued to kiss up her neck to her mouth. Pulling back to meet her eyes for a moment, he was full of so much emotion it was hard to sort them out.

"Harry," she whispered, leaning into him.
"I need you..." His voice was husky as he moved in, as his lips fell against hers. Maddie gasped at
the passion there; the need. But her arms slid around him and her mouth opened to him. She felt
his body tighten next to hers and she sank into him, into this moment. Harry let one hand linger on
the small of her back as the other moved to her face. He kissed her again and again and again. He
needed her. He needed to feel her body against his, her lips on his. He needed to feel the other
side of intensity. He needed to feel the other kind of overwhelmed. Just for a moment; just for this
moment.

"Harry..." His name escaped her lips in a moan and his mouth tore from hers; sliding down her
neck to her collar bone. Maddie's held tilted back as he moved across her wet, slick chest, as his
tongue darted out to lap against her. Her fingers laced through his hair and held him to her. "Oh
God..." She moaned as he dipped down to her breasts, his hand sliding around her body to cup
her as his mouth focused attention on just one.

"Maddie..." His voice was muffled against her breast, his breath hot on her nipple. "I need you. I...", His voice cracked and for just a second the sadness washed into the shower with them.

She pulled his head from her chest, pulled his eyes to meet hers and then she moved in; her hands
holding his face steady as she kissed him, as she pressed her body into his. "I need you too..." She
confessed.

"Make love with me Maddie..." He spoke into her mouth; his words full of the same kind of
desperate urgency his heart was feeling.

He need not say anything else. Without her lips leaving his, Maddie reached around him and
turned off the water; pushing open the door. She grabbed for towels, wrapping one around him as
he wrapped one around her. They made their way, clumsily to their bedroom. Maddie held his
hand in hers as she turned him around. She kissed him softly and with firm, loving hands, she
pushed him down to the bed, following his body with her own. As he laid back, she moved into
his lap and without much try at foreplay, without any thought of a tease, Maddie sank down onto
him. Harry let out a breath and reached out to her, his big strong hands moving into her hair as he
pulled her down to him. As his lips caught hers, she settled over him; her stomach pressed to his,
her chest against his, her hands sliding to his face and her lips and tongue tangling with his. They
needed the closeness; the absolute lack of space between them.

And they made love.

They made love to each other out of a passionate need to comfort the other, out of an undeniable
drive to seek comfort for themselves. They made love to feel alive. They made love to feel
something good. They made love to connect. They made love because in that moment, before this
terrible day truly began, they needed to feel the sort of heat, the sort of affection—the sort of peace
—that came when Maddie gasped his name into his mouth, when he drove up into her with
everything he had.

They needed this. Before they gave themselves over to Collins and Isaiah and what this week now
held for them, they needed to give themselves over to each other.

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As Maddie sat in the backseat of the car next to Harry, watching the Parisian highlights fly by, she
felt an acceptance wash over her. Before, coming to Paris had always been a joy. Before, coming
to Paris meant a reunion with her mismatch little family. Before, coming to Paris meant wide
smiles and late mornings and amazing wine.
But that was before and 'coming to Paris' had forever been altered in her mind. As she looked across the car to Harry, she wondered if it had already held this sad place for him. And it made her heart ache to know that this moment was adding to the pain he must have already felt coming to this city. It was still early morning; dark and damp and chilled. Their flight had been quiet; stoic and uneventful. There had been a car waiting for them upon their arrival and, because of the early hour, they had gone nearly unnoticed. And Maddie was thankful for that, knowing the sight of the two of them in sunglasses at night wearing casual, comfortable clothes and a new, permanent sort of devastation would be a hot find.

Harry sat next to her, his shaded eyes turned out to the city, his hand holding tightly to hers, as though she might be the only thing holding him there on earth. So she held tight and she held firm. And when the car turned up that familiar street, she felt his body grow taut and she knew, he was about to take the hit again.

When Collins had called Maddie with the news, he had been in a state of shock. He had relayed the news to her with little emotion, trying to get through the things he had to do before he let it wash over him; before he let it settle. Maddie had known that was what was happening, she could have diagnosed his shock over the phone. But in those moments when Maddie was trying to steady her tears, her breathing, he had told her that Isaiah was with his Nanny at her house. She had been there when the hospital had called Collins and she had offered to take him for the night —before she even knew how it would all turn out. Maybe it was for the best; Collins having one night to grieve selfishly before he had to be there for his son. As their car pulled to a stop and their doors opened, Maddie took a deep breath and prepared herself for the ball of emotions she knew were about to unload; not just from Collins but from her and Harry as well.

Harry's hand was at her back, their protection detail right behind them, as they walked up the few quick steps to the door. Maddie knocked once; nothing. She knocked twice; nothing. And on the third time she turned slightly panicked eyes to Harry.

"Was he home when you spoke to him?" Harry's hand reached for the doorknob and Maddie could feel Jim move behind them.

"Yes," she nodded, her emotions welling as she remembered. "He was home. He..." She knocked on the door again. "Collins!" She called out, rapping against the door again.

"Collins..." Harry's voice was loud, seeing the worry in Maddie's eyes. Taking a risk, Harry turned the doorknob and the door slipped right open.

"Harry," Maddie's hand stilled on his arm.

"Sir," Jim spoke up, taking a step around Harry.

"Come on," Harry turned to Jim. "Nobody knows we're coming. Nobody has any idea that we're going to be here..."

"Collins!" Maddie called out through the door and then, as Harry and Jim were entangled in conversation, she reached out to tug at Arthur's sleeve and she stepped into the home; pulling Arthur with her. "Collins?" Maddie's voice cracked as she stepped further inside; Harry right behind her. She was instantly struck with a gust of cold air; her arms wrapping around her body instinctively, pulling at her coat. She glanced to Harry who shut the door behind them and moved to join her. Jim and Arthur were quick on their feet, moving into the place and scanning as best they could.
"Collins?" Harry called out, his voice and his step steadier than Maddie could possibly be in that moment; his focus on this moment tearing him briefly from his grief. They stepped into the living room and Maddie's eyes flew to the far wall.

"Oh my God..." She moved quickly. "All of the windows are open..." She pulled them shut; closed the door to the balcony. With teary eyes, she looked to her husband. "Harry?"

"Collins!" Harry's voice was louder, with the slightest edge of panic. As he hurried from the room, Maddie was beyond thankful that Isaiah had gone to stay with his nanny for the night. At least she didn't have to worry about him that night. That would come with the morning.

With Maddie right on his heels, Harry moved through the rooms in the house; pushing in doors and turning on lights. One room after another, he scanned every possible spot while Maddie shut windows before leaving to the next room. As their feet moved, they grew infinitely more panicked. The thought of something happening to Collins, of losing another friend that night, made Maddie want to crawl up into a ball and cry.

"Goddamn it Collins!" She cried out when they turned on the light in their master room, the last room, and found nothing but open windows and sliding doors. "I swear to God if you don't answer me!" Tears tumbled from her eyes.

"Maddie..." Harry's voice pulled her back from the edge she was nearing. She turned to him and he pointed. He had found him. With a blink of an eye, they were in motion; set for the balcony.

The gush of air that had greeted them when they arrived was nothing compared to the bitter wave that slapped them when they stepped outside with Collins. He stood at the railing, his shoulders slumped, his suit coat wrinkled. Still dressed from work, his eyes were set out over the city. Not knowing what to say, they stood; the silence wrenching their hearts. Their protection detail slipped out and away, content with their safety.

"Collins...." Maddie whispered, wanting to find a way to pull him back to them. She watched as he nodded his head; slow and heavy and then, he turned towards them.

Neither of them would have ever been prepared for the agony they saw when Collins faced them. A small cry escaped Maddie's lips as Harry's hand moved reflexively to steady her. And then, as though he were the most fragile thing in the world, Collins crumbled—slumping to the ground in a pool of tears and sobs and devastation.
Maddie had always been fascinated by the grieving process; all of the intricacies, the ways in which it manifested itself. Perhaps it was because of her own significant experiences with grieving; her father even before he had passed, the people she had met and lost in Bendal, the children. Maybe it was the undergraduate course she took on death and dying and the way the Professor had taught the class; drawing them in and really making them get it.

He had explained how grief carried with people throughout their lives, how when people experienced loss they dealt with it to the best of their ability at the stage they were in at that point, with the available resources. And then it carried. His example had been of a five year old child losing a parent. That child would grieve for that parent up to the capacity of a five year old child; that the grief would look different than that of the same child losing a parent at twenty. But that same child who lost a parent at five would then grow up, go through life and then, if at thirteen that child lost a pet, when that child grieved for that new loss, that child would also play "catch up" with his grief—handling the death of the pet AND the death of his parent at five up to the level of a thirteen year old.

And that grief would look different. And that grief would carry. Then again, if that child lost a grandparent at seventeen, he would handle the grief for the grandparent and play catch up with the grief for the pet and the grief for the parent.

The point of it all was; people manage grief as best they can with what they have. And then it carries.

And as she sat, perched on the edge of the small loveseat, waiting for Harry to step from their room at the place they were staying in Bendal, she could feel her grief catching up. She could feel her body and her mind managing it as best she could with the resources she had.

Today was Khenda's funeral. Today was her service. Today was the end of three of the longest days Maddie had lived in quite some time. They were all there in Bendal; Collins and Isaiah, Ella and Bishop, she and Harry. Even Will; who had known Khenda, just like Harry. They were all there and they were nearly all dressed and soon, due to the expressed wishes of their dear, dear friend, they would be traveling to the edge of the world; to the ocean that sat just outside of Bendal and they would be putting Khenda's ashes to sea. They would be putting her soul to peace.

Maddie's eyes welled with tears as she looked down at her hands clasped together in her lap; the soft milky skin of her fingers against the stark black of her skirt and it all seemed to blur. Her grief was catching up. Khenda. Her father. Geru. Mante.

The door to their room opened and her head turned to the sound as Harry stepped out. She wiped at her eyes and took him in; black suit, hallow eyes, and the kind of sadness that took home on his face in a way that spoke of depth and permanence. Maddie took a deep breath and rose to her feet, trying to calm the sobs that held just at her throat, wanting to be there for him, for Collins, for Isaiah.

"Are you ready?" She whispered, her hands sweeping across his shoulders, smoothing over his tie. Without a word, Harry gulped and nodded and reached for his sunglasses. And her heart twisted in her chest.
His grief was catching up too. It had been since that night they had arrived in Paris, since they sat on the balcony with Collins until the sun came up; all three of them on floor. Maddie sitting in between the two men her hand holding onto Collins, keeping him from the rubble just as he had kept her in the past. Since they watched little Isaiah bound into the living room with his nanny close behind. Since they watched Collins take him aside to tell him.

Another motherless boy.

Harry took her hand in his as they walked towards the door. The others were waiting for them and they needed to be on their way. And as he held tight to her fingers, as he grasped onto the anchor he was finding in her, Maddie knew. Harry wasn't just grieving for Khenda, he was grieving for his mother. He had been carrying around the weight of it all, the aching sadness of it all, since he had watched Isaiah learn the news.

Grief was catching up with all of them today.

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The service was beautiful, it really was. But Maddie wouldn't have expected less. Honoring Khenda's life was easy; remembering her joy and her passion and the great love that exuded from her was easy. It was the realization that she was no longer there to offer it that made it nearly unbearable.

Maddie tried her best to stay collected. She had realized long ago that part of her make up included this instinctual drive to take care of those around her; to serve others. Surely that's what had led her down her particular career path. Certainly that helped her adjust to her new life of royal duty. And as she sat there that cool morning between Harry and Collins, that part of her couldn't have been more prevalent. She held tight to Harry's hand as Collins delivered the eulogy; speaking about Khenda in a way that left everyone there a weepy, blubbery mess. She let Collins hold onto her hand as Harry rose to his feet to pay tribute to the work and service that Khenda had poured herself into, as he spoke of her legacies; that with the people of Bendal and that with Isaiah. Little Isaiah who at two had very little understanding of what was happening but was perceptive enough to know that it was solemn, that it was final.

And then they all rose to their feet and walked to the water. As Bendal dancers performed and traditional music played out, Collins set her ashes adrift and Isaiah, tucked tight into Maddie's arms, waved good-bye.

And Maddie wasn't sure if she would ever stop crying.

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After the service, the group made their way back to the heart of Bendal. As was tradition with the community, there would be a large celebration of life; plenty of food, dancing, music. Maddie couldn't help but smile at the way the community took care of their own. Khenda and Collins had been away from Bendal for some time, but the second their family stepped back on the rich, red soil, Collins and Isaiah had been embraced and looked after.

And though there was sadness underlying everything around them, there were drops of bittersweet throughout the day. Watching Isaiah play with the local children, in this place that both of his parents helped to build, was endearing and sweet and it made Maddie smile even through the permanent state of grief. They weren't the only ones who were welcomed back and embraced. Many of the locals remembered Maddie, knew her from before, and they were thrilled to see her
again—even under these sad circumstances. And she would be lying if she said their small smiles and big hugs didn't go great lengths to easing the heartache she felt.

She did her best to play a de-facto hostess; looking after Collins, keeping track of Isaiah. She tried to make sure that Khenda's family, Collins' family who had travelled from France felt welcome; felt at ease. She sat with Ella for a while well Bishop walked with Harry and Will. And she watched her husband; studied his face. And she knew. Though he kept a strong face, though he nodded and offered smiles, though he truly did find a delight in the children swarming around Maddie and Ella and taking Isaiah under their wings; he was barely hanging in there. She could tell.

So when she glanced up a little later, from her spot next to Ella where they watched the kids run through the gardens, and saw that he was gone, she felt her worry for him pulse through her veins. She looked around, searching for signs of him. Will was just across the way, talking with the current head of the Community Center, she assumed continuing the conversation about the slowness in rebuilding that had started earlier. But Harry wasn't with them. Her eyes squinted at the sun as she scanned the crowd again; no spikes of red hair to be found, no hint of his security detail.

"You okay Maddie?" Ella nudged her lightly.

"I..." Maddie turned to her friend. "I can't seem to find Harry. Have you seen him?"

"No," Ella shook her head, looking out at the group. "Do you want me to wave Bishop over and have him go look?"

"No," Maddie smiled and squeezed her best friend's hand. "Will you be okay if I go look for him?"

"Of course," Ella nodded, squeezing her hand back. "I'll be fine. You going to be okay?"

"Yeah," Maddie nodded. "After I find him, I'll be fine."

It didn't take her long to find him. She honestly should have guessed. She only walked for a few minutes before she saw Jim standing across the way, inconspicuously standing guard to the main garden, just outside the greenhouse. She should have known; Harry would return to the spaces where he had stood with Khenda. With a swallow and a heavy blink, she moved towards him, remembering the night they had been there, the night they had danced and celebrated with the local people, with Khenda and Collins—the night they had first started this journey of them. She should have known Harry would find solace in one of these spaces that held history for him.

Her heels crunched at the gravel path and Jim looked up, offering a small nod to her as she walked past him. She glanced around the space, around the gardens, in through the glass walls of the greenhouse and she spotted him; off on a back porch from the building, standing at the edge looking out and away. She was slow in her approach, not wanting to startle of him. She could see the moment he knew she was there, the moment he sensed her. His head bowed and his shoulders sagged.

"Can I join you?" Maddie called out to him from where she stood; giving him space, giving him time. She heard him sniff, watched him nod and then she stepped forward; moving to stand next to him at the railing. Her fingers ran warm and loving over his that were wrapped around the metal of the rail; his knuckles white from his grip. "Harry..."
"You know..." He started, the muscles in his arm flexing as he worked it out in his head; in his heart. "She just...she knew my mother."

"I know," Maddie nodded, tears beginning to pull up again. "I know she did." Her hand moved around to his back, her head tipping against his bicep as she leaned into him just so.

"She knew the part of my mother that not a lot of people knew; the part that wasn't part of the drama, the part..." He sniffed and turned his eyes away from her, out over the land, over the distance. "She knew a part that not a lot of people knew, that not a lot of people saw...the part that I want to remember." His voice cracked as his emotions surged again.

"Oh baby," Maddie's heart ached as the tears took over her eyes.

"Khenda helped me remember that part of her. She helped me stay connected to that part of her and then..." He shook his head, his fingers leaving the railing to smudge at the tears on his cheeks. "Then she gave me you."

"Harry..." Maddie's voice cracked as his face fell into his hands.

"I don't know that I ever thanked her for any of those things. I don't know that I told her how much it meant that she loved my mother and that she loved you and..." And then Harry's words ceased and his tears took over and all Maddie could do was hold him and let him cry. So she pulled him to her and wrapped her arms around him and held the space for him to grieve.

"You know that Khenda loved you Harry..." She kissed the top of his head. "She loved you so much and she was so proud of you and all of the work you've done and..."

"Stop," he exhaled, trying to catch his breath, trying to control his tears.

"She was. She was. I could tell. I could see it in the way she looked at you, the way she spoke to you and about you and..."

"Stop," he shook his head, her words hitting home more than she knew.

"And though I didn't know her, I know your mother would be too. Harry..."

"Stop!" He yelled, pulling his head from the crook of her neck. "I'm sorry," he softened instantly, seeing her sadness, seeing her tears. "I'm sorry. I just...I..."

"I know," Maddie cried. "I know."

"I'm sorry..." He shook his head as the tears slipped freely from his cheeks and then he moved, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her in. His arms were strong and tight and he couldn't let her go; he needed her, all of her. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm..." His voice gave out to the tears and he held onto her as they both cried; again.

"I promise I'll remember her with you Harry," Maddie whispered against the skin of his cheek where she was pressed. "I'll remember her with you and you...you can tell me all about the parts of your mother that Khenda knew. I'll love all of those parts of her...all of those parts of you." She kissed his cheek as his hands tightened on her back, pressing her even closer. "I love you Harry...all of you." She sniffed. "I do. I love you so much and I promise you I won't ever let you forget those parts...I swear it. I swear it."
"I love you too," his breath was hot against her skin, against her hair. "Oh baby, I love you too..." She could feel him move in her arms, pulling back enough so he could kiss her cheek. And then his hands slid up her body to her face, cupping her cheeks in the palms of his hands and turning those wide, watery blue eyes to her with so much depth, so much emotion, it almost took her down. "Being here in Bendal is just...a lot." His thumbs smoothed at her skin. "My mother was here..." He gulped. "Khenda was here. And you...God Maddie, you were here." He blinked a few times and leaned his lips to hers. "You're the only one I have left." He kissed her again. "The only one...Madeline, promise me you won't go."

"Harry..." She started, but he cut her off; his lips pressing against hers again.

"Promise me you won't go," he spoke between hot, feverish kisses; his hands sliding back down around her waist and pressing her to him. "You have to stay, Madeline. You have to..." He kissed her again and again and the kisses that began in a shared sorrow, in the seeking of solace, soon moved to something else entirely. Something hotter, something more passionate; something that took them both over.

"Harry," Maddie gasped as his mouth moved over hers, as he began to walk her backwards towards the wall of the greenhouse. She had a brief, fleeting, blip of a thought that maybe she should slow him down, maybe she should push him away. They were in public, they had just been at a funeral. But that thought was tossed aside when his tongue slipped into her mouth and his hand reached for the handle to the door.

"Promise me Maddie," he groaned into her mouth as they moved inside; the door clicking behind them. "Promise me you won't go."

"Harry..." Maddie moaned, her arms wrapping up around his neck.

"Say it," he demanded as he moved her back against a long table in the middle of the room where pots sat off to the side with gardening tools and gloves and things that he really never took notice of as he pressed against her.

"I promise," Maddie spoke against his lips; her heart pounding in her chest, right along with his. "I promise. I won't go Harry. I promise..." And Harry, hot and needy, and so desperate for her, closed his mouth over her words and moved his hands over her body. His hands were firm as they slid; one up and rough over her breast, one down and quick under her skirt.

"Oh!" Maddie called out into the room when his fingers slid up her stocking to the bare flesh above the lace tops. "Harry...

"I need you," his hand moved higher, straight to her wet, warm center and he groaned. "I need you Maddie. Maddie..." His lips pulled from hers and he opened his eyes, needing her consent, not wanting to just take her—wanting her to come with him; to tell him it was okay. "Can I have you? Can I...oh God. Can I have you? Here and now and..."

"Yes," she nodded, her eyes tearing at all the emotion inside of her. "Yes Harry. Please..."

And that was all he needed. His hand slid higher, his fingers sweeping over the lace of her panties before he pulled his hand out from her skirt and moved to her waist. Maddie held tight to his shoulders as he lifted her off the ground up to the table behind her. Her hands tugged at his belt, his button, his zipper. His pulled off her panties and hiked up her skirt and Maddie widened her legs and brought him to her. And he went; pushing deep and strong, all the way into her.
It was hot and fast and full of the desperate kind of want they both felt. He needed her; so much. And she needed him too, all of him. It didn't take much to push them both to the end; a few long, steady strokes, some hot, strong kisses and a tangle of heavy pants and Harry was exploding within her as she exploded around him.

And when it was over, when he was leaning into her as she sat perched on the table, when she was wrapped up around him pulling in deep breaths, they both felt just a bit lighter and their lips pulled up just a bit higher.

"Are you okay?" He looked her over as he slipped from her; adjusting his clothing before turning all attentions to her. "I didn't hurt you or..."

"No," she cut in; soft and sweet as she wiped at the lipstick smudge on his mouth. "You didn't hurt me. I..." She took in a breath and let it out; slow and shuddery. "I'm okay."

"Yeah?" His hands moved to her face, holding her carefully; his eyes searching.

"Yes," she nodded, turning to press a kiss to his palm before she took his hands and hopped from the table and slipped her clothing back into place. As she looked around a small giggle escaped her lips and brought a smile from her husband.

"What's so funny?" He took her hand in his as they moved towards the door.

"It's just...the greenhouse," she grinned. "I guess we owed it one good go, no?"

"Ha!" Harry laughed; his head tossing back in a smile for the first time in days. "I suppose we did."

"Are you going to be okay?" She hugged his arm as he pulled open the door.

"I think so," he nodded, his smile fading just a bit. "You?"

"Eventually," she sniffed back the sadness that washed forward as they both remembered. "Come on Wales..." She tugged at his arm, pulling him through the door of the greenhouse. "Are you ready to get back to the others?"

"Yeah," he sighed, looking out around him for a moment before turning back to her. "I'm ready."

Their walk back to the group was slow. They took their time, they held tight to each other and when they finally made it back, the party had dissipated a bit; leaving their friends sitting around a large table, pushing around the remainder of the refreshments and biding time until they were to leave.

"Well look at that," Ella was the first to spot them, smiling up at them with tired eyes. "You found him."

"I did," Maddie nodded, holding onto his hand as they rejoined the group at the table.

"And where were you?" Bishop looked up.

"Well this is the perfect place for it," Collins offered, tucking a sleeping Isaiah closer to his chest. "A wonderful baby girl...with kinky black hair and a deep love for Africa."

"Exactly," Harry met Collins' eyes and tipped his newly acquired bottle of beer to him. "Well maybe not the kinky black hair," Maddie smiled as she watched the exchange between the two of them. "I would probably get into some trouble for that."

"Probably," Harry agreed.

And as the light rumble of laughter made its way around the table again, they all slipped into a contented silence; remembering Khenda and the love they all held for each other. And, for the moment, Maddie felt her sadness slip away from her. They could all keep Khenda's memory within them, among them. They could do that together.

It wasn't until later, three hours into the flight home, on Bishop's plane, when she slipped into the bathroom and made the discovery that would bring all of her emotions to the surface. They had been so busy for the last three day that neither of them had stopped to think about it, neither of them had paused to notice. But there it was, the undeniable answer to the question they had been too caught up to ask. Maddie had been three days late. But she wouldn't be four. She wasn't pregnant.

And everything washed over her; the death of Khenda, the memories of her father, the absence of Harry's mother, the pain and sorrow and upset she had pushed off in order to make it through and now—the loss of something that had never really been hers to begin with.

When she stepped out of the bathroom and returned to her seat, she looked to her husband and when he sent up a small smile, she fell apart. And he didn't know why, he wouldn't know why until they made it home and she finally told him, but it didn't matter. He took her in his arms and he pulled her close and he did for her what she had done for him over the last three days. He held her up and he held her together and there was no way he would ever let go.

Her grief was catching up.
Returning back to their lives was difficult. After losing Khenda, after the service in Bendal, it took both Harry and Maddie a little bit of time to readjust to their normal lives; as normal as their lives were. But they returned, full throttle. As the holiday season neared, their schedules expanded and Maddie found herself being called out more and more often.

But it was nice. It was nice to be busy again, nice to have something to concentrate on. And, in truth, she was really beginning to enjoy it. She was beginning to find the fun in her duties. She was returning to herself and it felt...nice.

Everyone around her seemed to be doing well. Kate was recovering well; still seeing Gerald on a twice a week basis, still taking a bit of a time out from public life but the improvements in her mood and her outlook seemed to have a trickle down effect on the family. Will was smiling more and Arthur was a happy bundle of cuteness.

All three of the Cambridges were present and accounted for at the Remembrance Day event. Even as Kate had scaled back her involvements, this was simply not something she would be willing to miss. So they all came together; to remember and honor. And seeing them, all of them, had been good for Maddie. And for Harry.

And for the public, who would salivate over a picture of Harry in uniform holding a smiley little Arthur who was focused on nothing other than pinching his uncles nose. It was just the kind of reprieve they needed. It was just the kind of reconnection they wanted.

And of course they were still trying to have a baby. They had taken a moment to recover from their sadness after Khenda died, after Maddie realized she wasn't pregnant yet again. They had taken a moment to wallow, a longer moment than those before, and then they took a collective deep breath and continued on. Neither of them were at the point of worry yet, but both of them were at the point of ready.

As November slipped by them with a bat of an eye, they were both looking forward to the New Year, to all that came with the end of this one and the beginning of the next. And it was one dreary, chilly day deep in November when they finally realized all that was lining up for them.

They sat in Harry's office at SJP while Thomas flipped through their schedules for the next two months; this party, that benefit. They were green-lighting nearly everything and then he presented an option that made Maddie's eyes pop up from her notebook.

"I'm sorry, was that for me?"
"Yes Ma'am," Thomas nodded, a small smile pulling at Harry's lips. "They asked for you specifically."

"Not Harry?" She turned to her husband with stunned eyes.

"No Ma'am," Thomas shook his head. "It's become customary for a member of the Royal Family to go to Camp Bastion just before the Christmas Holiday; to visit the troops, wish them a Happy Christmas, take photos. That kind of thing. This year they asked for you."

"Wow..." Maddie was shocked at the request and incredibly flattered. "Why?"

"Sorry Ma'am, do you not want to?"

"No, no!" She exclaimed with wide eyes and a wave of her hand. "I want to do it. I just. I'm surprised."

Harry chuckled next to her. "She has a hard time taking compliments sometimes, Thomas." Harry turned to her. "It's typically a woman; Kate, Anne, Sophie. I'm sure that they want to tap into your newness, your affiliation with Walking With The Women, your work with vets..."

"Precisely," Thomas agreed with Harry as he listed.

"When do I go?" She turned back to Thomas with a smile; she was in.

"Just before the family goes to Sandringham for the Christmas holiday. You would be gone for a day and take a heli to meet the Duke in Norfolk."

"Fantastic," Maddie smiled. "Sign me up."

"Right," Thomas nodded and made a note in his portfolio. "Now that's it for official duties. Are you still planning on spending the New Year in The States?"

"Yes," Harry answered quickly. "Following Boxing Day, we're going to Colorado through the New Year." It was a compromise he had made; easily. They would always and forever be spending the Christmas holiday at Sandringham, the very least they could do was spend the New Year with Maddie's family. And it didn't hurt that he loved spending time with them.

"Good then," Thomas made another quick note and shut his notebook. "If you'll excuse me?"

"Sure," Harry nodded and rose to his feet, shaking Thomas' hand. "Thank you."

"Yes," Maddie followed suit. "Thank you for keeping us so organized."

"Of course," he smiled to the Duchess and then, just as simply and unassuming as he had slipped in, he slipped out; closing the door behind him.

"Now..." Harry turned to his wife with a wide smile, knowing the answer to his upcoming question. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Ugh..." Maddie stretched her arms over her head as she groaned. It was too early in the morning and she had a long day ahead of her. "I cannot believe they are going to make me work out all day."
"It's not all day," Harry smirked, reaching for his cup of tea on the table and sitting back on the couch.

"It is too," she narrowed her eyes at him. "I have cardio first thing and then some endurance training," she rolled her eyes. "And after lunch with Ella..." She let out a long, heavy breath. "That trainer is going to make me run."

"Look at you," he chuckled. "You really think you're in such an athletic condition that you shouldn't have to train?"

"No," she laughed. "I didn't say I shouldn't have to train. I just...It's November. I need to start in November?"

"Well, they are trying to gear you up for the practice ski in January," he explained as she began to walk around the room.

"I do not need to train for two months for a practice ski in January." Her eyes narrowed.

"It's a twenty mile practice ski," Harry's eyes followed her as she moved around him; around the room.

"Yes I know." She smiled. "I've been skiing since I was a child, Captain. I'm no stranger to the snow."

"You do know that cross-country skiing is drastically different than downhill?"

"No," she turned wide, mocking eyes to him. "Tell me more my mountain man."

"Okay..." He rolled his eyes. "Make fun."

"Awww..." She moved around behind him, her hands sliding over his shoulders as she leaned to kiss him. "What are you doing today? While I'm out being trained like a circus animal."

"So dramatic," Harry sighed, pulling one of her hands from his shoulder to his lips. "I'm having lunch with my father."

"Oh?" Maddie smiled. "Where?"

"Our place," Harry answered and tugged at her hand, wanting to bring her around to him. "Listen, I know you don't want to go running," he grinned as she settled in his lap. "But I'm awfully proud of you for doing what they want you to do."

"Thank you," Maddie pressed her lips to his; allowing her ridiculousness to ease a bit. "Are you still going to love me if I'm a terrible runner?"

"I think I'll actually love you more," he laughed. Her stubborn nature was one of the things he enjoyed most about her, even when it was being used against him.

"Perfect," she grinned. "What about if I'm the slowest cross country skier in January?"

"You will most likely be the slowest," Harry pointed out as his shoulders shrugged. "But yes. I'll still love you."
"What if..." Maddie bit at her lip, amused by their conversation, delaying her departure. "What if while I'm out there I lose part of my nose to frostbite? You'll still love me then?"

"Of course," he nodded, sensing her motives, noting her silliness but answering her anyway.

"What about my ear?" Her eyebrows arched.

"Yes." He nodded again.

"How about part of my ass?"

"Now listen," his tone changed. "Your ass shouldn't be hanging out in the Arctic, Maddie."

"You just never know," she winked and moved to kiss his cheek before stepping from his lap. "I have to go. As much as I would rather stay here, in doors, with you. My big, strong, handsome husband..."

"Okay," he rolled his eyes, moving from the couch to his desk.

"We could cuddle up...make love..." She flashed a bright, wide, hopeful smile and he laughed.

"Go." He pointed to the door. "Go build up your endurance and I'll see you tonight."

"For the love making?" She laughed.

"For something," he grinned as she pulled open the door. "I'll see you later."

"Good-bye Captain," she sighed and with just a bit of dramatics, she left his office; as ready for her day as she would really ever be.

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The cardio workout ended up not nearly as strenuous as Maddie had feared. Even the endurance training wasn't terrible, though she was absolutely starting to feel the pain. After a quick shower, she pulled her hair up, dressed and hurried to Ella and Bishop's for a relaxed lunch before she had to meet up with her trainer again to run. Ella was really just beginning to show and every time Maddie saw her, she was growing a little rounder in the middle and she looked simply exquisite.

"Come in, come in!" Ella tugged her best friend into the house as they hugged and said hello.

"My God, look at you!" Maddie grinned from ear to ear as she looked down at Ella's little round pouch. "You look adorable!"

"Thanks," Ella rolled her eyes. "You would think it would make me a little self-conscious but, funnily enough, the rounder I get, the more Bishop wants to touch me. Things are about to get really interesting around here."

"Oh," Maddie chuckled. "I'm not sure I needed to know that. Is he here?" She looked around as they made their way to the kitchen.

"No," Ella shook her head. "He's in Italy with his father and some business associates."
"Oh fun," Maddie slid into a chair at the table, looking at the lunch spread. "Thank you so much for having me over."

"Are you kidding? I love seeing you," Ella sat down next to her and reached for her water; looking Maddie over with quizzical eyes. "Sorry but, did you just take a shower?"

"I did," Maddie nodded with a slight groan. "I started training this morning for the trek."

"Oh that's right!" Ella's smile pulled wide and amused. "You're going for a run this afternoon."

"I am," Maddie laughed at herself; pulling her fork into her fingers and poking at the salad.

"How are you feeling?" Ella smiled at the very thought of Maddie running; knowing what this trek must mean to her if she was.

"Well, if I'm being honest...my ass...really hurts."

"Ha!" Ella's head tipped back. "It's been awhile huh?"

"Yes!" Maddie's eyes grew wide. "I mean. I'm not exactly lazy and I like to think I'm in decent shape but...my ass..." She shook her head slowly. "It's already killing me."

"Apparently being Duchess isn't quite the ass workout you had expected?" Ella joked.

"Apparently," Maddie snickered.

"Maybe Harry could help you with that?" Ella winked.

"Working out my ass?" Maddie laughed into a sigh. "I don't even want to know what that would entail. Maybe we could keep that suggestion between us."

"I suppose," Ella shrugged.

"I think maybe you've been hanging around Bishop too much."

"Agreed," Ella smiled. "But that's not about to change..." She took a deep breath and a sip of water. "So...about Bishop."

"Yeah?" Maddie raised her eyebrows.

"I had an appointment this morning," her hand ran over her rounded stomach.

"Is everything okay?" Maddie glanced to the baby she felt so incredibly protective of before it was even there.

"Yes. Absolutely," Ella was quick with the reassurances. "I found out the sex of the baby."

"Hold on. You what?" Maddie stopped in her tracks, her voice shooting high and her fork resting on the table. "You know the sex of the baby?!"

"Yes." Ella was beaming.

"And you just let me go on for five minutes about my ass hurting?!"
"Well you were on a roll."

"A roll that should have been stopped!" Maddie wiped her lips with her napkin. "Now wait...I thought you two didn't want to know."

"Bishop doesn't want to know," Ella corrected. "I want to know. I DO know. Do you want to know?"

"Oh God YES. Can I know? I mean would Bishop care if I knew?"

"I asked him if I could tell you." Ella's eyes were dancing.

"And?" Maddie bit her lower lip, her breath holding.

"And it's a boy."

"It's a boy!!" Maddie clapped her hands together before she leaned in to hug Ella. "Oh my God. You're going to have a boy!"

"I know! Can you even imagine it?" Ella laughed as she hugged Maddie back. "Another little Bishop running around?"

"Look out London," Maddie sighed; happy and giddy for her best friend. "Oh wow. Ella...a son. You're going to have a son." And as tears pricked at her eyes, Maddie sighed back into her chair. "You're going to have a son."

The ride from Ella's to meet her trainer was a quiet one for Maddie; reflective and thoughtful. She sank back into the seat and looked out at the rainy, dark day. And it fit her mood. Despite the rebound she was feeling, despite the laughter and the happiness and the celebrations, she still had a bit of sadness looming nearby. She still thought of Khenda; every day. She had made it a point to call Collins often, to talk to Isaiah, to make plans with them. And, in the wake of it all, she and Harry had been spending more time talking about their parents; the parts they wanted to be sure to remember, the parts they wanted to be sure to pass onto their own children.

When those children finally came. Maddie took a deep breath and looked down at her hands. She didn't want to get caught up in the baby making hysteria, she really didn't. She didn't want to start counting days to ovulation and she really didn't want to begin discussions about samples and testing and basal temperatures. Though those particular adventures were still far away on the horizon from where they were at, they were still there. Months away, but they were there. But she wasn't ready to think that way. All she wanted to do was relax and enjoy her marriage. She wanted to have fun with her husband, lots of sex with her husband, and when the time was right —she wanted a baby.

But on these dreary dark rainy days, it was a little easier to feel the slight of sadness that came with months of trying and no results. Particularly when she seemed to be surrounded by babies; chubby little Arthur, sweet little Isaiah, Baby Tindall, Baby Bishop. There were babies everywhere and she just wanted one. One cute little bundle with bright red hair.

She took another deep breath and looked out the window. She wasn't ready to obsess over this yet. She wasn't ready to go down that road. She wanted to relax and let it happen. So she inhaled
and exhaled a few times and closed her eyes. And she smiled. Ella was going to have a son. Harry was going to be delighted to add another boy to the lineup.

"Oh!" Her eyes snapped open and she reached for her phone. Dialing his number, she held the phone to her ear.

"Madeline," when Harry answered, her lips pulled higher. If nothing else, the last few months had at least brought them closer; strengthened their connection. "If you're trying to get out of the run, I refuse to be an accomplice."

"Ha!" She laughed. "No. I'm not trying to get out of the run. I have some news for you, if you want it."

"What kind of news?"

"Ella knows what they are having," Maddie chuckled. "But Bishop doesn't want to know. I've been given permission to tell you if you want to know...and if you can promise not to tell Bishop."

"Oh wow!" His voice brightened. "I think I can do that. I think I'll actually enjoy doing that."

"Nice." Maddie rolled her eyes, already imagining the teasing.

"Tell me."

"They're having a boy," she felt a warm happiness wash over her as she let him in.

"A boy," Harry breathed. "Wow. Bishop's going to have a son."

"He is," Maddie nodded, her previous blip of sadness fading as she shared the excitement with her husband.

"Well that is wonderful news," Harry laughed at the thought of a tiny Bishop running around. "Hey listen, baby. When your run is over, can you come straight home?"

"Sure," she nodded. "Is everything okay?"

"Of course," he laughed. "I just want to see you...massage your sore, tired feet."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed along with him. "I actually think you may end up massaging my ass."

"Done. Sign me up." And she could tell he was grinning.

"I'll see you when I'm done," Maddie's sigh was heavier as her car pulled to a stop. "I'll be sweaty and exhausted."

"Brilliant." Harry couldn't help but chuckle at her.

"I have to go now. Run time."

"Remember to breathe. Deep breaths."

"Remember to breathe? That's your advice to me?"
"It is today," he answered. "I love you."

"I love you too," she grumbled. With a quick good-bye she ended the call; stepping from the car out into the drizzly rain. It looked like she was really about to do this.

She was about to become a runner.

By the time Maddie's car pulled into the gates of Kensington Palace late that afternoon, she was ready to call it a day; beyond ready. While she had been running the sky had opened up and it was way past drizzle. But it seemed fitting. She was tired and sweaty and wanted nothing more than to sink into her enormous bathtub full to the brim with piping hot water. She wanted to calm and soothe her muscles and then curl up with her husband and let the day sleep away from her.

Despite her weary body and the dampened day, her spirits were high. While she was running she had spent a great deal of energy trying to get her mind off of the fact that she was running, off of the fact that there was a trainer—ex Army no less—calling out pointers to her as she moved. In order to move past that, in order to keep from taking off her running shoes and throwing them at his head, she let her mind drift to all of the happy places in her life; Harry, Ella, Arthur, a recovering Kate, Baby Boy Bishop. There were a great deal of happy places in her life.

So even though her body needed soothing, her mind did not. She was already there. Her door pulled open and Sampson was ready; umbrella in hand. Maddie laughed and waved him off.

"I think I can use a little rain after all of that, don't you?" She raised her eyebrows, knowing he had seen her struggle through her workout.

"If you say so Ma'am," he nodded but followed along anyway. He was a smart man and he wasn't about to comment on that any further.

"Okay," she sighed as they reached the door. "Thank you Sampson. I think we're in for the night."

"Have a good evening Ma'am," he nodded and stepped away; watching as she opened the door and stepped inside. Maddie knew without looking that he waited until the door latched behind her before he turned away from her.

She let out a long breath as she toed off her shoes and kicked them to the side; giggling at the way it made her feel happy to reap just a tiny bit of abuse on the shoes she had finally worn. With a glance at herself in the mirror, pink cheeks and a haphazard pony tail, she called out into the house. "Harry! I'm home from my day of medieval torture..." She had a wide smile and happy eyes as she moved through the entryway, rounding the corner to their living room.

And she stopped in her sock-footed tracks.

There in her living room were Harry, Charles, and a uniformed Lieutenant Colonel in the British Army. All three men rose to their feet as she appeared and when Maddie's eyes flashed to her husband's, her heart thudddled in her chest and she felt it; a shift in the room. She watched as Harry gulped at a lump in his throat, as he pulled his eyes from her and forced a smile. She watched as he slipped into business mode.

"Madeline," he held a hand out to her, inviting her into the room. "This is Lieutenant Colonel
Mitchell. Colonel, I don't believe you've met my wife, Maddie."

She stood silent and still for a beat, for a blink, before she pulled it together and turned a smile to the tall, dark haired officer who extended his hand. "Colonel," her voice was shaky; a rattle only Harry was able to catch. "It's lovely to meet you."

"It's a pleasure, Your Royal Highness," he took her hand and dropped his head.

"Please forgive my attire," Maddie waved her hand over herself. "I began training today for my trek in the Arctic."

"The medieval torture?" The Colonel laughed lightly.

"Exactly," Maddie's eyes flashed wide and her smile pulled higher. "My trainer is former Army. I'm sure you would be proud." A rumble of laughter rounded the group as Maddie stepped to Charles, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "I didn't know we would have company when I returned."

"Actually," Charles spoke up, meeting her eyes with warmth and kindness. "The Colonel and I were about to take leave."

"Not on my account I hope," she turned back to the three of them, trying to reign in her overactive imagination; trying to calm her pounding heart.

"Not at all," Charles shook his head and turned his gaze to his son and Maddie caught it. An unspoken communication between them, something had happened here and the twisted feeling in her stomach hinted at her worst case scenario.

The two older men were quick with their good-byes, polite and dignified and Maddie stood in their living room as Harry showed them to the door. In the two minutes he was away, it took all she had to hold her mind at center, to not unravel before there was reason to unravel. But every beat of her heart, loud and hot in her ears, pulled her further and further from the calm she was grasping for.

The second Harry reappeared in the living room, the second his eyes found hers, Maddie's posture shifted; her shoulders slumped, her head dropped and her eyes focused on the ground.

"Colonel Mitchell..." Her voice cracked as she spoke; with a cough, she cleared it and continued. "Him being here with your dad...that..." She took in a shuddery breath. "That means what I think it means...doesn't it?"

And though Harry stood tall and steady, he felt his knees give just a bit at the look on her face, at the waver in her voice. "Maddie..." He tried for soft and soothing, taking a step towards her; wanting to be near her when she found out.

But she already knew. She was the wife of a highly trained Apache pilot in the British Army. She knew.

"When?" She cut him off, not able to look up at him as a weight settled over the room. Harry watched her for a minute, watched her wait for him to tell her what she already knew.

"January." She flinched at the sound of his voice.

"How long?" Her voice was devoid of emotion, devoid of feeling—numb. Just like her heart.
"Standard four month deployment," he answered; wanting to pull her into his arms, but knowing she wasn't ready for that. Her arms wrapped around her middle, protecting herself.

"Where?" She cracked; just a bit, just enough.

Harry took a breath and looked to the ground, remembering vividly the images they had seen on the news only two days ago. He lifted his eyes to her, intent on watching her reaction as he told her. "Khundu*.*"

The word slammed into Maddie's chest, nearly knocking her over. Her eyes blinked closed, her breath pushed from her lungs and her fingers clenched into small fists. And Harry caught it all.

"Madeline..." He reached out to her.

"Wow..." She cleared her throat; her head nodding heavily. "I...I guess I..." And she couldn't look at him. For the first time in their marriage, she couldn't meet his eyes; for fear it would be the end of her resolve. Her fight or flight instinct kicked in and suddenly all she could see was a way out. "I need to take a shower." She turned to look up the stairs. "The run and...I need a shower." She moved from her spot then, brushing past a confused Harry and making way for the stairs.

"Oh-kay," Harry watched her move past him with wide eyes. He knew she was shocked, he knew this had hit her—he had watched it hit her. But this sort of complete avoidance surprised him. "Maddie I..." His hand reached out to her but she was already out of his grasp.

"Shower," she repeated the word, already bounding up the stairs; leaving a stunned Harry in the living room watching as his wife fled.

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She couldn't get up the stairs fast enough. She couldn't get away from him, from his words, from the harsh reality of it all, fast enough. As she pushed into their room, she tore off her clothes, tossing them to the floor with disregard and immediacy. She didn't stop to do any of the things she normally did before she showered; lay out clothes, find her lotion, her robe. She didn't stop for any of it. She couldn't. She turned on the shower as hot as she could stand and then she stepped inside.

And only when she was there, safe in the steady stream of noise, the haze of the steam; only when she was completely hidden from the realities that awaited her did she let it sit.

And then she sank. Her heart, her mind, her body. Her knees gave out and she slid, her back against the hard tile of the shower wall as she slid to the bottom. It was there that his words finally resonated.

In just over a month her husband was being deployed to one of the most dangerous places on earth. And there was nothing she could do about it but cry.

So she did. Big, shoulder heaving sobs.
A/N: This is a long chapter so I will post in two parts. It jumps back and forth between the "present" where Maddie is on a helicopter landing at Camp Bastion for her visit just before Christmas and the day when Harry's upcoming deployment was revealed. I really hope the jumps make sense.

"Ma'am," the helicopter pilot's voice called out over the radio, into the headphones pressed against Maddie's ears. She pulled her mind from her wandering thoughts and looked up to him. "We're almost at Camp Bastion, Ma'am. Nearly ten minutes out."

"Thank you," Maddie smiled, nodding to him before her eyes shifted out the window. She was tucked snug and tight into her seat and the steady of whip of the helicopter blades was dulled but not drowned out by the phones on her ears.

She was on her way to Camp Bastion to visit the soldiers and wish them a Happy Christmas. It had been nearly a month since she had accepted the invitation; a long, hard fought month. As she looked down over the brown land below her, she could still remember that night. She could remember with vivid, palpable detail, the night she came out of that shower and just how long it took her to accept the truth. She was on her way to visit soldiers just before Christmas and, in a few short weeks, her husband was going to be one of them.

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Harry had only debated for a split second before he followed his wife up the stairs. She was upset and probably in shock and, as it would turn out, faster than he. By the time he reached their room, wanting to pull her back to him, back to the moment and away from this avoidance that surprised him; she was in the bathroom and the water was running. In truth he debated going in. He even went so far as to turn the knob and take a step. But, thinking better of it, he stepped back and shut the door.

It had been quite the news; even for him. He had wondered, of course, what the topic of discussion might be when his father called and requested lunch with him. He had caught the tone, caught the official feel of it all. And the second he saw the uniform, he knew. Somewhere in the middle of the discussion, he felt bad; a heaviness in his chest. He wished she had been there. He wished his father had requested Maddie be there; wanting her to have heard it with him, thinking that maybe that in this moment she would feel more like it was happening to them and not just to her.

Harry stepped away from the bathroom door and let her have her time, her space. He moved to sit on the edge of their bed and he waited. And waited.

And before long the sun had set outside and the room had grown dark. But he was waiting. He could outwait her, he could outwait the hot water supply; he could outwait anything. There was
nothing that would pull him from that room, from waiting to catch her when she came out; to absorb this together.

She wasn’t sure exactly how long she stayed in the heat of the shower but when she finally stood up and turned off the water, her fingers had turned to prunes and she was thoroughly cried out. She pulled herself up, turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. Reaching blindly for her towel, she dried herself off and found her robe. Tugging it around her, she twisted her hair up into a towel and took a long, deep breath.

She knew she needed to go back out there. She knew she needed to go back to him, to talk to him, to look at him; to accept this new fate. But it hurt, terribly. It hurt to think of him leaving now. It hurt to think of him going there. It just hurt—all over. She wanted to crawl into her bed, pull her covers over her head and avoid all of the harsh realities that came with this news. But she knew better. That wasn't how this worked. Not even a little bit.

So she pulled the towel from her head and she ran her comb through her hair and then, without bothering to care about her red, puffy eyes, she left the bathroom. Though she had been intent on dressing and going back downstairs to find him, to apologize for her quick retreat, her plans were detoured when she stepped into their bedroom.

There he stood; calm and casual and his eyes fixed on the bathroom door. When she stepped through, he stood taller, his attentions pulling to her exclusively and Maddie stopped there outside the bathroom door. And a silence ran around them; neither knowing exactly what to say. She had no idea how long he'd been standing there. He had come up after her nearly instantly but when he was confronted with the closed door, when he heard the stream of water and her tears beyond that, he had stopped and he had waited. He didn't want to push. He knew this was beyond difficult to process but he had hoped she would pull through, that she would come out to him.

And there she was, her toes curling into the soft pile of the carpet as she tried to gain the voice she knew she had. Her heart was at battle with her mind as she fought for the right thing to say. And when her lips finally parted and allowed her to speak, her words surprised even her.

"Did you know?" She was avoiding his eyes and he knew it. "Before today, did you know this was happening?"

"No." His response was quick and firm. "I literally found out just before you."

"Was that why I wasn't asked to lunch? So that I wouldn't be there when they told you?"

"Of course not," Harry shook his head. "My father asked if you would be there and I told him you had to start your training. Had I known it was going to be this...Maddie..."

"Okay," she whispered and took a deep breath, turning away from him.

"Okay?" He knew that couldn't be it as he watched her walk towards her dresser. "That's it?"

"What else is there?" She kept her eyes trained on the drawers as she searched for her pajamas.

"What else..." Harry trailed off and ran a hand through his hair. Taking two slow, deep breaths, he watched as Maddie reached for her pajamas; seemingly fine as she dressed for bed. "Maddie."

"Yes?" She lifted her eyebrows but refused to look to him. But before he could open his mouth to tell her the long list of 'what else' there was, the call came.
The Queen.

When her call came, he was tempted to ignore it; tempted to pretend he hadn't heard it. But he couldn't. He knew that. She was The Queen, she was his gran...and she was calling to talk to him about his deployment; logistics that needed to be sorted, deals that were being made. She was calling to discuss the very topic that he desperately wanted to discuss with his wife. With an explanation that wasn't necessary and a promise to return that fell on half-listening ears, Harry stepped from the room and answered the call; leaving Maddie alone in their room.

She took one look around the room, around their room, and her tears pulled forward. And her heart ached. He wasn't there but he was everywhere. His clothes, his smell, his things. She took a deep breath and shook her head.

"No," she spoke out into the room in a voice that told of the miles of emotion she was stuffing down. "I have to..." She began but had to stop, had to control the nearly uncontrollable urge to sob. "I have to be up tomorrow. Early. And we have to have our pictures taken and..." She tugged back the blankets and slid into bed. "I can't do this right now." And even though it was earlier than she normally went to bed, even though there was a massively difficult unfinished conversation to be had, Maddie pulled her blankets high around her shoulders, over her head. Her hand reached out to turn off her lamp and then she pressed her eyes tight and begged whomever was in charge of such things to just let her fall asleep.

To just let her avoid this for one more day. At least one more day.

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When Harry had come to bed that night, Maddie was asleep; hard and deep. And though he desperately wanted to wake her, wanted to connect with her, he didn't have the heart to wake her. She had been so upset, maybe the sleep would help. Maybe she needed time to sit with it, maybe she needed time to mull it over before she could talk about it. He didn't know. But what he did know was that he didn't think he could make it through a night like this with her not meeting his eyes, with her not connecting with him. So he took a deep breath and dressed for bed; careful not to wake her as he crawled in next to her.

She had woken earlier than he, slipping into the shower before he even began to budge. They had an early event that day and before he could grab her hand as she flew by him in her robe, Maddie was off in a spare bathroom down the hallway, her hair being curled and teased, her makeup applied. Harry was quick in the shower, quick to dress and with two mugs of tea in his hands, he slipped into what had become Maddie's staging area.

"Good morning," he eased in cautiously; his lips smiling as he took her in, his eyes glancing to Tara.

"Good morning," Maddie replied, her eyes set forward on something, anything that wasn't him. As he bent to kiss her lips, to hand her the mug in his hand, Tara took a moment and stepped from the room. "Thank you," Maddie smiled as she took the mug from him; feeling slightly more anxious now that she was alone with him—understanding how insane that even sounded.

"Maddie..." His voice was low and serious as his eyes sought to connect with hers. "Listen..."

"I can't," she whispered back.
"But Madeline," he moved closer, pulling up a stool next to hers, glancing at the doorway before he caught her eyes and when he did, he could see it. Everything she had been feeling since the night before was in her eyes, in that lump in her throat, in the pleading twist of her lips.

"Please," she whispered, blinking heavily. "I just...I need to make it through today before I..." She shook her head and wiped at her eyes. "I can't right now Harry."

"Okay," he gave in; knowing fully well he shouldn't, knowing fully well that she would never be able to just shut this out. But he gave in anyway; because she was his wife, because he loved her more than anything and because she had been pushed to her limits. He wasn't going to push anymore. It hurt his chest to even imagine pushing her more.

"Oh-kay," Tara sang out as she stepped back into the room with a smile. "I know you two have the lovey dovey thing going on but if you want your hair up, I'll need to steal you away from His Royal Highness."

"Of course," Harry nodded, squeezing Maddie's knee as he rose from his spot. "I'll just..." He cleared his throat and turned away from them both. "I'll see you downstairs."

"Thank you," Maddie's voice cracked as she tried to turn her focus, as she tried to avoid. With a nod, Harry stepped out of the room and into his day. A day full of smiles that weren't completely genuine, a day full of the worst kind of undercurrent of stress. A day when all he wanted to do was take her home and make her face this with him.

When they had arrived home that night, they were both exhausted; in all aspects of the word. They had been on their feet, on their game for the entirety of the day and it had taken nearly everything they had. They had smiled, they had posed, they had done everything they were supposed to do and finally, finally they were going to be able to do what they needed to do.

Harry shut the door behind Maddie and watched as she stepped into their home; kicking her shoes off to the side, pulling the hat from her head, careful of the pins. As she moved up their stairs, she worked the clasp of her necklace, slid her rings from her fingers; dropping them onto her dresser as they stepped into their room. All without saying a word. Harry moved slower behind her; shedding his suit coat, loosening the knot on his tie; watching her as she rid herself of her day, of her duty.

"Maddie?" He called out to her, dropping his watch onto his dresser with a light thud, staring at her through the mirror.

"Hmmm?" She didn't turn to face him as she continued to undress. Harry watched and waited and when he didn't respond, she didn't seem to notice. He turned away from the mirror, turning to look at her as she stepped from the pool of clothing at her feet and walked straight into the bathroom; as though they hadn't exchanged words at all.

"Madeline..." He called out to her, the confusion and concern etching into his forehead. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly and leaned back against the dresser. Looking down at his hands, he spoke out into the room, knowing she could hear him. "The day is over...the event is over..." His eyes snapped up as she emerged from their bathroom, dressed in pajamas with her hair pulled up in a messy bun. "What are you doing?"

"Going to bed," she smiled; a small, simple gesture that pulled just a bit at her lips...that never met
"To bed." He repeated her words with wide eyes.

"I'm exhausted," she explained, pulling back the blankets.

"Okay listen," Harry pushed away from his dresser. He didn't know if she was purposefully being evasive or if she was subconsciously choosing to sit in denial longer but he did know one thing. They had to talk about this. It couldn't just sit another night. "We need to talk."

"Talk?" She fluffed her pillow.

"Yes," he exhaled heavily. "Talk." He shook his head at her glassy expression, her tight smile. "And I'm going to need you to stop..." He waved his hand at her as though he couldn't quite find the words he was looking for. Her head turned up, turned towards him, but her eyes stayed away and he would be lying if he said it didn't worry him. He would be lying if he said her attitude didn't throw him more than a little bit. "The smile and wave. It's like you're playing Duchess with me and..."

"Playing Duchess?" Her eyes snapped right to him and he saw it; the darkness, the sadness. "What exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"It means..." He was taken aback by the look on her face. "You're walking around in this cold silence, like nothing is happening here. Last night when I told you about my orders, you ran out of the room and spent nearly an hour crying in the shower. This morning you could barely talk about it without...and now that the day is over, now that we're standing here...it's like..." He exhaled and shook his head. "It's like nothing has happened. I don't even know how to...I don't know you like this. I don't know what to do when you're like this."

"Like what?" She blinked, her arms crossing over her chest as her foot began to tap below her and she knew, she was so close to imploding. And she desperately did not want to fall apart.

"Silent. In denial. Distant. Avoiding me." He grew soft; his eyes, his voice. "Madeline please...don't shut me out. Don't do this. Say something. Anything. I don't know what to do when you're like this. I..."

"I can't," Her voice cracked and he saw her waver just a bit before she blinked and stood tall. "I can't talk about it with you right now."

"What?" He was astonished. "Why? We don't have anywhere else to be, no photos to smile for and..."

"Harry..." Her voice cracked and he saw it, the same waver she had that morning when he first broached the topic. He felt bad but he knew that there was no avoiding it and the quicker they got to it, the sooner they could move forward.

"Maddie, I'm being deployed. Right after the New Year, they are sending me to..."

"Stop," she shook her head.

"I'm going to be gone for four months and..."

"STOP!" She yelled, her hand flying up to his chest; pressing him away, keeping him at bay.
"Maddie..." He felt his own emotions stir. "Please. Don't push me away. Talk to me. Say something." His fingers moved over hers that rested on his chest and he waited; his heart thumping in his chest as he watched her. And then she lifted her eyes to his and she spoke; honest and difficult.

"I don't want you to go," she finally spoke the truth and fresh tears pricked at her eyes. "I'm sorry. I know it's selfish and I know I sound ridiculous and I know that I actually have no say in this but...I don't want you to go."

"Maddie..." His heart ached at the look on her face; his fingers tightened over hers.

"I know..." She nodded; her head heavy and her stomach turning. "I know it doesn't matter what I want. I know my opinion doesn't matter here." Her hand slipped out from under his and she turned away from him; defeated.

"It's not that it doesn't matter," he took a step towards her. "I'm a Captain in the Army, Madeline. When they tell me to go, I go."

"But we both know that's not true!" She shook her head, feeling as though she was grasping at straws, at a hope that wasn't there. "They've kept you home before! They've kept you home from battle before Harry..."

"What are you suggesting?" His eyes were wide and sad. He knew she was having a hard time hearing this, processing this. "You want me to tell them no?"

"Yes," she nodded, wiping at her cheeks. "I want you to tell them no."

"Because my wife doesn't want me to go?" His voice was soft and tender because he knew she was hurting, he knew she was afraid. But he also knew she was being unfair.

"Yes," she nodded. "Because your wife doesn't want you to go. What better reason is there?" She felt a little frantic there in their room.

"Maddie..." His voice was low and gentle, like a voice one might use with a toddler. "You do know that you sound..."

"What?" She arched her eyebrows, her innate draw to defensiveness kicking in. "I sound what? Crazy?"

"I didn't say crazy," he shook his head, seeing the tension rise in her face, sensing the edge in her voice; watching as she moved from avoidance and denial straight on to angry and defensive. He had known her for a long time, he had seen this before.

"Ridiculous?" She was challenging him with her word choice; egging on a fight—anything her subconscious could do to avoid the inevitable, the truth.

"Maddie come on," he groaned, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. "I don't want to fight with you. I want to talk about it. Listen...I know you're scared."

"Scared?" Her lips let out a puff of a laugh that held zero humor. "Scared. He thinks I'm scared." She mumbled to herself as she moved away from him. "You remember how you felt that day when that man came after me in the bookstore?" Harry's eyes hardened and he stood up straight;
his emotions pricking up at her words.

"I'm not sure what that has to do with..." He shook his head.

"Do you remember?" Maddie interrupted, spinning to face him.

"I'll never forget it," his arms crossed over his chest.

"You remember sitting here worrying, wondering if I was okay, wondering if I was going to come back alive, in one piece..."

"Madeline," his jaw flexed as he warned her. He didn't like the heat that coursed through his veins at the memory.

"You remember feeling helpless and witless and like your entire world could be folding in on you and there was nothing you could do about it?"

"Again. I'm not sure what this..."

"It lasted what? Ten minutes? Twenty?" She shook off his protests. "From the time the code was called until you got the all-clear...how long was it? I know you know."

"Twenty-two minutes," he bit off the words, not at all amused; not at all okay with where this was headed.

"That's right," she pointed to him. "Think you'll ever forget what that was like? Think you'll ever get over feeling like that?" She shook her head, wiping at tears that were pulling through her eyes. "Twenty-two minutes and when I got back you were just...shaken. Torn. So far past scared. You were so out of your mind that you nearly sent me away. You remember?"

"Maddie..." His voice was strangled. "This is my job..."

"That feeling..." She gulped as the reality washed over her again. "I'm going to have that feeling for four months. Four months, I'm going to worry about you. I'm going to know that you're right there, right in the way of imminent danger; right at the target. I'm going to wonder for four months if you're okay, if you're coming back to me...I'm going to be in the worst state of worry and you..." She sucked in a breath. "You talk about it like you're going to just do another job; another royal duty. You talk about it like it's nothing...like I'm just...scared. And in reality, my world is folding in around me." Harry was silent. "And you drop it on me in our living room, in front of people, after a run..." She faded a bit; her eyes, her passion. "You let me hear it and expect me to...

"Hold on," he held up his hand.

"And this morning when Tara's doing my hair for today..." She cut in, still in her own line of thought. "What did you expect? To just drop in and casually discuss this life altering event in our lives like you're adding another polo match to the lineup?"

"Life altering?" He sighed. "Come on Maddie...I know it was unexpected and I will admit that I could have handled it a little differently but it can't really be that much of a surprise...You had to have known there was a chance I would be deployed again."

"But I didn't," she shook her head. "I had no idea this would be dropped in our laps so soon
"But you knew I was a soldier when you married me." Maddie blinked at his words; her heart aching in her chest and she leveled her eyes with his and in a voice that sounded not very much like her, she shrugged.

"And you knew I was a Doctor when you married me. Do you see me practicing?"

And just like that the tension in the room pulsed and the air between them changed. Maddie would never really know why she spoke the words she did that night. Maybe it was involuntary reflex, maybe it was the misguided need to change the conversation, the way it made her feel. Because she wanted more than anything not to feel the desperation that was taking over her. Even if it meant that she replaced it with unjustified anger. Even if it made him mad.

"Wow..." The shock Harry felt was genuine and a bit overwhelming as he took a step back, his eyes wide. "I had no idea you would..." He shook his head and looked away from her. "Really Madeline? You're going to throw that up in my face right now?"

"Throw it in your face?" She laughed, an un-humored bark of a sound. "I can't throw reality in your face, Harry. When I married you I gave up everything I was before you and you've had to give up..."

"Nothing." His voice was hard and dark and angry; just like his eyes as they connected with her. "I gave up nothing." Maddie held his gaze, unfaltering, unblinking. "What are you trying to tell me Madeline? That I owe you some sort of penance for a life you CHOSE to take on?!" His voice rose with the red in his face, with the feeling in his heart.

"I'm trying to tell you that people change, that expectations CHANGE. That just because you were one thing before our marriage doesn't mean you have to be one now."

"What are you saying? You want me to quit the Army?" His voice was hushed and strong; a yell tied up in a whisper; astonishment pulling at every corner of his face.

"I didn't say that! I didn't mean that but...I want you to stop talking about it as though it is just another job! I want you to stop talking about it like it's something I should just blindly accept and be happy about!" She stood tall, not at all backing away from him.

"This is my duty, Madeline. This is how I pay back, this is how I serve..."

"And I want you to stop talking to me about duty and service as though I don't know what it's like to sacrifice." Her eyes narrowed and her lips pulled tight. "I've given up everything to stand beside you and serve, to stand beside you and do this duty..."

"Enough!" Harry yelled out into the room, his fingers clenching into a fist. "You do NOT get to use that against me! You do not get to bring that up when it was a decision you made! I did not force you here! I did not make you chose this! You chose this! You do NOT get to throw this up now!"

"And you do NOT get to take the one thing I chose and put him in the line of fire without me getting upset and protective!" Her voice cracked as she met him; loud voice, clench fists. "You do NOT get to make me feel bad for wanting you to be safe!"

"I don't think you understand what this means to me," he shook his head at her.
"And I don't think you understand what this means to me!" She countered. "I know why you do this, why you serve. I get it! I understand it on a deeper level than you think I do! I left my family and spent years in Bendal serving, doing my duty."

"Yes." Harry nodded. "Yes you did. And why do you get to do that with no issue and when it's my turn to step up..."

"Step up to a position that has people shooting at you!" She cut in.

"Says the only one of us who's actually been shot," his eyebrows lifted and his jaw tightened and Maddie had to take a step back.

"You're right," she exhaled sharply. "You're right. And then I left. I left and I came to you."

"And when the earthquake happened, when there was widespread devastation and panic, you went right back in!" He threw his hands in the air. "You and Ella in a pile of rubble! Talk to me about putting myself in the line of danger!"

"You wanted me to talk to you!" She yelled; angry and frustrated. "You don't get to follow me up here and tell me to 'stop playing Duchess' and speak to you and then be pissed when I do! You're flying you, my husband, the father of my children, my future...you're flying him into not only the most dangerous spot on the earth right now but what is arguably the most dangerous spot ever."

"I..." Harry began but Maddie wasn't finished; her face was flushed and her heart was pounding and she knew she was on a runaway train of thought, but she couldn't stop herself as she pushed forward.

"And I told you I didn't want to talk about it yet. I told you I couldn't talk about it yet and you keep pushing and pushing!" Her eyes narrowed. "You want me to say something? You want to know how I feel? THIS is how I feel! I want you safe and warm and protected and HERE! I've stopped with the 'smile and wave' just like you asked me to." She took a deep breath and reached for her robe that lay on the foot of their bed. "And now...if you'll excuse me...I'm quite finished with you yelling at me because I worry about you." And just like that, Maddie spun on her heels and stepped away from him, towards the door.

"Wh..." Harry watched her as she left the room, his forehead crinkled in confusion as he followed her out. "Where are you going?"

"To a spare room!" She called without turning around.

"To a spare room!" She called back. "I'm exhausted and we have another full day tomorrow and..."

"No." Harry stopped in his tracks; his voice firm as he crossed his arms over his chest. Maddie turned around then, her skin on fire from the yelling, from the moment.

"Did you just tell me no?" One eyebrow arched and though both of them knew at some level what was happening, neither of them stepped back.

"You're not sleeping in a spare room Madeline." His forearms tensed; muscles flexing.
"Excuse me?" She laughed; so caught up in her stubbornness, so caught up in standing her ground that she had lost sight of how this had all started. "Since when do you get to tell me..."

"You are my wife and we sleep together. In OUR bed."

"You do not get to order me around like..."

"I am your husband!" He yelled out, his voice echoing in the space around them; the sound of it hitting him enough that he took the smallest step forward. "And we sleep together. In our bed."

Maddie stood tall, unavering as her anger heated her blood; her cheeks flushing red. And in a moment of stubborn frustration, in a moment of headstrong defiance that she hadn't felt in a very long time, she made a move she knew would bring about the most anger from him.

She turned away from him and took the five steps into the spare room at the end of the hallway. And she shut the door behind her. Without another word.

Maddie pulled her eyes away from the small window just to her left and looked around the helicopter; full of men. She looked down at her hands, remembering their fight; remembering how angry she had been with him, how pissed he had been at her. Even now, weeks later, when she thought of it she could feel the heat and the emotion that had been boiling within her that night. She twisted her engagement ring around her finger, letting the sound of the blades above lull her back to calm; back to steady.

"Just under five, ma'am," the captain's voice clicked into her ear. With a smile and a nod in his direction, she turned her eyes back to the window.

The very second she shut the door between them, the fire that had been fueling her fight began to fizzle and the haze of anger began to fade. She moved further into the room, not bothering with the light. When she reached the bed, she pulled off the throw pillows, pulled back the blankets and slipped into the cold, crisp sheets.

But when her head hit the pillow, when she tugged the blankets up under her chin, her chest began to ache. And all she really wanted to do was sleep; close her eyes and forget about it all. So she pressed her eyes shut and she willed herself to sleep; forcing her mind away from all she had left in the hallway, all that had happened between them.

"One more day," she spoke out into the room, to nobody in particular. She needed just one more day before she faced it, before she let it sink.

But whomever it was she was speaking to, wasn't listening. Because as she laid in the bed that night, trying to push herself to sleep, to run from the reality of it all, she found that she simply couldn't. She really should have known better.

As much as she pushed, as much as she tried...when it started to sink in, all she could do was think about it; over and over. All she could do was relive it; in vivid, clear details. She could see herself yelling at Harry in their bedroom. She could hear the words she had thrown at him. She could feel the way his gut had flinched, she could feel the emptiness in her own heart.
And when she finally gave up and rolled over to look at the clock on the nightstand, it was three in the morning and she hadn't slept a wink. With a deep, heavy sigh, she sat up and looked around; her eyes settling on the door.

This wasn't how this was supposed to be. She knew that. She wasn't supposed to be in the spare bedroom without him. She wasn't supposed to be without him. Things had just gotten so out of control so fast and in her desperate desire to not think about his upcoming deployment, about the sadness and worry and fear that washed over her the second she knew, she had jumped head first into whatever topic would get them away from discussing it.

And now here she was; wide awake in the spare room without him.

And her heart was aching.

She had been wrong; wrong to snap at him, wrong to say those things to him, wrong to leave him standing in the hallway like that. She had been wrong to pull away instead of moving closer. She had been wrong and there was no way she was going to sleep until she made it right.

Tossing back the blankets, she rose from the bed and, swallowing what little pride she had left, she moved from the room and down the hall and with soft steps and gentle hands, she turned the knob and pushed into their room.

And Harry was gone.

As they neared their final destination, Maddie could see the others in the helicopter gear up for landing. The pilot began to flip switches, the special RPOs who had been sent out with her, began to look alert; ready. And Thomas across from her slipped his phone into his chest pocket and offered her a small smile. The dirt began to kick up and they hovered for a moment before the telltale bounce told her they had touched down. Before her hands could even slip lightly over the buckles on the belts that kept her in, her security detail halted her. This was different than any other event she had been to and this was the first of several reminders of that fact. While one RPO stilled her hands, the other geared up to step out. The team that was put together to ensure her protection were not messing around, they were taking her from the helicopter one step at a time. There would be no rushing, no moving about freely. Every step they took was planned and calculated.

Not at all like the way she had scattered around their home that night.

"Harry..." She flipped on the light, her eyes blinking at the sudden brightness. "Harry?"

Nothing.

She moved past their empty bed into the bathroom. Her feet were cold on the tile, her eyes squinting at the light. "Harry?"

Nothing.

Her heart thudded in her chest and she felt sick. She spun around and hurried from the room; her
steps rushed and her eyes panicked.

Where had he gone?

When had he gone?

She hurried down the hall and to the stairs. Holding onto the railing with shaky hands, she moved downstairs. His shoes were still in place on the floor at the bottom, his keys still hanging next to the door, his wallet tossed onto the side table. While he could have worn different shoes, he couldn't have gone too far without his keys and his wallet.

"Harry!" Maddie called out into the house. "Harry!" She moved through the living room, though the kitchen; around corners and in and out of rooms. And just when she thought she was going to cry from the crazy panic that flooded her body, she stopped and called out again; her voice coming in a sob. "Harry..."

"Maddie? What in the hell are you doing yelling and..."

She spun around in the hallway as he stepped out of his office; his pajamas rumpled and his hair mussed. He looked exhausted; and confused.

"Oh thank God..." She breathed, her hand moving to her heart as she took a deep breath. "You're here."

"Of course I'm here," he sighed, one arm folding over his chest while the other rubbed at the ache in his shoulder. "Where else would I..."

"You weren't in our room," she explained with teary eyes, pointing towards the stairs. "You weren't in our bed."

"You weren't either," he pointed out and her eyes welled over. Her head grew heavy as she nodded.

"Harry..." He saw the change in her disposition, the change in her mood. She hadn't come to fight and the knowledge of that eased his stance just a bit.

"I couldn't ..." He took a deep breath and made an admission that made her heart warm and ache at the same time. "I couldn't sleep there if you weren't sleeping there. I..."

"I'm so sorry." It was the truth and admitting it to him caused an overflow of feelings within her; the tears, the sobs, the worry, the fear. It all poured from her there before him. "Harry I'm so, so incredibly sorry..." She shook her head, not bothering to wipe at the tears on her cheeks. "I...oh God...I'm just so...afraid."

Though he was stubborn, though he was firm and stern and had been ready to hold his ground, that did it. That moved him.

"Come here," he walked towards her, his arms reaching to pull her into him.

"I was such an asshole to you," she pressed her face to his chest and continued to cry; even in the safety of his arms. "I shouldn't have said those things. I shouldn't have gone to the spare room. I'm just so..."
"I know," he whispered against her hair, tightening his hold on her. "I know you are baby...It's okay."

"It's not okay," she shook her head. "I should never have said those things Harry. I was just scared and angry..."

"I know," he kissed her hair and ran his hands over her; soothing and sweet. He had known all along that she was upset, that she was scared. The words hadn't hurt any less but at least he understood them.

"I don't want you to go Harry. I...haven't we had enough hits this year? Haven't we taken on enough? First it was Kate and then it was...then it was Khenda..." She felt her heart clench. "And we can't seem to get pregnant and..." Her eyes lifted to his and the look on her face felt like a punch to his gut. "And we're going to have to stop trying...aren't we?" Her voice cracked. "You don't want to miss me being pregnant. I don't want you to be gone when I'm going to appointments and..." She blinked at the big tears that were sliding from her eyes and her knees gave a little. "We're going to have to stop. Aren't we." It wasn't a question because she already knew his answer. Her hand flattened on his chest and she gave a small push, just enough to pull herself from him, just enough so she could breathe.

"I'm sorry, Maddie but..."

"We have to stop," she finished and grew quiet; tears slipping from her eyes as it all washed over her. Harry didn't know what to do. His instincts were to go to her, to pull her close and tight and kiss her tears away but there was something about her posture, something about her stance that made him stay put. Something that made him hold the space for her and wait. She took a moment, a long moment, before she looked back up to him and when her eyes slid into his gaze, his heart hurt. "I can't lose you Harry."

"Hey..." He moved forward.

"I can't," she shook her head. "I mean it. I've been able to keep it together through everything that's come our way but if something happened to you...it would kill me."

"Please don't talk like that," Harry's hand moved to his chest. "Please don't say stuff like that."

"It would," she leveled with him; her eyes wide and teary. "I...I know you're good at this. Hell. I know you're great at this. Clearly they think you're beyond capable and...and I know that I'm being unfair and that I should have been prepared for this because you're...but Harry..." She moved towards him then and she looked so scared, so scattered. Harry felt all of his loyalties call to question as he looked down at his wife in that moment. "I can't lose you. I...I can't. I can't."

"You won't," he shook his head, his hands reaching out to her as she stepped up to him. Forgetting all that was said upstairs, all that was thrown around, his hands moved to her face; cupping her gently as he tipped her face up to his. "Look at me. I promise you. You won't."

"You better not break this promise Wales," she let him take her in his arms, she let him pull her body into his; back into the strong, safe space of his embrace. "I can't lose you too."

"You won't," he shook his head again, pressing her into him. "I promise you, you won't." They stood like that, melted together, in that hallway for a long time; each of them holding onto the other and when Maddie finally sniffed and pulled away, she looked up to him with regret and apology in her eyes.
"I'm so sorry for what happened upstairs, for where things went. Do you think you'll be able to forgive me?" She held out hope, knowing her words had stung.

"Oh baby of course I forgive you..." He moved to wipe at her cheeks. "We both said things that maybe we shouldn't..."

"I have never, ever regretted my choice to be here," she whispered and his eyes softened. "I've never regretted my decision to be with you, to stand next to you. I don't. I don't know why I brought it up I just...I was upset and angry and afraid and..."

"Do you want me to quit?" His question was soft and heavy and it drew everything inside of her to his attention.

"Harry..." Her voice wavered and when his eyes locked with hers, she couldn't breathe. The depth and seriousness there was nearly too much.

"I'm asking," he cleared his throat. "I'm asking and I want you to be honest with me Madeline. No judgments. You've given up a lot and..."

"Baby," her hands slid to his cheeks. His hands followed hers and he blinked.

"Do you want me to leave the army?" And Maddie knew how important this moment was; how big. She could feel the weight of it settle over them and she didn't know if she should laugh or cry or take him in her arms and...

"No," she replied without thought, without reservation. "I don't want you to go but...I don't want you to quit. I could never ask you to..."

"But you could," he stepped closer to her. "You could. It would be...hard. It would be a difficult thing to do. This, serving in this capacity, is incredibly important to me."

"I know," she nodded. "I know it is, Harry."

"But God, Madeline." He shook his head. "Of course you're more important. I need you to know that you're more important. You, this...our family..." His lips tipped into a smile for the first time that night. "You could ask."

Maddie took it in; his words, the look in his eyes when he spoke them. She knew he meant it. There was no doubt. "But I won't."

And she meant it. She wouldn't ask him to give up this part of himself. Even though it meant that soon, sooner than either of them had anticipated, he would be gearing up to leave her for four months.

She wouldn't ask.

To Be Continued...
Chapter 137

Chapter Notes

A/N: This is a continuation of the last chapter. It jumps back and forth between the "present" where Maddie is on a helicopter landing at Camp Bastion for her visit just before Christmas and the events following the reveal of Harry's upcoming deployment. I really hope the jumps make sense.

They had made love that night. There in his office, on the rich leather sofa where he had gone to sleep for the night. Harry's offer to leave and Maddie's refusal to ask had moved them both from their stubborn stances, pulled them both to the middle.

Where she was sorry.

Where he understood.

Where they both surrendered the yelling and the arguments, where they let go.

Where they both clung tight.

Where she told him in breathless moans that choosing him was the best decision, that in that choice, she gained everything.

Where he told her that he would choose her over anything, over everything. Where he promised to return; promised to make her a mother.

They had made love that night; deep and heavy and passionate love. It pulled all of their emotions to the surface and left them raw and clinging to the other. And then they had gone to sleep, in their bed. Together.

And Maddie had never felt closer to him. Never more afraid to lose him.

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"Your Royal Highness." The soft accented voice pulled Maddie from her warm memory. Her eyes slid over to Thomas and she smiled. "Is there anything you need?" He nodded towards the door, towards the preparations for them to de-board and she shook her head.

"No. Thank you, Thomas." He nodded and held onto her eyes. And for a moment, she saw the same flash in his eyes as she had seen that afternoon; the afternoon they had told him.

This time it had been different. Before she had been the girlfriend, this time she was the wife. And though she wasn't sure her love for him had changed, or his for her—it certainly looked different from the inside. After they both recovered from that night, after they had made sufficient apologies, after they had moved past that heat filled moment, they had set out together to prepare
for Harry's departure.

Before she had been brought into the circle, this time she was bringing people in; very few, select people. She was there when they told Will and Kate, there to see the tears spring to Kate's eyes and the furrow set into Will's brow. She was there when they told Thomas and Bernard; both of them needing to know so that they could work magic to Harry's schedule, so they could be part of the great cover up and subsequently the great reveal. She was in on the discussions about media blackouts, about negotiating away interviews and exclusives. She was there when security began to discuss how to protect Harry the Soldier. She was there for all of it. She was there to watch the concern wash over faces only to be replaced by a get-down-to-business attitude. And she was there to see all of them, every single one of them, flash a glance to her; always checking on her.

And she was there the night they finally told Bishop and Ella. She turned in the helicopter, needing to look away for just a moment; her eyes focusing on the far, dusty horizon as her mind drifted back to that night not too long ago.

As soon as their security team had swept through Bishop and Ella's home, as soon as they gave the all-clear, Ella was tugging at their hands, pulling them inside.

"It's so good to see you," she hugged Maddie close and tight; her eyes pressing shut as she wrapped her arms around her best friend.

"You too," Maddie smiled, feeling warm there in that space, in the presences of Ella's wide eyes and glowing smile.

"Come in, come in," Ella stepped from Maddie, not noticing the way Maddie's hands lingered on her; not noticing the way her friend wanted to stay in that hug. She turned bright eyes to Harry and Bishop who were just behind them. "I'm glad you were able to come over tonight."

"We're happy you called," Maddie smiled, reaching for Ella's hand as they walked further into the house; noticing dinner on the table, wine uncorked. And her eyes slid to Harry's and he nodded; it was time.

"We actually have something we want to talk to you about," he spoke up, his hands clapping together in front of him.

"Yeah?" Bishop looked from Harry to Maddie and back again.

"Yeah," Harry smiled, small and sweet, to his wife and nodded in the direction of the living room. "Can we have a seat?"

"Sure..." Ella answered, her mind already at work, her eyes focused on Maddie as the four of them stepped away from the food, away from the wine. They settled onto couches; Harry and Maddie on one, Bishop and Ella on the other and as Maddie's hand slipped to Harry's knee, she looked across the coffee table between them at their best friends.

"There's something we need to tell you and..."

"It can't leave this room," Harry leaned forward, his hand closing over hers.

"There are very, very few people who know this..." Maddie swallowed her nervousness and met
Ella's eyes. Bishop had done this before, Bishop had held secrets for Harry for years but Ella was new. Yes, she was Maddie's best friend. Yes, she had kept her confidences all these years and yes, Maddie trusted her. But when it came to matters such as these, matters of her husband's safety, Maddie couldn't be more careful. "This is something you can't repeat. To anyone."

"Of course," Ella blinked but didn't falter. Bishop's eyes slid from Maddie's to Harry's and he could see the underlying current. He knew something was wrong. While his wife sat there not knowing what to expect, assuming that maybe, just maybe Maddie was about to announce a baby —Bishop knew better. He knew Harry like he knew himself and the cold set of his eyes was not in line with that of an expectant father.

"What is it?" Bishop's gaze stayed fixed on his friend and all eyes shifted to Harry who took a deep breath, cleared his throat and smiled at Maddie; small and simple. And sad.

And then he turned to Ella and Bishop and he brought them into the circle. "I'm being deployed." Ella gasped. "After the first of the year, I'm flying out on a four month tour in Khundu."

And Bishop's eyes closed.

"Oh my God," Ella spoke through her fingers covering her lips. "Oh my God...Harry..." She shook her head, saddened and worried and then she turned to look at her best friend. "Maddie..."

"It's okay," Maddie's voice wavered as she pulled a smile for Ella.

But it wasn't. It wasn't okay and everyone in the room knew that. As Maddie reached her hand out to Ella, Harry cleared his throat and turned to look at Bishop. But before he could say anything, before either of them could speak, Bishop opened his eyes and rose to his feet and without a glance to anyone other than Harry, he moved from his spot and left the room.

And the door to their back deck closed behind him.

"I..." Ella turned to look at the back of the house, squinting at the large windows. "Maybe I should..."

"It's okay," Harry spoke up, his hand reaching out to Ella as he stood up. "I'll go."

And he did. Harry spent an hour on that deck with Bishop that night while Maddie and Ella sat inside. He spent an hour convincing Bishop that he was going to be okay, that he was going to come back. He spent an hour listening to his best friend warn him and beg him and then, after they were both spent, he stepped back inside; Bishop in tow.

Before, Maddie had been brought into the circle, this time she was bringing people in. And it was breaking her heart.

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When Maddie was finally given the green light to step out of the helicopter, she unclicked the belts holding her in and smiled as she maneuvered from the impressive piece of machinery. Stepping out onto the dry, warm heat of Camp Bastion, she took in the land, the way it felt, the way it looked. She took a slow, deep breath and tried to push aside the emotions that surged forward when she saw all the soldiers, when she couldn't help but pull forth Harry's eyes. Focusing her attention forward, a decorated Captain stepped up to her with a kind smile and alert eyes.
"Your Royal Highness," he made quick work of a sharp salute and then extended his hand to Maddie. "I'm Captain Jonathan Bandeberry, Ma'am. I'll be showing you around Camp Bastion today."

"It's really great to meet you Captain," Maddie shook his hand in hers. "Thank you very much for taking the time to do this."

"Of course," he nodded. "How was your trip in Ma'am?"

"Wonderful," Maddie nodded. "Uneventful and swift."

"Happy to hear it," he smiled again; glancing around at all that awaited them. "Is there anything I can get you before we get started?"

"No sir," she shook her head. "Thank you."

"Very good. Right this way then," he held a hand out, gesturing off to her right. With a grin and an open mind, her tour began.

For Harry's last deployment, they had saved The Discussion for the night before he left. Of course Harry had delved into preparatory discussions with his family and attorneys. He had spent time with his father, his brother, his sister and then he had spent time with her. And it was that night, in the dark, in his bed, when they had discussed the 'while he was away', it was then that they had discussed the 'what if'. But this time, in all ways; this time was different. The Discussion came much earlier and this time Maddie was in on all of the preparations she hadn't been privy to before.

It wasn't something he sprung on her. It wasn't a surprise. He didn't want to blindside her, he wanted her to know what was coming, wanted her to prepare for it. So he scheduled some time, asked her to meet him in his office one night after their day had ended.

And she agreed; knowing it was going to be tough. They had returned from a long day, they had shed their clothes, shed their roles and it was just them. Maddie and Harry in warm, comfy pajamas, settling on the couches in his office; paperwork and documents situated on the table between them. Though there was a fire burning and they were sitting in a space that held heat and intimacy for them, the feeling was very businesslike.

"Here we go," Maddie moved into the room, drinks in hand. Harry's eyes immediately lifted to look at her, to watch her walk in.

"Hey..." He smiled, genuine and sweet, as he took the drink she held out to him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Maddie returned his kindness and moved to the couch opposite of him; sitting. Tucking her feet up underneath her, she pulled at a large, soft blanket and covered her legs.

"Are you ready for this?" He took a sip from his glass.

"No," she sighed with a small upturn of her lips. "But I suppose I don't have a choice." She took a deep breath and waved her hand in his direction. "Go ahead Captain...let's do this."
"Okay," he nodded and leaned forward. "You already know how to ring the attorneys..."

"Yes," she nodded.

"You know how to access the money..."

"Yes," she looked to her hands.

"And you know that if there is anything you need, all you have to do is ring Thomas and he knows how to make it happen..."

"I do," she smiled. "I do know that."

"Bernard has the house under control."

"Thank God," she chuckled lightly, gaining a smile from him.

"I had a Security meeting yesterday and it's my understanding that Arthur is heading up your security concerns for the Arctic."

"That's my understanding too," Maddie's lips turned down as she remembered; Harry wouldn't be here for her walk. He would miss the vast majority of it all.

"Now I know that..." Harry took a breath. "I know you'll be okay while I'm gone. I know you have things figured out but...if there's any trouble..."

"Your father," she offered, swallowing a sip. "Your father or your brother."

"Yes," Harry nodded and reached for his drink again. "Do you have any questions? Need to know anything else that you don't now?"

"Nothing I can think of," she answered honestly. She had given it some thought and felt like she had a good enough grasp on it all—or at least she knew how to get in touch with the people who had a grasp on it all.

"Ah," Harry moved from the couch as he remembered something. "I nearly forgot..." He moved over to the safe on the wall. "You know how to get in here?"

"Yes," she watched him; curious.

"Good..." He worked the combination and pulled out a long, slim package; shutting the door before returning to his couch.

"What is that?" Maddie leaned forward a bit.

"Cigars..." He sat it down on the table.

"Cigars?" She glanced up at him and then focused more closely on the package. They weren't the ones her father had smoked. "For what?"

"Well," Harry sighed, growing a little sad. "While I'm away...Bishop is going to become a father." His voice cracked as he ran his fingers over the package. "And when that happens...I need to ask a favor of you. I need you to take these to the hospital and smoke them with him and...and
congratulate him for me. I need you to mark the moment because...because I can't."

"Harry..." Maddie felt her heart sting in her chest.

"Would you do that for me?" He swung his eyes up to hers.

"Of course," Maddie nodded without thought. "Of course I will."

"Thank you," he smiled and, after a moment let his fingers off the cigars; his eyes sliding to a folder sitting next to them on the table. He took a deep breath and his features shifted in a way that made Maddie nervous. Reaching for the folder, he sighed. "I've signed everything over to you."

"Sorry?" Maddie whispered, not entirely sure what he was saying.

"If...If something happens to me."

"Ah," Maddie's eyes shifted away from his, her heart thumping.

"I'm sorry. I know it's not something you want to talk about..."

"It's not something I want to think about," she clarified.

"But," he continued. "We have to talk about it."

"I know," she finished her drink and sat the glass to the side. "I know we do."

"And if it does," he held up the folder. "I've signed everything over to you. The accounts, the trust, the house, the car..."

"The Aston Martin?" She lifted her eyebrows, allowing the tiniest bit of levity into the room.

"Yes," he smiled across to her; appreciating her attempt at ease. "The Aston Martin."

"Go on," she nodded.

"And I've talked to my father about your title." Harry continued matter-of-factly.

"Sorry?" Maddie looked up to him sharply; confused by his words. "My title?" A small, humored smirk graced her lips.

"I talked to him and he agreed..." Harry took a deep breath and leaned back. "If something happened to me..." He let out his breath and continued. "He said he would remove your title if you wanted."

"Remove my title?" Her voice dropped; surprised. "What? Why?"

"Because in those circumstances your title would become the Dowager Duchess of Sussex."

"But...what makes you think I wouldn't want to be that?"

"You would have to stay here, in London. You would have to continue on with royal duties and continue on with protection and..."
"And?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, stunned at the direction the conversation was taking.

"And...I don't know. I thought you might want to go away from here; back to Bendal, back to Colorado."

"And leave the only home we've had together?" Something in her voice drew him to a pause. He slowed down; looking her over, searching her face.

"Baby listen..." He leaned forward, wanting to pull her into him. "I would never forgive myself if I left you alone, Maddie. I'm just...I'm trying to make sure that you can do whatever you want. Whatever it is, I want you to have it...if something...if I die out there. I don't want to hold you back..."

"And I don't want to leave our home, Harry." She blinked at unexpected tears, swallowed at a sudden lump. "Please. If I lost you I...I don't want to lose the life we had too, the home we had...I....Please don't make me leave our home."

"No," he whispered, his own heart flooded with emotion. "No. I won't make you leave our home." He shook his head. "Of course I won't. You can...you can do whatever you want. I just wanted you to know it was an option."

Maddie's eyes locked with his as she assured him, "it's an option I would never, ever use." The space between them was heavy with it all; sadness and worry and everything that came with a discussion such as this.

"You would obviously stay in touch with Collins..." He needed to move this along, needed to finish it up.

"I would," she nodded.

"And if Isaiah ever needed anything...for travel or education or..." Harry shook his head and shrugged. "You would take care of him?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I promise."

"And Arthur..." Harry was nearly done; with the list, with the way his heart ached at this conversation. "He's going to need somebody to keep him grounded; keep him normal." He chuckled to himself. "And my charities. Walking with The Wounded, Sentebale...you would make sure..."

"I would," she agreed with a whisper, her emotions getting the better of her as tears began to form in her eyes. "I would make sure that the legacy you built lives on...even if you don't. Harry..."

"I know," he nodded, swallowing back his own tears. "I'm almost done."

"Good," she sniffed. "Because I am too."

"I know," he could see that, he could sense that. They had covered nearly everything.

"What else is there?" She asked; waiting for him to stop, waiting for the time when she could move to his couch and hold him close.

"A funeral," Harry's words echoed in the room and Maddie felt her stomach turn. "There is
already a plan in place; a lot of things that are non-negotiable because of..." He cleared his throat. "Because of who I am but...if there's something you want, something you would like to do or...please speak up. Please tell Will or my father and they will do what they can to make it happen." He watched her for a moment; waiting for her to acknowledge what he had just said. And when she did, when she finally nodded, he took a deep breath and rubbed his hands into his hair.

"Is that it?" She asked; hoped.

"It is," he nodded.

And then she was up. Maddie moved from her couch, leaving her drink and her blanket and she moved right into his arms, into his lap; into him. Harry caught her, his arms wrapping around her, his hands pressing her close and his lips turning up; ready to kiss her back.

The last time he had been deployed, he had left behind this amazing woman; bright and beautiful and holding his heart and the hope of a future. This time, he was leaving behind everything.

Captain Bandeberry had shown Maddie all around the Camp. She had toured nearly every nook and crevice they had. Some of it she recognized from pictures of Harry from before, but much of it was new to her. He was smart and kind and explained things to her without speaking down to her; something Maddie instantly appreciated about him. She had met other soldiers, she had seen demonstrations. And when they neared the end of their tour, when he escorted her back to the mess where she would be eating lunch before photos and a good-bye, he let her in on something he had been keeping to himself.

"I wanted to tell you, Ma'am," his voice dropped in a way that drew Maddie closer; curious. "I served with your husband here at Camp Bastion a few years ago."

"You did..." Maddie's breath caught, her eyes flashing to meet his as her feet stalled. "You served with Harry?"

"Captain Wales," he nodded, a small smile in place. "We flew on different schedules. When he was on, I was generally off and when I was on, he was off." His eyes faded out as he remembered. "Hell of a pilot, hell of a soldier."

"Yes," Maddie agreed, her smile pulling high with pride. "So I've been told. Did you spend time together then? With such conflicting schedules?"

"We did," he nodded. "It's a small group, Ma'am. Tight. Close."

"Sure."

"He spoke of you," the young Captain offered; his face soft, not entirely sure he had the ground to be speaking to her of such things.

"Did he?" Maddie was surprised to hear this.

"I'm sorry," his eyes shifted down. "Maybe I shouldn't speak of such things."

"Nonsense," Maddie laughed lightly. "You should absolutely speak of such things. I'm sure he
will be thrilled when I tell him I met you."

"Tell him Johnnie Berry said hello."

"I will do that," Maddie grinned. "Tell me. Are you joining me for lunch? I would love to hear some stories..." She leaned in just a bit. "Particularly any that I might use to gently chide my husband."

"Of course," he chuckled and nodded. "I would be happy to join you for lunch, Ma'am."

"Fantastic," Maddie's eyes danced as they turned down the path to the mess.


After her lunch with Captain Bandeberry, after group photos and meet and greets, after wishing soldier after soldier a Happy Christmas, after she had done all she had gone to do and then some, Maddie boarded the helicopter to leave Camp Bastion. It had been a beneficial trip for her; and not just in the royal duty sense—though she had made great gains there too.

The soldiers, from top to bottom, were impressed with the new Duchess; with her questions, with her demeanor, with the way she treated them with kindness and respect and the slightest bit of awe. The pictures taken of her that day would go miles in the press; improving her already high approval numbers. She seemed at ease among the soldiers and her smile was radiant. Thomas had stayed behind her the entire day and was himself impressed with the way she moved about, with how quickly she seemed to have adapted to this new lifestyle, to this new aspect of it.

But that wasn't all that Maddie was taking away from Camp Bastion that day. In fact, her personal gains were much greater.

"Ma'am," the pilot called out to her over the radio, her eyes pulling up in his direction. "We're under five from Sandringham."

Maddie smiled wide, her breath sucking into her lungs. "Thank you." Her eyes turned to the window, looking down on the ground below her; blanketed with snow. The family had already arrived for the holiday, Maddie would be the last to join them, and she was eager to join them.

She was eager to enjoy these next few days with her husband, with their family. Because the greatest thing that Camp Bastion had given her, the thing that would sit with her for the next four months—was perspective. Perspective and understanding.

Captain Bandeberry had told her stories of Harry the Soldier that made her smile, stories that made her beam with pride. He had told her tales that made her feel more at ease, that made her release the anxiety she had been feeling and made her trust more; in Harry, in the system, in his training. She had known all along that he had a fine-tuned set of skills, but hearing it from another soldier, seeing the place he had been, how he had served—it somehow made it easier.

And hearing from a third party—the way Harry had spoken of her, that early on, that long ago—it made her heart warm. It made her want to do whatever she could in the next few weeks to put aside his upcoming deployment and focus only on him, on them.

"Ma'am," Thomas's voice called to her and she looked up to him. With a smile, he nodded towards the ground. "It looks as though we have a welcoming committee."
Maddie's eyes shifted as she looked out the window, lower and closer to the ground. And then she saw him. Even from their height, she could see her husband; tall and broad. Dressed for winter and standing in stark contrast to the white snow, he was looking up at the sky, up at the helicopter. Up at her.

"It would appear that way," Maddie sighed into her seat, her head turning to the side so she could watch their final descent. "Thank you for everything today, Thomas."

"Of course," he nodded. "It was a pleasure to travel with you today Ma'am."

Maddie turned her smile to him for a moment, a flash of unspoken understanding passing between them. "Are you off to join family after this?"

"Yes Ma'am," he answered.

"Excellent."

Quiet settled over the cabin of the helicopter as it hovered down; kicking up snow and casting up wind. And then it bounced just so and they were on the ground. This time the doors opened quickly. This time, when Maddie's fingers reached for her buckles, nobody stalled her. They were moving easily and freely out of the helicopter, clearing the way for Maddie and Thomas. She could see Harry stepping forward, could see him shaking hands with the team that had taken her in, the team that had delivered her back. And then he was there, standing at the base of the stairs and holding his hand up to her.

"Welcome back," he squinted as he smiled up at her.

"Captain," she grinned, taking his hand and stepping out of the helicopter; thanking the group of people as she moved. When she was finished, when they all began to say good-bye, to board the helicopter to return to London, Harry held onto her hand and led her away; allowing for the helicopter to take off.

"How was your trip?" He asked when they were finally left alone, moving out from underneath the blades, their feet crunching in the snow.

"Well..." She bit at her bottom lip, holding onto his one hand with her two. "I met an old colleague of yours."

"Johnnie Berry?" She tossed out the nickname Captain Bandeberry had given her.


"He was the soldier assigned to show me around," Maddie loved the warmth on Harry's face, the happy look in his eyes. "He introduced me, gave me a tour, ate lunch with me..." She leaned closer to him, nudging his arm with her shoulder. "He told me a few stories about you."

"Yeah?" Harry's voice dropped a bit, his smile pulling higher. "Good stories?"

"Great stories..." Maddie slowed to a stop, tugging at his hand so that he would too. "Hey Harry..."
"Maddie?" His eyes were dancing as he looked to her, fully expecting her to tease him about something she may have learned on her trip, from her conversations with the Captain.

But Maddie had another idea. As she pulled at his hand, she took a step towards him and, clutching his coat in her hands, she brought him to her.

And then her lips moved against his.

She was hot and soft and assertive in her need for him, in her quest to fulfill her need for him. Reacting quickly, his arms moved around her as he angled his mouth over hers; hoping she could feel just how much he had missed her.

"Mmmm..." He moaned, pulling her closer, kissing her deeper. "I've missed you Madeline..." He leaned back, catching her eyes; half open and hazy.

"I've missed you too," Maddie whispered into his mouth, her tongue running soft over his lips; teasing inside. "And I'm so sorry Harry. Sorry for how I've been behaving and..."

"Shhh..." He shushed her, nudging her nose with his. "You don't need to apologize."

"But I do," she nuzzled closer. "I should have been better, I should have been easier on you and..."

"Let it go, love," Harry stopped her. "Please. We're fine. We are fine. Let it go..." He kissed her. "For me?"

"For you?" She sighed. "Anything." She kissed him again. "I love you Captain."

"Oh baby, I love you too."

"Good," she sighed happily. "Good..." She kissed him once more and patted his ass with a grin. "Is everyone here?"

"They are," he nodded, tossing a smirk towards the enormous home. "Probably making fun of us right now."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back just a bit.

"You want to come in?" Though he made the suggestion, he didn't budge. "Begin the Christmas holiday?"

"Sure," Maddie nodded, not moving an inch. "We should go in."

"We should," Harry chuckled, his hands tightening around her. "Or..."

"Or?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows.

"Or..." He leaned in, cocky and sexy, and his lips took hers again. And Maddie, not willing to argue with him when he was like this, sighed and leaned into him. The family could wait, they both needed this. They had very little time left with the other...they could take just a moment longer before they made their way back to the family.
"So listen..." Harry's voice dropped low as he and Maddie made their way back to the house. Her arm was tucked through his and she was holding him close; borrowing the heat he radiated.

"Mmm?" She looked up to him, their feet falling in sync as they walked through the hard, crunch of the snow.

Harry glanced around and ducked his head, lowering his voice as he spoke. "They are going to mess with you."

"What?" The corner of her mouth tugged up in half a smile, finding the secretive way he was disclosing this to her to be humorous.

"The cousins," he cleared his throat. "It's tradition. We always pick somebody to mess with and if you don't know by arrival who it is you're messing with, they are messing with you."

"And?" Maddie snickered; loving how very much like her family his really was.

"And..." He shrugged. "I don't know who we're messing with."

"Maybe they're messing with you." Maddie nudged him with her shoulder.

"Nope." He shook his head, certain. "It's you. They didn't tell me because they knew I would tell you."

"Why can't it be you?" She lifted her eyebrows, smiling hopefully up at him.

"They don't mess with me anymore," he explained, a bit of a cocky grin lightening up his face.

"Why not?"

"Not easily rattled," he sighed, his face growing humored as he ran through the memories in his mind. "I'm no fun." He stalled in the path, turning his body slightly to hers, wanting her to hear him. "I'm telling you, they are going to mess with you."

Maddie giggled, a light puff of a laugh that told him she wasn't worried, that she found his warning a bit silly and premature. "Okay." She shrugged.

"You think I'm joking?" He laughed at her easy response.

"No," her eyes danced against his. "So they're going to mess with me." She shrugged again. "What can I do?"

"Nothing," he shook his head.

"Well then..." Her lips slid into a long smile, her eyes narrowing. "Why are you telling me?"

"You're my wife," he nodded his head to the side, pulling her back into their walk, back towards the magnificent home before them. "I'm on your team. They mess with you...they mess with me. That sort of thing."
"That's very sweet," Maddie smiled. "So tell me...what sort of things should I be looking out for exactly?"

"Well..." Harry took a deep breath and reached for the door handle, pulling it open for her. "Let me tell you..." And then they stepped inside as Harry began a low voiced list of things that had happened in the past; prepping her for a variety of possibilities that could be headed her way.

Maddie loved Sandringham House. Though this wasn't her first visit, it was her first time at Christmas and the snow, the ice hanging on the trees, crusted on the foliage, only added to the allure—to the surreal nature she felt when on the property.

The home was magnificent. It stood tall and massive against the wide lawn, striking out onto the skyline. It was beautiful and Maddie loved being there. Inside it was just as impressive. Maddie had done quite a bit of 'settling' into her new life, her new family. She had grown accustomed to, if not at ease with, all of the pomp and ceremony that surrounded her on now a nearly daily basis. But there were moments, walking through the hallways where King George VI had walked, where The Queen Mum had held court. They were in the space where Elizabeth and Bertie played with Lillibet and Margaret. They were in this gloriously brilliant home where so much history had taken place, where Harry's family had been for years and years.

And it felt warm. The colors, the fabrics, the paintings, the little mementos; the touches of home. It felt warm—in this vast, drafty, splendid old estate. Maddie felt warm there.

After she had arrived from Camp Bastion, after Harry had given her the fair warnings towards his cousin, after she had gone to greet The Queen and The Duke of Edinburgh, after Harry had escorted her to their suite for the holiday and she had taken a little bit of time to herself; a quick nap, a shower, and then dressing for the afternoon. She pulled on a sweater, wrapped herself up in warmth, and she set out in search of her husband.

It was easy to find him; his laughter rang out along with his cousin's, echoing throughout the large hallways. She hugged her arms around herself and followed the sounds of life. When she rounded the corner and stepped into the doorway of the drawing room, she had only a moment to take them all in, everyone seemed to have settled in for the holiday. Kate was off with Autumn in the far corner of the room, watching as Ilsa and Savannah cooed over baby Arthur. Zara and Bea were deeply entrenched in a game Maddie didn't recognize at first glance. Peter and William were sitting on a set of couches, talking with Harry who was gesturing and laughing as he spoke. Maddie smiled as she watched them, but she had only a moment before she was caught, before Mike looked up from his card game with Eugenie and smiled wide.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the Sleeping Duchess of Sussex..." The room came alive with his words as the family rose to their feet; love and greetings abound. They were all smiles and hugs; happy to see her.

"How was your nap love?" Harry's hands were warm, running up and down her back when she finally took her spot next to him on the couch where he sat, talking to Peter and William.

"Wonderful," she sighed, smiling as she snuggled into his side; tucking close. "Where are the adults?" She glanced around the room, finding only their own generation; none of the aunts, none of the uncles.
"Right there," Harry nodded a wink towards his brother and his cousin.

"Ha, ha," Peter rolled his eyes.

"You know what I meant," she sighed; turning a kiss to his shoulder, to the soft cotton of his shirt.

"My father is downstairs, preparing to head out with Andrew," Harry smiled down at her. "They asked Will and I to come along but..."

"You should go," Maddie patted his leg. "You should spend some time with them."

"Yeah?" He liked the idea; had been warm to it since his father had suggested it. But he had wanted to be there with her, watching his cousins like a hawk; waiting for them to mess with her, ready to strike back. "You'll be okay?"

"Of course," Maddie laughed, glancing to the two men across from them. "I'll be absolutely fine."

"Okay," Harry shrugged, stretching his arms up and over his head. "What do you say Big Brother..."

"I'm in," William clapped his hands together.

"We'll be back in time to dress for dinner," Harry leaned in, kissing the side of her head. His voice dropped low. "Keep your head up, don't take your eyes off of them and remember..." Maddie smiled as his voice dropped even lower. "Bea usually heads this up. She looks sweet but she's the ring leader."

"Got it," Maddie's eyes twinkled as she smiled up at him. "Go. Have fun. I'll see you when you return."

"Okay," Harry nodded to his brother and with a quick, scoping glance around the room, he leaned to kiss her. "I'll see you soon."

"Have fun," she kissed him back and let him go; watching as he left.

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Harry hadn't been gone very long when Maddie slipped from the room. She had spent time catching up with Peter, talking about how big his girls were getting, about an upcoming holiday they had planned. She had gone over to cuddle Arthur, to play a bit with the girls. She had watched as the intensity grew in the games that surrounded her and then, excusing herself, she had slipped from the room. They were given free reign when they were at Sandringham; able to explore and discover and though that sort of thing might have grown old for the cousins, Maddie still found it fun to poke around; to enjoy the old house and all it held.

So she set out in search of some of her favorite finds and for a new nook that might tug her in. She moved about at a slow pace, enjoying the peace that came with such explorations. She moved through the drawing room, studying the portraits that hung on the wall, the soft colors of the tapestries. She moved through a small study, loving the rich dark contrast it held. And then she moved to the library. She had always been drawn to the libraries. Even before she stepped into this royal world, she had been drawn to the stacks and once she married Harry, once she was able to walk into some of the most impressive libraries she had seen, the fascination had only increased.
As she stepped into the library at Sandringham House that afternoon, she felt that warm, familiar tug in her stomach; the feeling she normally associated with home, and she let out a sigh.

Content.

Happy.

"Well good afternoon," that unmistakable voice rang out, causing Maddie to spin towards the source; startled.

"Your Royal Highness," Maddie recovered quickly, smiling wide at Harry's Aunt Anne who stood to her far left, looking out the massive windows across the snow covered property. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you in here."

"I blend," Anne smiled with a nod. Maddie walked into the room, kissing Anne's cheeks, dipping to curtesy. "I didn't mean to startle you," she smiled at her nephew's wife. "Were you lost?"

"Purposefully," Maddie nodded, looking out the window Anne had been focused on. "It's a beautiful view."

"It is," Anne agreed, her smile small and tight as she turned her eyes back. "I spent a great deal of time here with my grandmother; watching the birds and the wildlife..." Her thoughts trailed off as she caught herself becoming a bit sentimental. Training her focus elsewhere, she moved on to another topic. "How was Camp Bastion?"

"Incredible," Maddie answered with a blink. "It was my first visit to a military base and I learned a great deal."

"Rumor has it you did marvelously." Anne commented with a small nod in Maddie's direction.

"There's already rumor?" Maddie turned a raised eyebrow to her.

"There's always rumor," Anne's eyes flickered at her words; at a humor that was hidden there. She looked down at the floor, as though she were tucking away a memory, and then back up to Maddie. "You enjoyed yourself?"

"I did," Maddie nodded. "It was nice to spend time with the young Captain who showed me around. He was incredibly knowledgeable and quick to answer any questions I had. It was good...to see firsthand the things I read about, the things I'm briefed on."

"A different sort of event from the smile and wave, no?" Anne chuckled lightly; a soft, warm sound that made Maddie feel as though they were sharing something.

"It is," Maddie agreed. "The smile and wave is important but yes...this was different."

"Good for you," Anne nodded and looked back out the window. She had a fondness for her nephew's new wife. She didn't know her terribly well, had not spent a great deal of time with her. But there was something in her, perhaps the delight she found in visiting the Camp, perhaps the same thing that had drawn them both to solitude in the library. She didn't know exactly what it was, but she felt a warmth, a liking to her. "You know," she turned towards her then, clearing her throat as her body shifted to face her. "You and I never had a chance to talk about what happened."
"What happened?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, caught in surprise.

"The kidnapping incident in March," Anne was quick to the point, never one to mince words or beat around the bush.

"Ah," Maddie nodded, surprised by how far away that incident felt.

"My understanding is that you handled yourself impressively."

"Well," Maddie shrugged, her eyes catching Anne's as she smiled. "It wasn't as though I fought off a gunman or anything..." She alluded to the Princess Royal's own brush with disaster.

"No," Anne laughed. "I suppose not. But you did get in a good bite."

"I did," Maddie laughed along with her.

"Well good for you."

"Thank you," Maddie took a breath, wanting to continue the conversation, wanting to ask her what drew her to this library, wanting to ask where her favorite corners were. But before she could speak, a soft knock on the door drew their attention.

"Sorry to bother you," Beatrice's bright, innocent smile greeted them both.

"No bother," Anne shook her head, waving her niece into the room. "What brings you here?"

"We were wondering if we might be able to borrow Maddie for a bit?" Bea grinned as she looked between the two women.

"Of course," Anne was quick to answer with a dismissive wave of her hand; amused at the way the group of them reverted back to childhood when they were all together. "I was just about to go meet up with father for a bit." She nodded to the two of them and took a step towards the door.

"It was nice talking with you," Maddie smiled to Anne, feeling as though they had shared something there.

"It was," Anne agreed. "I'll see you both at dinner." And just as easily as she had slipped into a conversation with Maddie, she was slipping out.

"Yes," Maddie answered and watched as Anne left them.

Beatrice smiled sweetly as Anne took leave. Once they were alone, her smile pulled into a bit of an evil grin as she reached for Maddie's hand. "Now, now, now Madeline Sussex. Won't you come with me?"

By the time Harry was returning to the house, the sun was beginning to set. The four men had rosy cheeks and chilled noses and their breath blew out in white, cloudy puffs when they spoke. It had been a great day; laughter and ribbing and the strengthening of a bond between them. Harry was smiling as they stepped into the massive mud room; shedding coats and hats, pulling off mud covered boots and unloading from their trip out.
"It's comforting to see that your technique hasn't improved since last year," he threw a smug glance to his brother.

"Of course," Will's eyes narrowed, his face growing tight at the mocking. "It's comforting to know that eventually all are knocked from their pedestals."

"Please," Harry snickered, shedding the last of his winter clothing and clapping his hands together. "I'm not sure who you think is going to do the knocking big brother."

"Alright you two," Charles stepped in, moving between them both towards the door. "Perhaps you should head up, check in with your wives, prepare for dinner?"

"Perhaps," William smiled and followed as the group moved from the mud room into the home.

The second they stepped through the door into the main hall, Harry saw her; Beatrice. With wide eyes and a foot that tapped nervously, she watched Harry. And he knew. Something was up. As Charles and Andrew moved forward, Harry hung back and Bea was quick to saddle up to him and Will.

"Harry..." She was cautious as she approached him.

"Beatrice," he was leery as he looked her over.

"Ahem," she cleared her throat and took a deep breath. "I need you to come with me. Please."

"Where?" He rubbed at his shoulder, working the kinks out of his neck.

"Upstairs," she jerked her head to the side.

"Why are you acting so weird?" He sighed, his eyes studying her. "What's going on?"

"It's Maddie," she bit her lip and Harry stopped walking.

"What do you mean it's Maddie?" He bit off the words, his jaw growing tight.

"Don't stop walking," she tugged on his arm, glancing at Will who was walking with them.

"What did you do?" The only reason he did what she asked, the only reason he moved forward was to find his wife and find out what had happened.

"She's..." Bea stalled, trying to explain. "We were only playing around Harry..."

"What happened?" His jaw clenched as they took to the stairs.

"She's..." She took a deep breath and braced herself for what was about to unfold. "She's drunk. Completely wasted really."

"Drunk?!" Harry's eyes went wide, his voice booming.

"Shh!" Bea waved her hands. "Would you keep your voice down?"

"Why in the hell is she drunk?"
"We...we had a few drinks and..."

"A few drinks?" He shook his head. "You got my wife drunk before Christmas dinner?"

"It was an accident..."

"An accident?!" Harry's face was beginning to turn red. "Please. Tell me. How in the hell did you accidentally get Maddie wasted? And why in the hell would she think she should be getting wasted before dinner?"

"She..." Bea swallowed the lump in her throat and it was clear; she was nervous. He wondered if they had played some sort of 'short straw' game to decide exactly who it was who had to come and tell him this. "She thought we were drinking too."

"But you weren't."

"We had water and tea and she..."

"I'm going to kill you," Harry's teeth gritted together and his fingers flexed. "Where is she?"

"In your room," they reached the landing and turned down the long corridor. "Harry...she can barely stand up. I had no idea she was such a lightweight and..."

"What do you mean she can barely stand up?!" His pace quickened.

"She's crying and upset because this is her first Christmas with the Queen and..."

"What is wrong with you people?" Harry cut in, livid. "You couldn't just mess with her at dinner? Stealing her utensils and swiping her napkin? You had to get her bloody pissed and..." They reached the door to their suite and he stopped, stepping up close to his cousin; his eyes raging. "I'm going to kill somebody. Anybody. You all get together with whoever thought this would be a good idea and you pick which one of you wants to go down for the team because when I come out of here..." He shook his head and rubbed at the back of his neck. Reaching for the door, he took a deep breath and pushed inside; slamming the door behind him, right in his cousin's face. He looked around the room quickly; finding nothing. "Madeline?!" He called out.

"Captain," she greeted him.

"You're..." He looked her over, biting at the corner of his lip as realization washed over him in an instant. His arms crossed over his chest and he shook his head at her. "You're not wasted."

"Not at all," Maddie shook her head, her smile pulling higher. "In fact..." She took a breath and rose to her feet. "I haven't had a thing to drink. As though I would drink before dinner with The
"Ha," Harry laughed; a bitter, mildly humored sound and then he turned away from her. "Ha. Just. One. Second." Taking the two steps out of the bathroom, back into the room, he discovered exactly what he had been expecting.

All of his cousins sitting sweetly in their room; wide smiles and eyes full of pride. Beatrice, much more at ease than she had been only moments earlier, took a few small steps up to him and with a sigh and an innocent smile, she tapped his chest lightly. "I think the word you're looking for is...gotcha."

He shook his head and looked down at the ground, admitting defeat. "Yes. You did it..." He took a deep breath and looked up to them. "You got me. Congratulations." As the room drew alive with laughter and applause, Harry turned back to the blonde standing in the doorway. Part of him was mildly annoyed, still reeling from the emotions he had brewed up on his way up the stairs. But a bigger part of him was incredibly fucking proud. "So I see you've joined forces with them."

"Just this once," she smiled sweetly, kicking an innocent twist into her eyes as she moved towards him. "They said it was their only chance, their last real opportunity..." She ran her hands up his chest as she leaned closer. "Are you terribly mad?"

"Not terribly," he shook his head, letting out a long, jagged breath. He had been worried. "Though there will absolutely be retribution."

"Oh?" Maddie's eyebrow shot up, her mouth twisting naughtily. Harry laughed.

"Oh no, wife," he shook his head again. "Not that kind of punishment..." He let his arms move around her then, pulling her close to his sweaty body. She giggled as he buried his nose in her neck.

"Okay well..." Peter clapped his hands together. "That was fun while it lasted but this..." He waved a hand to where Maddie and Harry were joined. "I don't need to see this."

"Well you had better hurry on out of here," Harry called out into the room, not turning to look at his cousins. "Cause in sixty seconds, I'm getting naked and taking her into the shower and..."

"Enough," Zara called out. "We're leaving."

"There we go," Harry grinned, pulling Maddie tighter.

"Thanks for your help Maddie," Bea called out as they all began to file out.


"No," Harry pulled back enough to look in her eyes; warning and cockiness there. "Not anytime. Not anymore. You're my wife. You're on my team..."

"Good luck with that!" Kate called out, the last to leave the room, as she shut the door.

"Now..." Maddie grinned, sighing further into his arms. "About this promise..."

"Of retribution?" He ran his hands over her back, down her waist.
"No," she shook her head, pulling her bottom lip into her teeth. "Of getting naked and taking me in the shower..."

"Ah..." He smiled wide, his eyes brightening. And then, without warning, he leaned over and lifted her up; tossing her right over his shoulder. Maddie let out a yelp of a giggle as he smacked her ass and moved to the bathroom; making good on his word. They had a little bit of time before they needed to be dressed for a formal, candlelight dinner with The Queen—Harry had every intention of taking advantage of it.
Maddie wasn't exactly sure when it was the mood shifted on their holiday. She couldn't pin point what she was doing or the time it really moved. But it had moved; from the lively, jolly nature that came with pulling one over on Harry to this new place. It wasn't necessarily heavy as it settled over them. It wasn't tension or anxiety but it was something that pulled at their attention; at their hearts. They had gone from loud, wild laughter as Harry had pulled her fully clothed into the shower with him, to this new peaceful calm that passed between them as they finished dressing for dinner.

"You're staring at me," Maddie smiled as she looked herself over in the mirror, not needing to look at him to know that it was true.

"Guilty," he smiled at her from across the room, straightening his tie and pulling at the sleeves of his tuxedo jacket. "Though if I were you, I would get used to that tonight." Maddie turned to face him, taking in the handsomeness that came so easily to him.

"You're going to keep your eyes on me?" Her face took on a flirty nature; coy and smug.

"I have to," he shook his head, moving closer in on her. "I let my eyes off of you for a second and you're plotting with my family to take me down."

"So much drama," she grinned up at him as he pressed close; his hands resting on her hips. "Should I be on the lookout throughout dinner?"

"You should," he leaned in to nuzzle her neck. "I might try to steal your dessert."

"I'll stab you with my fork," she giggled as his mouth tickled her skin, her hands holding onto his shoulders as he tipped her back just a bit.

"Not a chance. I have quick reflexes," he tipped her back up and took a half a step back. "You ready love?"

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Maybe it was the candlelight. The way it flickered, making everything seem shiny and warm. The way it bounced off of Harry's mess of ginger hair, the way it made his eyes dance. Maybe it was the fact that the Queen was there; appearing so regal and elegant yet speaking to them just as a grandmother would; lovingly and with soft warmth. Maybe it was the way Harry's family made her feel welcome in their own individual, unique ways.

The way Peter had called her weeks ago to let her know about the games they played, asking her to join them in what they felt was the only opportunity to play with Harry.

The way Anne had spoken to her in the library; about the kidnapping attempts, about her visit to Camp Bastion.

The way Charles and hugged her close and let her know he was looking forward to seeing her marksmanship at their Boxing Day hunt.

The way even Arthur offered up a smile to his Aunt Maddie when she bent her face to kiss his
chubby cheeks.

It was the way the room was immaculately decorated; pristine and elegant. It was the way the family was with each other; loving and chiding and full of a wit and sarcasm with an underlying current of deep affection.

It reminded her of her own family, of her adopted Bendal family, of her home with Harry. It was everything a Christmas among loved ones should be.

And it was with that gravity, with that warm, consuming love and emotion that Maddie sat at that long table—across from Harry and between Mike and Peter. It was with that depth that she met Harry's eyes and smiled; soft and sweet. And she could see it in his face, he was feeling it too.

This was a big moment for them; their first Christmas as a married couple. Truly, it was their first Christmas together at all; given the unique circumstances. Though Harry was proud to finally have here there with his family, proud to have her with him, there was a part of him, a large part of him, that wished he could whisk her away to some far remote location and spend their first Christmas with only a warm fire, lots of champagne, and each other.

But that's not how this was meant to be; that's not how their lives were supposed to go. So he took a deep breath, steadying his scattered emotions and he tossed a wink across the table to her and she tossed one right back. In truth, neither of them were going to have a problem making this a close, intimate, meaningful Christmas—even if they were among family.

As Charles rose to his feet and the attention of the group shifted to him, gearing up for a toast, Maddie tore her eyes from her husbands and let it all wash over her.

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Dinner had passed with great conversation and amazing food. They had been excused from the table, they had gathered for the much lauded gift exchange; laughing over the wild and often inappropriate items that were unwrapped. They had played cards, they had drank champagne. They had posed for photos; the entire family, their immediate family. Them. They had listened to old familial stories that had been told and retold over the years; stories that still drew them all to silence and grins. They had sat close to each other, kept in contact with each other; they had been together throughout.

Later into the night, much later than Maddie would have guessed, the families had begun to disperse; making their ways to their own rooms, some to sleep, others to change and come down from the busy day. They all had an early morning call time and they still had the next night to connect. When Maddie and Harry stepped into their own room, Harry was quick to bring her to him, high off the emotions that had passed between them at dinner, the way she had stayed with him the entire night.

"Dance with me..." His voice was low and a bit rough as he tugged on her hand. It was late and they were sleepy; spent from the revelry and the festivities. But he pulled. And she went.

"Oh..." Maddie gasped as he tucked her tight into the circle of his arms, giving her no time for protest or thought. He took one hand in his as his other slid into the home he had made on the small of her back. "But Captain..." She turned warm eyes to him. "You always say I step on your toes."

"Step on my toes," he shrugged, moving his cheek against hers as they began to sway. "Stand on
"Hmmm..." Maddie let out a soft moan of a sound, feeling the emotion that seemed to pulse from him. Sliding her hand up his shoulder to the back of his neck, she nuzzled in; wanting to be closer. Her eyes fluttered closed and she let him hold her. She let him press her to him, she let him dance her around their music-less suite. She let him have this moment where it was just them in this silence, in this space with the lit fire and the dim lights.

"Have you had a happy Christmas?" He whispered against her cheek, his breath puffing her hair as he spoke.

"I have," she smiled, a small nod moving her skin against his. "I'm happy to finally be spending it with you..."

"Oh me too," he agreed with a groan, spinning them both around as his hand tightened at her waist. He had waited a long time to have her next to him for the holiday. "Did you talk to your mother?"

"I did," Maddie smiled at the memory; smiled at their small talk. Even dressed in formal ware, even dancing in the private residence of The Queen, even with the elegant dinner and the candles...they still came down to this; the normal back and forth of a marriage. "She's excited to see us next week."

"Of course," Harry nodded, excited to spend time with Maddie's family. "Did you speak with Collins?"

"I did," Maddie's eyes grew sad for a moment. "They are at his mother's home for the holiday. Isaiah is going to open our gifts tomorrow night if you want to get online with him and watch."

"I would," Harry grinned; the image of watching Isaiah tear through the wrapping momentarily blocking out the sadness that came with the stark realization as to how much their family had changed that year. Swallowing that back for a moment, trying to stay with the merriment, Harry kissed Maddie's temple and rubbed love into the back of her hand with his thumb. And then, in a moment of sentiment, a moment that hung heavy for him as he couldn't help but remember their lost friend, he stopped dancing and wrapped his arms clear around her; hugging her just as close was he could get her. And just when Maddie thought he might be overcome by the weight of the emotion, just when she thought he may be starting to crumble, he whispered against her. "You know...I have a gift for you."

"Other than the sweat bands you gave me to wear while running?" Maddie's eyes danced as she laughed, as he moved back from her just a bit.

"Other than that," he chuckled and released his tight hold on her. "Let me get it," he lifted her hand to his lips and then stepped away from her, moving to the stand next to his side of the bed. Maddie moved to the chest of drawers on the wall, locating the package she had brought for him.

"I hope you followed the rules this year," she stepped from her shoes as she moved towards the bed, pulling her dress up as she moved towards the middle.

"I did," he grinned, toeing off his shoes and joining her on the bed; package in hand. "It is small, personal and..."

"Not extravagant," she finished. It was a deal they had struck; an arrangement they had made for
all of their gifts for the other. "Here's yours," she held out the small square box.

"Fantastic," he stretched his legs out and around the pool of her dress, handing over her package.

"This is heavy," she juggled the weight in her hand. "Harry Wales, did you give me a bag of rocks?"

"You are shockingly close," he winked at her. "Why don't you open it and find out?"

"Actually, if it's okay..." She rested the gift in her lap and nodded to the one in his hands. "I would like for you to open yours first."

"Oh?" He grinned down at the gift, his inner child peeking through; excited.

"You said you wanted..." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly; her eyes turning down just a bit as her mind slipped to the upcoming deployment. "You said you wanted something you could take with you."

"I did," he nodded, meeting her eyes with a smile; trying for reassurance as his fingers began to peel back the paper. He lifted the lid and pushed inside the folded tissue paper, his fingers closing around the small, stiff piece of fabric. "What's this..." He pulled out an embroidered patch and took it in. And his face grew soft. "Madeline..."

"It's our family crest," Maddie spoke softly. "The House of Sussex. I had a patch made. I thought...I don't know. Maybe we could sew it on your bag or a t-shirt or..."

"I know the perfect place," he ran his thumb over the embroidery, over their joint crest and a solemn, happy look took over his eyes. "This is wonderful, thank you." Pressing the patch to his chest, he leaned forward; drawing her lips to his for a slow, sweet kiss.

"You like it?" Her eyes danced in his as she pressed her forehead against his.

"I do," he nodded. "I love it." He kissed her again, savoring the taste of her lips; champagne and cake. Before he could be swept up in the emotions that were starting to prick to the surface, he pulled back and took a breath. "Now. About this bag of rocks..."

Maddie chuckled, allowing him to move away from her for the time being. She knew that eventually their attempts to dance around his upcoming deployment, around this monster of emotions that seemed to be poking at them both, were going to run out, she knew that they were going to end up talking about it, crying about it. She knew it was coming. Just not quite yet.

"This is a beautiful package," she admired the paper. "Did you wrap it yourself?"

"Do I get extra points if I did?" He grinned as he watched her.

"Are we accumulating points?" She laughed and lifted the lid to the box.

"It couldn't hurt," he joked. Maddie pulled out the balls of tissue paper, reaching into the deep box and pulling out a cloth bag. Her eyes flashed up to him.

"Harry..." She brushed the box aside and sat the bag on the pooled fabric of her dress. She pulled at the tie and opened the top of the bag. "It really is a bag of..." She looked inside. Her heart thudded and her eyes slid right up to his. "Marbles." She wavered. "It's a bag of marbles."
"Antique clay marbles," he corrected, his fingers reaching to run over hers. "There are one hundred and twenty marbles. One for every day..."

"Harry..." That was it. She was done. She couldn't have kept the tears away from her eyes any more than she could keep the thoughts of his deployment from her mind. Her fingers moved to her face, pressing at her lips, brushing at the tears on her cheeks.

"I didn't know what the rules were about using the old ones, so I thought..." He trailed off, half a smile on his lips as though he wanted to joke, as though he needed to joke. But things were serious and she was upset. "I didn't mean to make you cry." His hands lifted to her face, following hers as they swiped at her wet cheeks. "I didn't mean to make you sad."

"You didn't," she shook her head, eyes wide as she looked at him. "What a beautiful thing to give me..." She sniffed and looked down at the bag in her hand, pulling a few marbles into her fingers; examining their color, their texture. "These are beautiful Harry. Thank you."

"You're welcome," he watched her for a moment, noticing the struggle in her eyes, in the way she was fighting to keep emotions away. "Maddie..." He warmed over her name as he squeezed her toe, wanting to pull her back to him, away from the sorrow that was taking over her face.

"Sorry..." Her voice croaked, her hands waving in front of her face as though she were trying to wave off the emotion, the tears. "I'm sorry..."

"It's okay," he shook his head.

"It's not," she let a light laugh through her tears. "It's Christmas and it's supposed to be happy and..."

"It's okay," he tugged at her foot, wanting her closer.

"I'm scared." Her voice was small and soft and it cracked as the tears came. "I'm sorry. I'm just...really scared."

"I know you are baby," he moved the marbles from her lap, sat them to the side and he gathered her into his arms. "Come here. What are you scared of?"

Maddie blinked at his words, the emotions inside of her swelling at his question, at the answers she had. And her quiet, simple tears continued as she pressed her face into his chest. "I'm scared of losing you..." She whispered. "I'm scared something will happen to you. I'm scared this is our last Christmas together. I'm scared we'll never have babies. I'm scared that I'll get a phone call one night or that your brother will show up at my door and..." She shook her head. "I'm scared to be apart from you for four months. I'm scared of doing this alone of...being without you..." She tried to control her breathing, tried to control her tears, but it was clear; she had no control over her words any longer. All of her fears were pouring from her. "I'm scared of all those mornings I have to wake up and you're not there. I'm scared of going to sleep without you and...God Harry..." Her voice broke. "I'm scared I'll never stop feeling this way, that I'll never stop worrying and feeling out of control and..." She took a deep, shaky breath and wrapped her arms around him; hugging him tight and close to her. "I'm scared you'll hate me for feeling this way, for making this moment sad and I'm scared that you'll resent me for wanting you home and..." Harry's arms tightened around her then. He didn't know what to say, didn't know if he could find his way past the emotion piling up in the lump in his throat to even say anything. So he held her closer and tighter and he let her unload.
In truth, he was scared too. He was scared that this might wreck her, scared that he was leaving her alone to fend for herself. Scared that the role, the family might swallow her up while he was gone. He was scared that this would permanently scar them and somewhere deep down, he was scared of something happening. Scared of the possibility that he could get hurt, or worse. Scared that if he did, she would never ever forgive him.

"I'll never resent you," his voice had a shake to it; a hiccup that Maddie caught, that brought her back from her spiral. Back to him. She turned her face, pressing a kiss to his cheek before she pulled back just an inch or so; just enough to look at him. He took her face in his hands then and put more distance between them, wanting her to really see; wanting to watch as he tried to get it through to her. "I could never hate you," his eyes blinked at the idea; tears teasing at his lids. "Jesus Maddie. I love you...so fucking much. Would you just...stop... I couldn't hate you. I couldn't resent you. I..." He took a deep breath and though he wanted to pull back, though he wanted to keep avoiding, he knew he couldn't any longer. So he pulled her forehead to his and they sat there for a moment. Their breath fell in synch, their hearts thumping to a slower rhythm and when he finally felt himself collect, he opened his eyes and locked with hers. "Yes. Something could happen to me..."

Maddie tried to shake her head, tried to pull back, "Harry...." But he held firm.

"It's a war Madeline. Something could happen..." He struggled as he watched a tear slip from her eye. "I swear to you on all eight of those babies we're going to have that I will do everything in my power to make sure that nothing happens." Her eyes shifted down, her vision clouding with tears and he knew that she was sinking. But he couldn't have her do that. Not yet. His hand at her neck slid higher. "Look at me..." He was gentle but firm in his request, his fingers pressing her chin up to him. "Baby...look at me." When she did, he wasn't prepared for the emotions she brought with her; the way it slammed into his heart and he felt tears in his eyes, so fucking close to the surface. "You have to trust me. You have to believe me...nothing can keep me from coming back to you. Nothing." He leaned his lips to hers; light and chaste. "Haven't you figured that out yet?"

"I'm going to miss you..." The vulnerability in her voice did him in and he broke; his strong exterior giving way to the feelings flowing inside. His hands left her for only a second, his forehead left hers and his lips moved to her mouth.

As his arms wrapped tightly around her, as his lips pressed promises into hers, he wasn't sure exactly how it was he could possibly convey it all to her; his hopes, his fears, his primal instinct to protect her. From all of this.

So he went for silence. He went for warm, loving, all-consuming silence. He needed her; in a way that he would never be able to explain. And he knew she needed him, in exactly the same way.

In a blink of an eye, a stroke of a tongue, they moved together.

"Harry..." She breathed into his mouth.

And everything was pushed aside as they connected. His hand pressed flat against her back, warming the bare skin that was there and Maddie adjusted in his arms, moving into his lap without a second thought.

Her legs curved around him. His hands pushed up under the skirt of her dress, all along smooth stockings to the warm, soft skin that bared just above the lacy top to those stockings. There was no
fumbling in those moments; his fingers expert at the clasp to her garter belt. His hands easily
pulling the silk fabric down her legs, all the way behind him to where her feet were linked around
his waist.

And then they moved to her face; cupping her gently in the palms of his hands, his fingers
pressing up into her hair as he tilted her lips to his. He kissed her; over and over and over again.
His lips worked against hers in a slow simmering build of a way with kisses that were meant to be
given sweetly; chastely, but when delivered one right after another with the long slow linger of his
tongue in her mouth, of his lips wrapped around hers.

It was a slow, deep spiral she was heading towards. And she knew it. Maddie's hands slid up his
strong arms, over his broad shoulders and pulled at the slip of fabric that was his untied tie from
the evening. It slid from around his neck with a quick swoosh of a sound and was quickly
discarded.

No need for this, Maddie managed a moment of thought as her hands slid back to his shoulders for
a moment. Her palms pressed against the strong muscles there as she held onto him; needing a
second of stability. Catching her breath, growing accustomed to his tongue in her mouth, his lips
dancing against hers, she slid her hands down his chest, over his pounding heart and moved
straight towards the buttons on his crisp, white shirt.

There was no mishandling, no searching or struggling. Maddie had his shirt unbuttoned and was
pushing it off those amazing shoulders, those strong arms in no time at all. Harry's hands left her
face so she could take the shirt all the way off and when his hands returned to her, they moved
around to her back; pulling at the zipper to her dress, helping the fabric fall away from her.

In two beats of his heart, Maddie was tugging his t-shirt up and over his head; forcing his lips and
his hands from her body. So he took advantage and pulled the small sleeves of her dress down her
arms and the dress sagged; the beautiful silk fabric folding down and revealing the top half of the
matching lingerie Maddie had chosen for this particular night, for this exquisite dress.

Harry's lips turned into a smile and his hands fell to her hips where he held her and pulled her
closer; needing her there. As the lace of her bra pressed against his bare chest, Maddie could feel
the deep, wild breaths he was taking. She was taking them too.

"I want to make love to you," her admission was easy; simple and sweet and so completely
genuine. Her eyes were wide and open and even though they had remnants of tears, even though
they gave promise of further discussion, further emotion—they also held an abundance of love; of
desire. "Harry..." She wrapped her arms around his neck and tightened her legs around his body.
"I want to feel you...inside of me. I want your body against mine, your mouth on me...Harry..."

His hand slid up her back to the nape of her neck, bringing her face to his; pressing his lips to hers.
This kiss wasn't as slow as the ones before. It was intense and deep and laid the path for exactly
how the rest of the night was going to be.

Intense and deep.

They moved easily together then, their lips staying together as he made fast work of her bra, as her
fingers slipped to his pants; unzipping and slipping inside. They had to pull apart, this they knew.
They were completely undressed from the waist up but from the waist down...they had to pull
apart.

Though neither of them really wanted to. Maddie moved first, scooting back and off his lap,
taking his hand to pull him with her. Once they were on their feet, Harry's strong arms were wrapped around her, hugging her tightly to him as his mouth opened wider over hers, his tongue dipping into her mouth to stroke at hers. Maddie exhaled; long and slow into his mouth, her body growing a bit weak there in his arms. It took her only a moment to gain her wits back and her hands moved quickly to the work she had begun at his pants. She tucked her fingers into the waistband and pushed them down over his legs, sending them to pool around his ankles on the floor.

Stepping out of the fabric, Harry kicked it to the side and moved attention to her dress. With sure hands and soft fingers, he brought the zipper further down and gathered her closer for support as she stepped out of it.

And then there they were. The soft flicker of the fire dancing over their nearly naked bodies, both of them in their underwear. There were times in their lives, times in their relationship when this moment would have been the beginning of a big tease. Harry would have slipped a long, firm finger over the lace of her panties and stroked against her until she would moan and press him closer to the wetness he had created. There were times when Maddie would wrap her fingers around the hard length of him, where she might slip her hot hand into his boxers and circle the head of him until he was ready to burst.

There were times when this moment became a long, drawn out tease of a foreplay.

But not tonight. There was no teasing as Harry's hands slid across her skin, over her backside, pushing into the lace and pushing it down. There was no teasing as Maddie tugged at the boxers and let them fall to his feet. Though they loved the tease, found great use and desire for the tease —this was not a moment for the tease.

Harry's hands were back around her waist, Maddie's fingers were buried in his hair and both of them were doing their level best to bring the other as close as they possibly could. Harry walked them back to the bed, finding it with the back of his knees before he stopped. His hands moved reverently over her, over her curves, over her breasts. Maddie arched into his palm, fingers holding tight to the muscles in his neck, in his shoulders, in his arms. She loved the feel of him against her, the feel of his skin on her skin and all she really wanted was to be with him.

"Harry..." She begged with the tone of her voice. As much as she loved this, as much as she adored the things he could do to her with a swipe of his thumb or a stroke of his tongue, what she really needed was to be absolutely connected with him.

And he knew that. So he moved them to the bed; bringing her with him to the center and watching with lust filled eyes and a love filled heart as she laid back, pulling at his hand for him to join her; her legs adjusting to make room for him between them. Harry leaned over her, his hands bracing on either side of her head and he kissed her; a long, slow, art form of a kiss and then he pulled back. Maddie whimpered as he moved away from her and he couldn't help but smile at the sound she made, at the fact that she missed him.

"I have to get..." He waved to the nightstand; to the condoms in the drawer and he made a move towards it but Maddie's hand wrapped around his forearm and stopped him. His forehead crinkled in confusion; his eyes widening as he looked down at her. "Maddie..."

"Not tonight," her voice was a whisper and her eyes held steady with his. "I want to feel you. All of you. I don't want anything between us..." Her hold loosened on his arm and she smiled; blinking at the emotions that seemed to be continuously at the surface lately. "It's okay if you don't want to..." But Maddie couldn't finish that sentence, because Harry had returned to her; his mouth
opening hot and insistent and heavy over hers. His tongue moved into her mouth and stroked against hers in that long, slow, maddeningly way she knew he was about to do with his body. She grew hot and heavy-breathed and then he pulled back; pressing his forehead to hers and opening his eyes to look down at her.

"Are you sure?" He kissed her lightly. "You know that you could end up pregnant without me here or..."

"I know,\," she nodded, moving both of their heads just a bit. "It's not very likely. The timing is off and it wouldn't be the right time to..." His lips met hers again, one hand sliding down her side, over her hip to her knee, pulling her leg wider and higher and she could feel him hot and hard and ready right at her entrance. She gasped at the feel and arched out against him and she felt his groan in his chest. "Harry..." She whispered, her hand behind his neck pulling his lips back to hers. "Make love to me. Please. I..."

And then, because he needed no convincing, because an explanation or reasoning was completely unnecessary, because he wanted to be as close to her as he possibly could, because the off chance that she might end up pregnant was never something that scared him or made him nervous, because he loved her, because he wanted her and this and because his own heart was so full of this moment, Harry's fingers pressed into her hip as his mouth met hers and he slipped—long and slow and so incredibly hard—into her warm, wet body.

They both groaned at the way they moved; the way the other felt and they paused; holding onto that for just a moment, neither of them moving as they savored the way it was to have him buried so deep inside of her, to have him so close. And then, with a loving, warm kiss to Maddie, Harry began to move.

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Christmas Day awakened them all with a bright, shining sun and a cold, crisp air. Maddie's nose was rosy and she could see breath puff out of their mouths as they spoke, as they readied to take that walk to Saint Mary Magdalene's. They were all there; the whole lot of them. The older generation; Charles, Camilla, Andrew, Anne, Tim, Edward; they were out ahead. This was old hat to them and they had come to enjoy the tradition; setting it up next to all of the other traditions that were held so dear at this time of year, to this particular Matriarch.

The rest of the family gathered in less organized fashion; the cousins spending the last few seconds of their time razzing each other in a way that spoke of love and childhood. Maddie could imagine that they had done exactly this for as many years as they had been able to talk and it made her smile. Harry was close to her side. He had kept within arms' reach of her all morning and she wasn't entirely sure if it was for her benefit or for his own. But it didn't matter. She was happy to have him close enough to touch.

"Okay wife," he turned his attention from Zara's round stomach back to his wife; rosy cheeks and bright eyes. "Are you ready?" Maddie tilted a smile up to him and nodded. She was ready. He reached for her hand, the heat from his obvious even through their gloves. Slipping her hand through his crooked arm, he turned them both towards the path. Maddie fell easily into step with him; matching him stride for stride as her lungs sucked in the cold winter air and the others all moved along with them.

"Oh my..." Maddie's hand tightened on Harry's arm as they rounded the corner and looked past those in front of them, through the open gate at the masses of people lining the walk way.
"Don't worry," Harry's voice was low and deep, a smirk flickering across his face. "They're all here to see Kate."

"Funny," next to her, Kate narrowed her gaze on her brother-in-law all while smiling sweetly.

"Watch your step Sussex," Mike spoke up from behind her. "Don't want to fall on your ass over a patch of ice in front of all those cameras."

"Thank you," Harry tossed a glare over his shoulder.

"Tell me," Maddie smiled up at him. "Do you think I have enough time to fix Mike's nose?"

"Ouch," Mike snickered playfully as she continued.

"Or will they catch it on camera?" A warm chuckle rounded the group around her and Harry patted her fingers.

"They'll catch it on camera, love." He shrugged. "Maybe after service?"

"Maybe then," Maddie nodded and continued on. Maddie could hear the rustle of excitement from the throngs of people who had turned out on this crisp morning. She could see them move closer as Charles and Anne walked through the gates; Tim, Camilla, and Andrew directly behind them.

There were so many people; more than Maddie had expected to be there on Christmas morning. They spanned all ages; babies bundled up in oversized winter clothing, making them look like wobbly pandas and overstuffed teddy bears. There were grandmothers and, Maddie guessed, great-grandmothers; some standing tall, straining to snap a photo of this famous family. And there were those seated in wheelchairs, having been pushed to the walkway by another, younger family member—some happy to be there, some not as much.

Maddie watched their faces as she and Harry stepped through the gate along with Kate and William. The boys took to the outside as though they were forming this unspoken, unplanned barrier of themselves between this moment and their wives. This was Maddie's first walk and it was Kate's first since everything that had followed Arthur's birth. As if either of these men needed reason to want to take the brunt of the attention.

Maddie watched their faces as they turned their wide smiles, their bright eyes from one generation of royals to another; to them. And it struck her—seeing the way their faces lit up, the affection they turned to them. It struck her for the first time really, shockingly, how big this really was. She wasn't just married to Harry; to the Duke of Sussex. She was married to that little red-headed baby boy who had toddled around Sandringham, that smiling, cheeky little man who many of these people had watched grow into the man who now walked past them with a wife. Tears pricked to her eyes and she sniffed; a warm realization washing over her face and into her heart.

These people—They knew him. They loved him.

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It was the music. It was always the music. Sitting in that immaculate church surrounded by beautiful paintings and carvings and meticulous pieces of artistry that made Maddie desperately want to sit in this space all alone in a peaceful sort of silence. It was enough to bring her wandering mind rushing right back to this spot; to this moment.
Sitting next to Harry; his hand holding onto hers in a way that was more need than want, sitting two rows behind The Queen; who was very much Gran inside of these walls. Sitting in this place of worship that had been a place of worship before Maddie's home country had been established, in this place that held so much history—not just for the world, but for this family that was now hers.

She had no idea why she had been so emotional lately. She knew—but it confused her. Harry had been deployed before; he had left her before. And he had returned. But for some reason, this seemed to be sitting with her in a way she hadn't expected. Even still, long after she had grieved over the news.

She had no idea why it was she couldn't seem to keep the feelings at bay, keep the emotions from overflowing the surface.

It must have been the music. It always was the music that did her in. Drew her to tears.

It was beautiful; the voices, the lyrics, the sentiment behind them. She loved it. And yet it tore at her heart. Twisting her fingers around Harry's, she drew his hand nearer and she had no way of knowing that he was fighting much the same battle as she.

He knew she was crying; he knew she had been crying in one way or another since the news of his deployment had come. Though there was a part of him that wished she could find a way to move past it; to accept and fall in. There was another part of him that was swept away by the knowledge that this person sitting next to him, this woman who he had met less than five years ago, this woman who had been a stranger before a friend before a lover before a wife...that she who had linked herself to him in matrimony, she who was ready to link herself to him in parenthood—that she whom he loved more than he could articulate most days—that she would feel his absence so heavily from her heart that she was already feeling it; weeks before he left.

It was that; that kind of love and devotion and partnership; it was always that realization that did him in. Drew him to tears.

But it was a joyous occasion. The music was praiseful, the spirit enlightened so they clung to each other in that ancient church and they lifted their eyes to the ceiling—because they really couldn't look at the other—and they put smiles with the teary eyes and they held tight and fast.

And they didn't let go.

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"There you are!" Harry stepped into the rooms occupied by his brother and his family, his eyes finding Maddie as he let out a breath of relief. "I've been looking all over for you." They had been online with Collins and Isaiah for a while and she had slipped out of the room when he had closed things down and stepped into the restroom.

"Well now that can't be true..." Her voice had the soft upspring that always came when she spoke to the chubby, happy little man in her arms. "What do you think Arthur? Do you think Uncle Harry's been looking everywhere or is he just being a drama Queen?"

As if on cue, their nephew cooed and they both melted. Maddie snuggled him closer and inhaled his hair.

"Do his parents know you have him?" He leaned in to kiss first Arthur's head and then Maddie's.
"No," she shook her head, catching his lips with a kiss of her own.

"Should we make a run for it?" He lifted his eyebrows, his fingers tickling along Arthur's stomach, making him squirm in Maddie's arms.

"Absolutely," she nodded with a wide grin. "What about his officers?"

"I'll distract them while you boost him from his room." Harry chuckled at the look on his nephew's face.

"I'm not even sure what you just said to my son..." William stepped back into the room, his eyes narrowing at the two of them; Kate right behind him. "Though I can absolutely tell it wasn't good."

"Aw, come on," Harry laughed, waving his hand towards Will.

"Are Uncle Harry and Aunt Maddie corrupting you?" Kate moved to her son, smiling as she lifted him from Maddie's arms. "Come on, love. Let's get you bundled up."

"Is it time?" Harry's jokes fell away as he looked to his watch.

"Nearly," Will nodded his head, tossing a sweater onto the bed and looking them over. "You'll probably want coats."

Maddie looked from one brother to another with a warm gaze. "Time for what?" She folded her arms in front of her. "Coats for what?"

"We're going out," Harry's arm slid easily around her, tugging her body closer to his.

"Out?" She looked past him to the dark outside the frosted windows. "For what?"

"Another Christmas tradition," he shrugged.

"There are more Christmas traditions?" She smirked. There had been so many that day; greeting people after the service, the gala luncheon, watching The Queen's Christmas address.

"There are always more traditions," Kate looked up from where she readied Arthur. "You should know that by now, Duchess." Her eyes were bright and her cheeks warm as she glanced to her sister-in-law.

"Nobody is going to tell me more?" She took a breath and let it sigh from her lungs. She already knew the answer to that. "Coats?" She looked to her husband who already had a cheeky grin in place.

"And mittens and hats and scarves and boots..." He rattled off the list of winter wear she would need for this particular trip. "How long?" He glanced to his brother.


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ground, Maddie was surprised to find that it was just them. Herself, Harry, William, Kate and Arthur. There was a car behind loaded with protection officers but for this particular tradition, William would be driving this small collection of people. As Kate secured Arthur's carrier in the middle of the back seat, Harry opened Maddie's door watched her warmly as she went to move past him.

"Hold on," he caught her arm and shut the door in front of her.

"What?" She turned an amused grin to him. "Am I not allowed to go any longer?" She was joking, her spirits having lifted after the service, after seeing all of the people and spending time with the cousins. She was in a lighter mood.

"No, no," he shook his head; his hands moving to her arms, rubbing up and down a few times as he prepared to let her in on the secret. "We're going to see my mother's family."

"We are," Maddie's voice went low, her breath pulling in. She hadn't spent much time with this side of Harry's family and she was surprised to find that she was surprised they were going there.

"Sarah and Neil have a home not too far away. They are all there for the holiday this year," Harry nodded his head in the general direction they would be traveling. "We try to go see them every year."

"That's sweet," Maddie stepped to him, her arms wrapping around his waist.

"I'm going to tell them," his eyes grew slightly dark. "My aunts at least."

"Tonight?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted, knowing exactly what he was talking about.

"I know," he sighed, understanding that Christmas probably wasn't the best time to drop the news; but he hadn't seen them in person since he had been told and he likely wasn't to see them again before he left. "But..." He looked over the top of her head, out into the cold darkness and he shrugged.

"Okay," Maddie agreed, her hand running up his arm, comforting. "Okay. It's okay." She leaned up to kiss him. Her fingers pressed his cheek as her lips pressed against the other. "Let me know if you need anything?"

"Yes," he nodded and watched her for a beat of a second before Will knocked on the glass of the window, waving them inside the car. "Coming!" He called in to his brother and reached for the handle. He smiled down at Maddie for a moment, unable to articulate the way it made him feel to see her react to talk of the deployment without immediate tears. And then he opened her door and watched as she slid past him inside. Closing the door behind her, he stepped into the passenger seat next to his brother and they were on their way.

Maddie situated quickly; buckling her belt and turning her attention to the sleepy little baby between her and Kate. "You're going to your parents' tomorrow?"

"Mmm," Kate nodded, her smile deepening at the thought. "First thing, yes." They would be missing the hunt, but it was a compromise.

"Your parents must be ecstatic." Maddie caught his little fingers around one of hers, running a thumb over the soft skin.
"They are," Kate grinned. "I would imagine Arthur will be well spoiled by the time we're through with them."

"I would imagine," Maddie agreed, glancing out of the window as they drove along. "I can't believe we're already at the end of the year..."

Kate watched Maddie for a moment and then reached for her hand; her fingers were gentle as she drew the blonde's attention and her voice was low when she spoke. "Are you doing okay?"

Maddie's eyes swung up to Kate's in a flash of surprise and then they settled into understanding. And though she felt a little teary, she didn't cry. Instead she took a deep breath and allowed her lips to curve up just a bit. "Yes?" She asked more than answered, a tiny bubble of laughter pushing through her lips. Kate chuckled a bit, understanding more than most what Maddie meant.

"Well, you're handling it better than I would," Kate eased back a bit, allowing Maddie a chance to escape the conversation. "I think I would be a blubbery mess."

"I am," Maddie breathed. "I have been. I just..." She glanced up at the two men in their own conversation; Will's eyes trained on the road as he debated with his brother. "I'm trying not to be."

"Well, if there's anything I can do," Kate offered; her voice quiet and solemn as she extended an open invitation to Maddie. "Anything..." She met her eyes then and smiled; remembering their history. "I'd be happy to come and sit in the bathroom for hours..."

"Ha," Maddie laughed softly, her heart warming at the way Kate offered, at the meaning and sentiment behind her words. "Thank you. I'll be sure to take you up on that."

"Any time," Kate's fingers squeezed Maddie's hand then, holding tight and then letting go. "Any time."

Before they could slip further into the emotions they were both juggling, Harry—in true Harry fashion—jumped into the conversation.

"What are you two birds chirping about back there?" He tossed a look back to them; half smirk, half curiosity.

"How ruggedly handsome you are," Maddie tossed back without missing a beat.

"Please," the brunette rolled her eyes and snickered.

"I'm actually trying to drive up here," Will jumped in and the laughter settled the group.

It wasn't long before Will turned their vehicle through a gate and down a long, winding road draped in trees and snow. They pulled up to the massive home and stepped out into the night that seemed to be growing colder and colder. Harry's hand slid around her shoulders; tucking her in and closer to him. Maddie looked up at the house, the kind of house that would have blown her mind in the days before she had married a Prince, before she had moved into a Palace. It was large and sprawling and as they followed the Cambridge's up the stoop, the door swung open and the warm, vibrant life inside came pouring out.

It was Harry's uncle, the Earl Spencer; tall and broad in the doorway, seemingly taking up all of the space. With a loud voice that competed with the celebrations behind him, he wished them a Happy Christmas and invited them in.
"I have something for you," Harry spoke to just Maddie as they left the very same house later that night.

"Oh?" She perked up; her eyes, her smile. They hadn't stayed too long; just long enough for the cousins to coo over baby Arthur. Just long enough for Harry to let his mother's sisters in on this secret he was carrying, just long enough for Maddie to look through some old, rarely seen photos of the boys as children, of Diana as a young mother. It was sweet, Maddie thought, to be able to see these hidden gems, these moments from her husband's childhood. They had stayed just long enough for a drink and a biscuit and then they had left. Amidst hugs and wishes for Happy Christmas, they slipped back out the door and were on their way back to the cars to take them back to Sandringham. "What do you have for me?" Her face was light and free and Harry wanted nothing more than to snuggle into her and kiss her neck until her giggles gave in to sighs.

"You'll have to put your hand in my pocket to find out," his eyes danced with the innuendo, with the dare he placed before her.

"Fair enough," Maddie shrugged, not the least bit shy as she slipped her fingers into the pocket of his heavy wool coat. And her entire face lit up like the lights of the tree.

"Happy Christmas," he grinned like the cheeky little shit he was; the cheeky little shit she loved.

"You know," Maddie leaned into him, her fingers unwrapping the plastic wrapper of her candy. "I'm not sure I'm able to decide which of my gifts is my favorite."

Harry laughed, his arm around her flexing as he did. "I'm putting my money on the sweat bands."

"It's funny that you mention those, Captain," she dropped her voice as they stepped up to the car. "Because I think I have imagined an entirely different use for them." With a swift pat on his ass, Maddie slipped by him and opened her door. With a wide grin and wink, she moved into the car. Harry chuckled and shook his head and, moreover, he let out a breath he had been holding.

She was laughing and smiling and poking fun and making jokes and...she was coming back to him. From the sadness she had rightly been enveloped in for a while, she was coming back. He knew it would happen, he knew she would get there. And, though he knew she would ebb and flow like the lively creature she was, he was happy to be able to see a bit of this before he left. Climbing in next to his brother, he settled into his seat and felt his shoulders ease just a bit.

It was late when they finally pulled up outside Sandringham and though it was warm and toasty inside of the car, it was clearly not so outside. Arthur had been asleep for most of the ride home and the four of them had fallen into a gentle quiet; peaceful. The gravel and the snow crunched under the tires as they pulled to a stop and they all sat for a moment while Kate placed blankets over Arthur's carrier, protecting him from the nip outside. When the doors opened, Harry was quick to Maddie's, reaching for her hand as Will took the carrier from Kate and they headed towards the door.

"Walk with me for a minute?" Harry nodded his head towards the lawn with the tall, iced over trees spiking up towards the sky.
"Sure," Maddie agreed immediately, never having been one to turn down some quality time with her husband. Tucking her arm through his, he led her off towards the path to the lawn. "It's nice out..." She commented, looking up at the clear sky.

"It's freezing," Harry chuckled.

"It's Christmas," she corrected, leaning into him. "And it forces you to stand closer to me; seeking warmth."

"We don't need frost for that," he shook his head and kissed the side of hers. "Tell me, how did I ever convince you to marry me?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie smiled, pressing her lips together as she pretended to think about it. "I don't know..." She sighed and slipped her hand into his pocket. "Maybe it was the candy."

"Had to have been the candy," Harry chuckled.

"Or..." She unwrapped the piece, growing a tad romantic. "Maybe it was the way you showed up in the desert and swept me off my feet..." Their eyes met for a blink of seriousness, his face growing sweet as he remembered. "Your charm and your wit and your alarmingly contagious laughter..." She shrugged. "And your sweet ass."

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back, his laughter echoing into the night. "Now that's just the candy talking."

"Yes," Maddie laughed in a light sigh. "Whatever it was...I'm glad it worked."

"Yeah?" He lifted an eyebrow. "Even now? Holed up in this drafty old house..."

"Drafty old house?" Maddie snickered at his description.

"Preparing for a deployment?" He sighed, bringing her closer. "Planning for a trip to the Arctic I won't even be here for..."

"Well," Maddie smiled, dropping her head to the side. "You weren't going to be much help with that anyway..." She could see him slipping into the sentiment where she had been most of the holiday.

"Yeah," he drew to a stop, turning to face her. "Even now?"

"Even now." Maddie's hand reached out, her fingers stroking down the profile of his nose, tapping the tip with a wink. "With all of the traditions and warmth and love and..."

"What if..." He took a breath and slid his hands from around her, down her arms, capturing her hands. "What if I told you that it's not over yet..."

"What's not over yet?" Her forehead crinkled in confusion.

"The holiday traditions..." And then she saw it, this wicked little glimmer in his eye and she knew. Something was up.

But she didn't have time to dig any further. She barely had time to recognize it and put a name to it. Because no sooner did her eyes narrow, the snow began to fly; not in the winter-time-flurry
sense, but in the tightly-packed-snowball sense.

From all around them, the cousins ran out of hiding and snowballs were being tossed in nearly every direction; with Maddie and Harry right in the eye of the storm.

"What kind of tradition is this?!" She shrieked, ducking as the laughter and yelling began.

"I don't know," Harry shook his head and dropped her hand; bending down to collect some snow. "But I would suggest you start running."

Maddie's eyes glanced down at his hands and then back up to the smile on his face and she knew exactly who that ball in his hand was meant for.

"Henry Charles..." She held up a finger, slowly backing away from him.

"Madeline, darling," he shook his head, rising to his feet as he rolled the snow around in his hand. "I love you more than anything on the Earth, baby. You know I do. But..." He shook his head and laughed. "When Bea met me in the corridor yesterday and told me you were upstairs pissed out of your mind and crying...well, love. You chose sides that day."

And Maddie knew she was in for it, there was no talking her way out of this one. He was a stubborn, competitive man and there was no doubt in her mind that he was coming for her. So she did the only thing she could think of.

She ran.

But not in the way he had intended; not in the other direction. Instead she ran right for him. Harry barely had time to register his surprise when his wife; his tiny, beautiful, graceful wife plowed right into him; tackling him to the ground.

"OW!" He called out as he fell back; his ass taking the brunt of the fall, his body catching hers as the snow puffed up and around them. "Jesus Madeline. You brut!"

"You left me no choice," she laughed as she sat over his waist, looking down at his happy face. "What was I supposed to do?" She tossed snow into his face until he managed to snatch her wrists with his hands.

"You were supposed to run!" He shook his head and took control; wrapping his arms around her and rolling. Maddie squealed as he reversed their positions, looking down at her pink cheeks and bright smile. He leaned in to kiss her and she giggled against his lips. "You were supposed to run..."

"I did!"

"The other way!" He shook his head, snow flicking out from his hair and falling to her face.

"Ah..." She breathed, her arms twisting up and around his neck; her eyes taking on a clearly flirtatious look. "And what am I supposed to do now? Pinned underneath you? At your mercy?" Without answer, Harry grinned wide and bent to kiss her again. Once, twice and on the third time; slower and more intense.

"Oh bloody..." Mike groaned, catching sight of them. "Really now?"
"Knock it off!" Eugenie called out, kicking snow in their direction.

"Would you two get a bloody room?" Bea followed up.

And then, as the groans around them grew, the snowballs began to fly and this time their aim was right on.

"Captain," Maddie laughed as a snowball hit the back of Harry’s head; snow flying as it puffed. "I think maybe you were right..."

"About the running?" He laughed and she nodded and then, with a shared look, they both moved; Harry quick to his feet and extending a hand. "Come with me." Maddie didn't think twice about taking his hand and following him.

With wild laughter, they ran from the onslaught of snow, seeking shelter behind at meticulously sculpted shrub to prepare their own defense. As he packed the snow together, he caught her in the corner of his eye. She was balling up snow of her own, watching those around them with a wide smile and a carefree look in her eyes and he knew.

She was going to be okay. She was going to be better than okay.
Chapter 140

"What do you mean you don't have any new t-shirts for me?" Harry's laughter rang out as he turned wide eyes to Jenna who sat next to him on the sofa in Hannah's living room. "You've let me down." He shook his head in mock disappointment. He and Maddie had finally arrived in Colorado after a long flight and, having finished a wonderful dinner, they were lounging around with Jenna and Gary and Hannah as the evening wound down.

"Ha!" Jenna laughed with a heavy sigh. "You know I did see one on amazon that said 'Prince Harry is my Homeboy' that I nearly bought but you know...I wasn't sure if we were tight like that."

"Come on!" Harry nudged her with a roll of his eyes. "Of course we're tight like that. Though it would be strange for me to wear one."

"It would," Jenna snickered as she nodded.

"Maybe we could find one for me that says 'Jenna is my Homegirl'?" He winked as the rest of the room laughed along.

"I'll see what I can do," Jenna agreed, her cheeks flushing a bit at the idea.

"Good lord," Maddie rolled her eyes, pulling herself up from the big chair she had been snuggled up in since dinner had ended. "I'm not sure I'm going to be able to handle the two of you for three days in the mountains."

"My thoughts exactly," Gary agreed, taking a long drink from his bottle and looking to Harry. "Are you going to stick to the skis this year or are you going to give in and try boarding?"

"I think I'm going to stick to the skis," Harry shrugged, reaching for his own drink. "Why? Are you switching it up?"

Maddie stood at the door to the room, watching as the conversation moved to their trip into the mountains the day after tomorrow. Her eyes travelled to the tree with presents underneath; gifts they would be opening the next day when they celebrated their own Christmas with her mother. And then she looked to her mother sitting in a chair next to the fireplace, a blanket tucked around her legs as she laughed lightly at the conversation in her living room. She was watching Harry as he seemed to animate with the story he was sharing. And Maddie felt a tug in her stomach. She had to tell her.

"Hey mom?" She called out softly, gaining her mother's attention with a wave of her hand and a nod of her head. "Can I talk to you?" She glanced out of the room and back to her mother.

"Sure," Hannah nodded and with a smile, she lifted her blanket up into her arms and followed her daughter out of the room.

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Harry was quiet as he moved through the house later that night, stepping softly as he slipped from their bedroom and made his way down the stairs. It was dark out, the snow filled clouds having blanketed over the stars and the moon. He chuckled to himself as he pulled on the heavy coat he
had haphazardly tossed aside when they had arrived to a warm, sunny evening. He remembered
the way Maddie had laughed and assured him he would need it sooner rather than later. She had
been right.

He wasn't surprised to find her outside. Even though it was cold, even though snow threatened to
fall any second, it was Friday. And this had been a standing date for her for years. With a smile,
he zipped up his coat and slid open the large glass doors.

"Can I join you?" He called out quietly, stepping onto the deck and closing the door behind him.

Hannah looked up with a smile and waved him over. Though she had grown accustomed to him
joining her when they were together, she had thought the long travel and the late hour might have
kept him inside. After her conversation with her daughter, she was happy and relieved to see him
step out onto the deck that night. "I thought that you might be asleep. You had a long day...aren't
you exhausted?"

"Not really," he shrugged. "Nothing I can't handle." His smile was wide as he sat in the spot next
to her. "Your daughter on the other hand..." He shook his head with a chuckle. "She barely made
it to the bed."

Hannah laughed along with him, remembering the way Maddie seemed to fade almost instantly
when she was tired. "She's had a long day," she offered Harry a cigar.

"She's had a long year," Harry took the cigar from her fingers; reaching to the lighter on the table
in front of them; his voice dipping into serious for just a moment, finding it pointless to dance
around the news his wife had dropped on her.

Hannah nodded and sucked on the cigar. "She told me, you know."

"I guessed," he nodded, tossing the lighter back to the table and inhaling from his own cigar. And
there they sat for a few minutes; their acknowledgments hanging in the air like the smoke they
blew out into the night; heavy and very present. Hannah was the first to speak.

"Please be careful over there..." She was soft and pleading instead of demanding; gentle instead of
angry. "Please don't let anything happen to you."

Harry took a full drag; in and out and then he leaned forward to ash into the tray and his eyes
swung up to hers. "I'll be careful." He wasn't placating her. He meant it. "I won't let anything
happen." He also didn't need to go into the details, the chances, the mechanics of it all. She was
like a mother to him, all she wanted was a promise for his safe return.

"It's just..." Hannah's lips twitched up just a bit. "You're my only hope for grandchildren." He
watched as a crack of a smile swept over her face.

"Is that so?" Harry chuckled lightly, his heart tugging at the mention of children crept into his
forethought and Hannah continued.

"And if something happens to you...I'll never get to be a grandmother," she smiled a bit higher,
happy to see he found amusement in her words. Tucking her feet up underneath her, she watched
as he took another drag and exhaled.

"Well, that's not entirely true," he shrugged with the ease and lightness that usually came with
him. "She's young and gorgeous and brilliant...I'm sure there would be a line of suitors eager to
"Ah," Hannah nodded and gulped at the sudden, unexpected lump in her throat. "I see you're under the misguided notion that she would ever, ever move on." Her voice caught and Harry's face shifted. When Hannah spoke, she reminiscent and full of gravity and the entire mood on the deck was altered. "As if she would ever get married again, as if she would ever have...somebody else's children." She chuckled and tried to look away. But she couldn't, she was caught there with him and she watched as Harry blinked at the emotion that hung between them and then she took a deep breath and moved her hand to rest on his arm. "You're my only hope for grandchildren, Harry." She snuffed out her cigar and held his eyes. "And you're much too young to leave this world." Her hand slid up to his face in a sweet, gentle gesture that made him want to hug her. It made him want to cry. "Take care of yourself over there."

Harry blinked; a long heavy reflex trying to calm his nerves, trying to quiet the thoughts running through his mind about Maddie and children and a future without him in it. He gulped back the lump in his throat and his fingers moved to Hannah's that laid against his cheek. Meeting her eyes, he nodded. "I will. I promise."

And then because she had no other words to say, because she was afraid that if she tried to find words to say it might come out in nothing but sobs and pleas, she leaned in and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "We love you around here Your Royal Highness," her eyes danced as she spoke the words that made him pull into a chuckle. "You should know that."

"I do," he nodded, pulling her into a hug. "I love you too. Mrs. Forrester."

Harry watched Maddie for a few minutes before he stepped inside their room. He watched from afar as his wife slept; her breathing steady and a small smile on her lips—as though she fell asleep with a wide smile that faded with every deep breath. He shut their bedroom door softly and began to shed his clothes as he walked towards their bed.

The conversation with her mother had stuck with him since they had finished their cigars and come inside, since he had told her goodnight and climbed the stairs to his room. Her words raced through his mind over and over, making him feel dizzy with it all. And now as he looked down on her, all he wanted to do was wake her up and make her promise. To live without him.

He sighed; a heavy, weighted sound as he reached for his t-shirt and shorts and dressed for bed. When they had left Sandringham after the Christmas holiday was over, Maddie had been in a better space; a lighter space. It wasn't as though she had totally moved on from his impending deployment. It was more like she wasn't letting it control all of her thoughts. She had gone days without crying, without tearing up and it seemed as though it wasn't hanging over them as much or as heavily. And here he was, wanting to wake her up and bring it all back to the front. He brushed his teeth, washed his face and by the time he slipped into bed next to her, he knew he had to or he wasn't going to sleep.

He rolled over onto his side, wrapping his arm around her and snuggling close, he tucked her back against his chest and he closed his eyes; his body molding against hers. He felt bad waking her, but he had to.

"Maddie..." Harry's breath was soft against her shoulder, his lips right behind. His fingers pulling
her hair back and away from her face as he called to her again. "Madeline..."

"Mmmm..." She moaned, rustling as she snuggled back into him and shrugged closer underneath the weight and heat of his arm. "You smell like cigars," she whispered, her lips hinting at a smile.

"I know I do..." Harry kissed her shoulder again. "Can you wake up for just a second? I need to talk to you baby..." His hand smoothed over her side, trying to rouse her awake.

"What is it Captain?" Her hands warmed over the arm he had wrapped around her and she turned just a bit, just enough so she could look up at him through her half-opened, sleepy eyes.

Harry looked down at her for a beat, his eyes dancing over her soft features; her warm eyes, her tiny nose, the soft upturn of her lips, and he smiled. "You told your mother."

"You knew I was going to tell her," her arm snaked up, winding around him and pulling him close. She could feel the tension in his neck, the stress in his shoulders. "Harry?" She opened her eyes wider, taking in his heavy eyes, his worried brow. "What happened?"

"Nothing," he shook his head, his chin rubbing against her shoulder as he moved. "She just...she mentioned something I honestly never thought to talk to you about..."

"Oh?" Maddie was waking up more and more, turning to look at him. "What's that?"

"Moving on," he sighed, watching her face for a reaction. "She told me..." He took a deep breath and held her eyes. "She told me that I was her only chance for grandchildren."

"What?" Maddie chuckled halfway; the laughter dying down as she let it settle, as she took in the look in his eyes.

"She told me that if something happened to me she couldn't imagine you ever moving on and having children and..." Maddie's expression changed, her smile slipping away completely. Her mouth opened to say something, but he held a gentle finger to her lips and he continued. "You do know that I would want you to."

"Harry," she groaned, nudging his shoulder with the heel of her hand.

"I would want you to move on and fall madly in love and have a family..." He tried to hurry ahead, seeing her protest building, but she cut him off with a huff as she moved in his arms; turning her eyes from his.

"Don't be absurd, Harry. I couldn't possibly move on to somebody else..." She sighed heavily and bit the corner of her lip. "Bishop's already married."

"Oh Madeline, really," Harry groaned, rolling away from her with a half chuckle. "Be serious for a minute." His head rested back on the pillow and his eyes lifted to the ceiling.

"I am," she sighed, turning to face him. "While I think he would be okay with having two wives, I'm not so sure Ella's prepared to share and..."

"I'm trying to have a conversation with you." His eyes found hers in the darkness; turning his head to look at her.

"And I'm trying to not," she opened her eyes wide and moved so she was facing him. Her hands
went to him; holding the sides of his face as she focused on him. "I'm done with the planning Harry. I'm done with the preparations. You're leaving in a week and...if something happens to you...it happens. And it would kill me." She nodded; knowing for sure that she was speaking the truth. "But I can't...I don't want to focus on this part of it. I don't want to talk to you about me loving somebody else," she let the tears come as her anger gave way to something greater; more powerful. "I don't want to talk about...babies. Harry. Babies? If you want me to have babies then you do your job. You be careful and you get your ass back home to me." She lifted her head from the pillow, tilting her lips to his.

"Maddie..." He whispered above his emotions as she moved closer to his side, cuddling into him. "I don't want you to be left alone."

"I won't be," she kissed his t-shirt covered chest. "I am surrounded by people who love me."

"You know what I mean," his fingers pulled into her hair; stroking gently.

"I do," she nodded and nudged her way under his arm; tucking close. And then in a voice that held as many tears as her eyes did at that moment, she confessed. "I can talk about plans for houses and money and cars and...God...I can talk about plans for a funeral and a service but..." She took a deep breath and opened her eyes to his. "I can't talk about plans for loving somebody else. Okay? Please..."

"I just want you to know that I would be okay if you..."

"Okay," she cut in. "I know you would be okay. I'll...God. If something happens, I'll remember that. But I don't want to make plans for loving somebody else, for somebody else's children. I just..." She sniffed and rolled her eyes as a few tears pressed from her eyes. "If you want my mother to have grandchildren, you'll get your ass back to me. Okay?"

And because he couldn't make her cry anymore, because he couldn't stomach the way she was looking at him in that moment, because he couldn't refuse a request such as that, he nodded. Cupping her head in his palm he leaned in to kiss her.

"Okay," he whispered. "Okay."

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Harry did as she asked that night; he dropped the discussion. He had said his piece and she had said hers and he wasn't really willing to spend more time than that trying to convince his wife to love somebody else in his absence. So he let the conversation go. But that didn't mean he stopped thinking about, that didn't mean he didn't continue with the planning. He had one more conversation to have while they were in Colorado. And he was finally able to have it on their first night in the mountains with her cousins.

They had spent Day two of their trip celebrating Christmas with Hannah. They made pancakes, they hung stockings, they watched A Christmas Story over and over on DVD. They decorated the tree, they ate, and they exchanged gifts. It was warm and cozy and Maddie's heart swelled at the sight and the feeling of it all.

On Day three they had piled into the SUVs with Gary and Jenna and they waved good-bye to Hannah and Patrick and they left for the mountains. Kyle and Amy had already been there for a few days and Derek and Dena would be meeting them, they were ready to ring in the New Year with their long standing tradition; cousins, skiing, and lots of drinking. Harry had tried to convince...
Hannah to come with them, to take advantage of the time they had, but she had waved them off and promised she had her own New Year's plans.

So off they went.

They had arrived earlier than any of them had expected and Amy and Kyle were ready and waiting with excited smiles and opened drinks. The cousins made no haste as they mixed cocktails and slipped into this special sense of relaxation that came with this trip. They had plans that night to go out after dinner. There was a mountain pub that was having a New Year party and when Maddie lifted her eyebrows to Harry, he couldn't tell her no—not that he wanted to. The mood had been set and he was diving in head first.

But first, he had one conversation he needed to have.

He watched as Kyle went out to the deck to check the meat he was grilling in the snow. He glanced to where Maddie was going through wedding details with Amy and then, grabbing two bottles of beer, he went to join Kyle outside.

When Harry stepped out onto the deck, the chilled air slapped against his cheeks and he could see his breath push from his lungs. He slid the door closed with a click and moved further into the cold night.

"Hey man," Kyle looked up from the grill with a quick nod in Harry's direction.

"Hey," Harry nodded back, offering one of his bottles.

"Thanks," Kyle took it from him with a smile and a tip of his drink to Harry.

"Sure," Harry lifted his bottle to Kyle and glanced back towards the house to ensure their privacy. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

"Out here?" Kyle's eyebrows shot up in confusion as he tipped his bottle of beer to his lips.

"Yeah," Harry shrugged. "We're alone out here."

Kyle glanced towards the doors, a half smirk spreading across his lips. "Listen, if you're about to hang me over the edge to pay me back for Maddie's ankle this summer..."

"No," Harry shook his head, waving his hand dismissively. "It's nothing like that."

"Okay," Kyle put down the tongs next to the grill and turned to Harry, his eyes scanning him for some sort of hint. "Go ahead."

Harry took a deep breath, his fingertips pressing together as he let it out slowly, his eyes swinging to Kyle's and refusing to beat around the bush at this point, he hit him with it. "I'm being deployed."

Kyle flinched at Harry's words, taking a step back in shock; eyes wide in surprise. "What do you mean you're..."

"I'm flying out in a week," he continued, knowing that Kyle understood. His brother had been deployed before, he had served in a war before. They were both keenly aware of what Harry was talking about.
"Where?" His voice was soft; a breath.

"Khundu."

"Oh my God," Kyle's hands moved to his mouth. "In a week?"

"Yes," Harry nodded, watching as Maddie's cousin absorbed this news, as he took it in, made sense of the words.

"Jesus Christ," his hands scrubbed up into his hair and he looked to Harry in disbelief, in fear, in all of the scattered ways that everyone had when they had learned the news. "How long?"

"Four months." Harry paused for a moment, letting Kyle sit with it for a blink and then he continued. "Not many people know this. In fact, I can probably count on my hands how many people know other than essential military personnel."

"I won't say a word," Kyle held his hands up in surrender.

"I didn't think you would," Harry shook his head, a small smile on his lips. "But I'm not worried about that."

"What are you worried about?"

There was only one answer to that; there had only ever been one answer. "Maddie." Kyle had no words; only dark eyes and a heavy nod. "She's...worried."

"Sure."

"She's afraid and she's..." Harry took a deep breath. "We've had a lot this year. She's had a lot this year and this is just pushing her right to the edge and..." He let out a dark chuckle. "Honestly Kyle she's been doing better but I'm still worried about her. And I know she trusts you and I trust you and she'll listen to you and..." He shrugged. "Not many people speak to her the way you do. She's a Duchess now and they're afraid or reserved or... Not many people feel free enough to talk to her the way you do. Not many people will look after her like you will. Not many people are close enough to her for her to feel she can speak freely or trust them or..."

"What can I do?" Kyle cut in; all of the jokes and pranks that had passed between them having drifted away. This was serious; he could see it, he could feel it and despite all the back and forth, he loved Maddie and he loved Harry. "What do I do?"

"Just..." The lump in Harry's throat cut him off; the overwhelming need to cry flooding his thoughts for just a moment. His hand moved to his chest and he gulped; pulling it together. "Just look out for her. Call her and check in..." He ran a hand over the back of his neck. "I'll give you my brother's number and my assistant Thomas and...just check in with her and Kyle..." He grew stark serious for a moment; stepping in closer as his voice dropped with the gravity of it all. "If something happens to me you just...get on a plane. Don't listen to what she says just...get to London."

"Of course."

"Promise?"
"I swear."

The relief was evident; the way his shoulders eased, the way his face relaxed, the way the tears in his eyes seemed to manifest. Harry nodded; thankful in so many ways. "Thank you." He lifted his bottle to his lips and took a long, slow pull.

"Is there anything else I can do? For you, I mean?" Kyle asked; knowing the next four months were going to be difficult for both of them.

"You just did," Harry smiled; wide and relaxed. "You just did." And just before he could come back with a crack about retribution for the events of the summer, the glass doors slid open and the blonde love of Harry's life poked her head out.

"So..." She was grinning ear to ear, the champagne she had been drinking already taking effect. "The group inside has elected me as our spokeswoman."

"What do you need a spokeswoman for?" Harry's eyes squinted as he looked to her.

"The group would like to know..." She cleared her throat and tried to fight the smile on her face; going for as serious as she could muster. "If you were going to finish grilling that meat anytime soon or if we should just order pizza while you two bond in the cold?"

Harry laughed as Kyle's jaw tensed and the normal rivalry and punch between them returned. "Actually..." He sat his beer down on the table next to the grill. "I have something you could take back to 'the group'."

"Oh?" Maddie couldn't help the sass that bled into her voice. "I can't imagine that it's dinner."

"Nah," Kyle shook his head and reached for a ball of snow. As he tossed it in Maddie's direction, she squealed and slid the door shut; narrowly missing the snowball and the three that followed.

"Harry..." Maddie could see her breath as she turned her face up to him as they walked. She was tucked close and warm under his arm as the group made their way to the pub where they would spend the rest of the night ringing in the New Year.

"Yes love?" He turned a smirk down to her, his arm flexing around her shoulders; tugging her closer.

"I'm freezing," she giggled softly. "And a little drunk I think."

"You think?" He raised his eyebrows and laughed; his eyes up and watching as they walked past a group of partiers trying to warm themselves by a tall outdoor heater smoking cigarettes. "How many bottles of champagne did you ladies finish before you let Kyle and I off the deck?"

Maddie snickered as she remembered the hilarious battle that had ensued, the way Harry had finally managed to get back inside. Her hand slid up inside his coat wrapping closer to the warmth of his torso and sighing. "We had a few."

"I thought so," he nodded. "Throwing caution to the wind tonight?"

"Throwing everything to the wind tonight," she sighed as they came to a stop outside the doors.
"Is that okay?"

"Okay?" Harry laughed, reaching ahead of him to hold the door as Jenna and Gary stepped through. "Drunken Maddie? Giggling and laughing, trying to get me to dance and then talking dirty in my ear? Why wouldn't I be okay with that?"

"Ha!" She tossed her head back. "Dancing and talking dirty..." She patted his chest as he ushered her ahead of him. "You know me so well."

"Here we go..." Harry grinned as she moved past him through the doors. "You just keep with me all night, Doctor." His hand slipped down to pat her ass.

"You've got a deal, Captain," she turned a wink back to him and followed her cousins inside. Maddie had been here before, though it had been a long time. She loved the place; loved the way it felt spirited and fun and still managed to keep it low key. There was a band playing and steady flow of partiers. And for the most part, Maddie and Harry seemed to go by unnoticed. Either people didn't recognize them or they didn't care. Whichever it was, they had made it through the crowds to a booth towards the back of the dimly lit place. Harry had made a stop off at the bar with Derek and Kyle while Maddie had continued on with the ladies and Arthur; who blended in quite well with the locals.

When the boys returned to the corner booth with the drinks, they were well received and quick to be relieved of their load. Harry shook his head in amusement and handed his wife a drink before slipping in next to her. The party had officially and effectively begun.

Harry had been absolutely right about the course of the night. Drink after drink after drink and Maddie was just as he expected. Of course, he was right behind her; laughing right alongside her as their entire group seemed to run headstrong into party mode.

"I cannot believe you are going to ski to the fucking North Pole," Amy shook her head at Maddie; her cheeks pink from the warmth in the pub, from the alcohol in her system.

"Believe it," Maddie nodded, tipping a bottle to her lips and setting it back on the table with confidence.

"God, you must be training your ass off," Dena guessed.

"I am," Maddie nodded. "My trainer is ex-army and he's....seriously. I think he has something against Americans because he is fucking mean."

"Ha!" Harry laughed, pressing the back of his hand to his lips to keep from spitting beer. "That's not true."

"He doesn't hate Americans?" Jenna giggled. "Or he's not mean?"

"Neither," Harry pointed to her with a grin. "And you're not an American." He turned to his wife.

"Well, I'm not anymore," she nodded. "But he is mean."

"He makes her run," Harry offered with a dry voice and lifted eyebrows and Maddie's cousins couldn't help the laughter that came.

"You're running?!" Kyle held his hand to his chest.
"Ugh," Maddie groaned. "Yes. I'm running. It's ridiculous. I run once a day. Sometimes twice..." She caught Harry's amusement from the corner of her eye and nudged him with her elbow. "And this one thinks it's hilarious; bought me sweat bands for Christmas."

"Hahahahahah," Kyle clutched at his stomach as his laugh took him over. "Shit. That's great."

"They are very nice sweat bands," Harry smirked.

"Please," Maddie rolled her eyes, unable to keep her own smile at bay.

"You should have worn them tonight," he wrapped an arm around the back of the booth behind her.

"Shit..." Kyle wiped at his eyes and looked to his brother. "Derek, remind me tomorrow to get online and look for pictures of Maddie running. Somebody must have documented that at least once, right?" He looked to Harry who nodded and took a drink. "Fantastic. I'll have to print those babies up and keep them for future use."

"I hate you," Maddie's eyes narrowed across the table at him, though her smile widened.

"Hate me enough to come dance with me?" He nodded towards the dance floor. "You don't mind do you?" He looked to Harry.

"He's not my keeper," Maddie spoke up as Harry shrugged.

"No man. They're your toes."

"Hey!" Her hand slapped against his thigh as she pushed him lightly. "Would you excuse me? I'm leaving you for a braver man."

"Who's also your cousin," Harry laughed as he moved to let her out. "Maybe you are still an American."

"Hey!" The rest of the table called out, tossing napkins and groans his way.

"Sorry, sorry," he held his hands up in surrender. "I sometimes forget the company I keep. My apologies. Let's get back to the part where Maddie's running."

"Ha!" Jenna snorted into her drink, bringing more laughter from around the table. "Sorry! I just can't..." She snorted again.

And the laughter continued.

Before the song was over, before Kyle could bring Maddie back to the table, Harry drained his drink and stepped from the booth, telling the others he was going after his wife. Though he loved to tease her about her dancing, loved to crack jokes about steel toed boots, in truth there was nothing he loved more than holding her close, than feeling her body pressed to his. So he shrugged off the giggles and the 'awwwws' that followed him and he moved through the dancing people; finding them just as the song came to an end.

When Maddie saw his mess of red hair and his wide smile, she had forgotten about their exchange of words at the table and was only happy to see him. Kissing Kyle's cheek, she watched her
cousin leave to find his own date and she turned into the arms of her husband.

"Feeling brave tonight, Captain?" She turned bright eyes up to him as he tugged her close and began to sway to the music.

"I figure the sooner we get to the dancing, the sooner we get to the dirty talk," he winked down at her and she laughed.

"Well you're in luck tonight..." She leaned in closer, her hand smoothing over his tight stomach, around to his strong back—her other gracing over his chest towards his shoulder. "Because there's some dirty talk headed your way right now."

"Is that right?" Harry hand slid a little lower towards her ass, his head dipping closer to hers.

"Mmm..." She nodded, biting her lower lip as they continued to move to the music. "Seriously Harry, I will say this about all the preparing you've been doing..." She blinked as she referenced his upcoming deployment, refusing to get stuck there. "Your body is...Jesus. I'm not sure it's fair."

"Ha!" He chuckled. "It's not fair?" He didn't even know what to say to that, his laughter pushing through any thoughts.

"I feel like it's selfish of me to keep this for myself," she sighed into him. "Like maybe I should be sharing this with the rest of the world."

"Sharing?" His face twisted up. "Okay. You've had way too much to drink because you've never been one for sharing."

"Not you, silly," she waved her hand and slid her arms up around his neck. "Just maybe...pictures or something."

"Wonderful," Harry shook his head, tightening his hold on her. "My wife wants to sell pictures of me. Tell me love, when did you start working for The Sun?"

"Shoosh..." Maddie shook her head and leaned up to kiss him. "I would do no such thing..." She kissed him again. "I just...I don't know..." She sighed again and lifted her eyes to his; a slight smolder taking over her mood, her expression. "I get to press this body against mine whenever I want..."

"Well," Harry's voice dropped low. "Not whenever...there are those times when we're in church or..."

"Or the stables?" Maddie cut in, bringing his quick wit to a stall. His breath sucked in as his lips twisted up.

"Wow..." He breathed, his eyes taking on the same wicked, smug, pleased look on his lips. "You liked the stables?"

"I loved the stables," she corrected nearly before he had finished his question. "I also loved the night after The Golden Bee, when you had been carrying my black lace around in your pocket..."

"Jesus," Harry adjusted against her, his entire body remembering that night.

"Harry..." Maddie looked up to him with a flash of innocence that told him that whatever was
about to come out of her mouth was far from innocent.

"Madeline," he warned only slightly. "Please don't tell me you're about to hand me your panties."

"What makes you think I'm wearing any?" She lifted her eyebrows and watched as Harry let that sit for a moment. Her lips twitched up higher and she continued. "Do you remember our honeymoon?"

"Yes," he whispered, completely caught up in her, in this moment; her voice, her eyes, the way her body moved against his.

"When you handcuffed me to that chair and..." His lips caught hers then; hot and insistent against her mouth. He remembered. Fuck, he remembered.

"Ohhh..." She smiled against his lips, moaned into his mouth. "You liked that night too?"

"I loved that night," his voice was gruff as he pulled back from her. "And you have to stop talking like this."

Maddie shook her head, her smile teasing him. "What about that night you took me in the bathroom of that pub..."

"That hasn't happened between us Madeline."

"Yet," she stopped moving and cocked her head to the side, her eyes flashing towards the back of the pub. "That hasn't happened between us...yet."

"Madeline Forrester," his eyes grew dark, his voice serious.

"It's Sussex now," she reminded him without blinking.

"It is," he nodded, dropping his lips to her jaw just next to her ear. "You can tease me all you want, love. I'm not going to take you in the bathroom of this bar."

"Booo..." Her lips turned down slightly; her eyes dancing. "Is it because you're worried I'll sell my story to The Sun?"

"Ha!" Harry's head tossed back. "Not at all." His smile shifted to sweet and he shrugged. "I didn't bring...anything...with me."

"Ah," Maddie caught on, her smile softening. "Maybe later then?"

"Definitely later," he promised with a kiss to her lips. "Now come. Let's get you another drink."

"Another drink," she grinned wide. "Big fan of drunk Maddie, I see."

"It's the snoring that comes when you pass out," Harry joked and turned her towards the booth; walking behind her as they moved off the dance floor and back to their seats. Amy and Kyle were out dancing while Gary, Jenna, Dena and Derek held conversation.

"So Maddie," Derek leaned his elbows on the table, looking across it to Maddie as they slid in and found their drinks.
"So Derek..." She stopped when she reached the corner; tucking in close to Harry in their own little section of the booth.

"When you go to the North Pole, will somebody be going with you?"

"Somebody?" Her forehead crinkled as she took a drink.

"Arthur?" Derek nodded to the table where their officers were stationed; relatively relaxed as they kept an eye open.

"Ah," Maddie nodded and sat her drink down. "He will be coming with me."

"Short straw?" Gary asked.

"Nah," Maddie nodded. "They asked if anyone wanted to volunteer. He did."

"Arthur has a soft spot for Maddie," Harry offered with a smile that spoke of thanks and gratefulness. He had been pleased and touched when he was told about Arthur's intent on going with her. Though all of her PO's were fantastic and took their jobs very seriously, he knew Arthur was particularly loyal to his wife. And that made him happy.

"Got it." Derek nodded and turned to Harry. "What about you? Is it going to be odd for you to wait in London while she's up there?"

Harry blinked, looking down into his drink before he could respond; his eyes swinging to Maddie's with a soft smile. "Sure," he shrugged. "I mean...I'm terribly proud of her. It's going to be a big thing she's doing. I think I'll just...I'll miss her is all."

Maddie's eyes swung to his and she smiled a smile full of so much more than she was willing to share with everyone else in the booth. Her hand slid to his thigh under the table and she gave him a light squeeze. "I'll miss you too." When he leaned in to kiss her, the only thing he really could do at that point, he was answered with groans and laughter from around them.

"Alright, alright," he rolled his eyes as he turned back to them, sitting back and wrapping an arm around Maddie whose hand still rested on his leg. "What was going on over here before we came back?"

"Actually," Gary finished his drink. We were going to head back the shuffle board table," he nodded to the far side of the room. "You two want to come?"

"Nah," Maddie shook her head; relaxed and comfortable. "I think I'm going to stay put."

"Harry?" Gary looked to him.

"No thank you," he smiled. "I'm sticking with Maddie tonight."

"Seems smart," Derek winked and chuckled as the four of them slid from their seats; leaving Harry and Maddie tucked into the corner of the large booth, in the back corner of the dark bar. Nearly alone in their corner of the world.

Maddie leaned into Harry's side, cozying up to him as they kicked back and tucked into each other. They worked on their drinks and watched people as they went about their partying, as they went about their celebrations.
"It's like they don't even know we're here," Maddie commented, her hand sliding along his thigh. "Like we're back in a corner that nobody can see."

"Hmm," Harry smiled; warm and content as his arm squeezed her shoulders. He looked down to her then, catching a look on her face as he swallowed back the end of his beer. "What's on your mind?" He sat the empty bottle back on the table and reached for a new one, sliding it closer to him.

"You," she answered without missing a beat; her eyes turning up to his as she leaned in. "I was just wondering..." Her fingers tightened on his thigh as her voice dropped. "If you had a favorite...time?"

"Time?" He lifted his eyebrows and caught her eyes. His chuckle, deep and humored, rumbled in his chest. "Ah," he nodded and tipped back his bottle. "You really think that I'm able to sort through all of the times we've been together and pick a favorite?"

"I think that maybe a few could come to mind," she nudged him lightly. "Like maybe that time in my office at St. Joe's, when you came for that Christmas party."

"Up against your door?" He lifted his eyebrows, his cheeks flushing the tiniest bit as his smile tugged higher.

"Mmm..." Maddie nodded, her lashes fluttering slightly as she remembered. "You do like to take me against the door, don't you Captain."

"Maddie..." He shook his head, a knowing look flashing in his eyes.

"Remember that time we flew to Australia for Sean and Kiki's wedding and we were back in the cabin and you teased me mercilessly?" Her hand began to stroke at his thigh as she remembered. "Made me tell you exactly what I..."

"Madeline," he cleared his throat, adjusting in his seat as his eyes flashed out and around them.

"I loved those times," she bit at her bottom lip, her fingers dancing higher on his leg. "Are you telling me that not one time comes to mind? Not one single incident that sticks out over the others? Not even..."

"Buckingham Palace," he whispered, turning his eyes and his attention back to her. "Just after the interview when you locked the door and persuaded me to..."

"Me!" She gasped, laughter passing between them. "That was all you!"

"Or when we went to see the Northern Lights and you told me..." He sucked in a breath and tipped his lips to her ear. His words were hot against her skin as he whispered. "You told me to fuck you.

"Oh..." She couldn't help the moan that escaped her mouth, her lips curling higher; her body warming.

"And then..." His smile grew soft. "The first time after you we threw away your pills."

"Harry," she tilted her head to the side. "That's..."
"Sentimental," he sighed. "I know. But it was..."

"It was," she agreed, allowing a moment of sweetness to pass between them before she tuned a bit; angling herself closer to him. "Do you remember..." She looked coy, smug; adorable as she leaned in. "When we were on the boat in the Maldives and it was like we were...all alone out in the open..." She held his eyes and bit her lip as her hands slid over him; one up his thigh, one down his chest—both headed right towards the place where all his blood seemed to be rushing with this topic of conversation.

"Madeline," he breathed; watching her closely but making no move to stop her.

"And you had to keep your eyes up, keep a normal look on your face..." She found him then, hard and stiff beneath the fabric of his jeans, and her face brightened. "While I..." She wrapped her fingers around the bulge in his pants and stroked down his length. "Enjoyed myself."

Harry let out a breath and watched her eyes, not daring to glance down at what she was doing underneath the table of their booth. She would always have the ability to light his senses on fire and he loved that she pushed limits like this; even when he knew nothing could come of it.

"Do you remember?" She whispered again; her fingers tightening just a bit.

"Jesus," Harry groaned, the look on his face washing hazy for a moment.

"Harry?"

"Of course I fucking remember," his voice was rough as she moved over him.

Maddie tilted her lips to kiss him, just under his jaw, the scruff of his facial hair rough on her lips. "You smell amazing..." She spoke against his skin. "And you feel..." She sighed, her fingers stretching out over him.

"Maddie..." He groaned, his head tipping back against the back of the booth, his mind at war with his body.

"You're so incredibly sexy, Harry..." She grinned at his reaction, watching his fingers twitch as he debated his next move. She loved that she could read him enough to see the struggle; how much he loved what she was doing with her hand and how much he knew he needed to stop her. "I don't know if I tell you that enough...just how often I want to..."

Harry moved then; his hand lifting to her face, tugging her chin towards him so he could kiss her. His mouth was hot over hers; his tongue insistent as it slipped between their lips and stroked into her mouth, much the way she was now stroking against him. He felt her moan into his mouth; felt it deep down in the pit of his stomach and despite the way his mind was trying to reel him back in, every single part of him wanted to move this to the next level.

"The time at Highgrove," he spoke against her lips in a muffled voice. "After our first date, on my desk..."

"Oh..." Maddie sighed, the image flooding her memory.

"The night you came back to me..." He pulled his lips from hers, moving to kiss her jaw as his hand slid down her arm.
"Came back to you?" Her head titled back as he kissed into her neck.

"When you chose London over Bendal." He moved back up to her lips.

"I chose you over Bendal," she pulled his face so that she could see his eyes.

"I know," he grinned. "And that night...was amazing." He kissed her again; more firm, more solid. His fingers slid to her wrist, wrapping firmly and holding her to him. "My favorite time?"
He chuckled and pulled back, keeping her close to him. "The time after the photos when I realized I was going to marry you. The time we finished what we started in that greenhouse. The time after you came back from the earthquake, the time I came home from Afghanistan...Maddie. The time between our wedding and our reception, when you were my wife..."

"You're such a romantic," she nudged his nose with hers, her fingers letting up on the madness she was stroking against him under the table.

"The time in the bathtub this summer," he grinned, a wicked gleam flashing in his eyes. "The time on my kitchen counter after you moved in..." He pulled her hand away from his body then, knowing that if she kept going he was going to end up in an incredibly precarious and potentially embarrassing position.

"Mmmm..." Maddie bit back a moan as he kissed her again.

"And damn it if I didn't love that time in the stables," he chuckled at the pleased look in her eyes. His fingers released her wrist and moved to her thigh making no haste as he slid up the inside of her stretch pants, up under her oversized sweater, right to her hot center. Maddie's eyes snapped to his and her body arched against him. "Don't make me pick a favorite, love." He stroked her quick and steady and then he pulled his fingers away, his lips pressing into hers. "I'm not sure that's fair. And..." He took a deep breath. "If we keep talking like this, we're going to have to leave. I'm going to have to have you. And we're going to miss the New Year."

"What if I'm okay with all of those things?" She turned wide eyes up to him, her last effort to pull him in that direction; though she already knew the answer.

Harry shook his head and let a groan pull from his lungs. "Sometimes I don't know what to do with you."

"Now we both know that's not true," she winked at him then, allowing him to kiss her once more before he reached for her drink; holding it to her as he reached for his.

"We have twenty minutes till the New Year love, think you'll make it?"

"It's incredibly doubtful," she joked, taking the drink from him and relaxing into his side. "But I suppose I'll give it a shot."

"You're a good woman," he nodded with a laugh and tipped his bottle to his lips; adjusting in his seat with a groan as he pushed back all of the dirty thoughts that she had drawn to the surface.

"Twenty minutes?" Maddie snickered, seeing the look of want on his face.

"Twenty minutes," Harry nodded; nearly certain he could make it.
The buzz of his phone drew Harry from a deep, heavy sleep. They had partied late into the night; ringing in the New Year with Maddie's cousins and a slew of other partiers who had crowded the pub at midnight. He had wrapped his arms tight around her and kissed her wild with promise for the rest of the night.

They had finally come home and, after falling into bed in a mess of giggles and clothing being tugged in every which direction, he had added another time to his list of favorites. And then they had drifted off to sleep; wrapped up in each other.

His phone buzzed out again, bringing a groan from the sleeping blonde next to him as he chuckled and reached for the nightstand. It was later than it felt and he was actually a little surprised one of Maddie's cousins hadn't come bounding in demanding a trip to the slopes. Maybe they had partied just as hard as his wife had. Bringing his phone into bed with him, he squinted at the screen.

"Who is it?" Maddie turned over to face him, her hands running over her face; pushing into her wild strands of hair.

"Bishop," Harry yawned, swiping his finger across the screen to open the text message.

"My God," Maddie laughed, pressing her face into his side, nuzzling up under his arm so she could lay on his chest. "Can he not make it one week without you?"

"Apparently not," Harry laughed and hugged her close. "He sent a link to something..." He tapped the blue underlines in the message and let out another yawn; his eyes scrunching closed as he did. And when he opened them, when his head tipped back to look at the screen, his heart thumped in his chest. "Holy shit."

"What?" Maddie watched as Harry rubbed his eyes and sat up; his arm moving out from around her. "What is it?"

"It's..." Harry wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or scream or break something. "I..." He shook his head as he scrolled through a post online that held a series of photos; every one of them making his eyes wider, his shoulders tighter.

"Harry?" Maddie tugged at his arm.

"It's..." He turned to look down at her. "It's you."

"Me?" She scrunched her face up.

"And me," he sighed and held his phone out to her. "In a booth that...apparently wasn't quite as hidden as you thought it was."

"What are you..." She took the phone from him and sat up and as though all of the words had fallen from her conscience, her mouth hung open and her eyes went wide. There on his phone, in a link Bishop had sent to Harry, were pictures—grainy and dark but clear enough—of Maddie and Harry tucked into the corner booth at the pub the night before.

They were snuggled together. They were alone. And her hand was clearly groping...

"The Royal Jewels?!" Maddie gasped as she read the headline, her hand flying to her mouth. "Oh
my God! Harry!" She scrolled through the photos, each one more telling than the other; gasping and groaning as she did. "Somebody took these!"

"It would appear so, yes."

"And they sold them to..." She got to the last one; Harry's head tipped back against the back of the booth, her lips in his neck and her hand clearly stroking against him. "Oh my God...." She groaned. "This is going to be all over the place."

"Going to be?" Harry lifted his eyebrows and took the phone back. He scanned the article, reading through the handful of sentences quickly. "Look at this..." He found a quote. "The young party-goer was certain she was catching wild Prince Harry up to old antics and was surprised to find that the groper in question was in fact his wife, Doctor Madeline Forrester."

"I wish they would get my name right," Maddie rolled her eyes, falling back onto the pillow with a huff.

"I wish they would stop being surprised that I'm making out with my WIFE." It irritated him that there were people who were constantly waiting for him to step out.

"This is so..." Maddie sighed and looked up to him. "Are we going to be in trouble over this?"

"Trouble?" He thought about it for a moment, sliding his phone to the nightstand with a shrug. "Not really. I mean...it's not ideal but...you're my wife and your hand's not actually in my pants. So we have that going for us."

"You know," Maddie turned to watch him as he laid back down next to her. "If people ever want us to have those babies they keep demanding in the papers, they are going to have to get a little more comfortable with the idea of me touching your...jewels."

"Ha," Harry laughed; small and a bit bitter.

"You know..." Maddie moved next to him; knowing that they would soon be having a conversation with Thomas, with Charles. "I'm not sure what bothers me more, knowing Bishop has seen these or knowing that eventually my mother will."

"Oh God," Harry groaned, pressing his fingers to his forehead. Before he could offer up the sheer mortification he felt at knowing Hannah was going to see them, there was a knock on the door. "Yeah?" Harry called out.

"It's me," Kyle's voice called in. "Can I step in for a second?"

"Sure," Maddie answered; noting they were both dressed and presentable. Kyle stepped in and turned to look at them. And then with a stone cold expression he crossed his arms over his chest and looked to his cousin.

"So...the group has elected me their spokesman."

"Spokesman?" Maddie asked cautiously.

"Mmm," he nodded. "You see I got online this morning, looking for photos of you running to tease you with, and instead I was greeted with...you know...The Royal Junk."
"Get out." Maddie called out as Harry snickered in bed next to her.

"Or was it The Royal Jewels?" Kyle's eyes squinted.

"Get out!" She pointed towards the door, her face serious despite Harry's laughter next to her.

"And we...the group...were wondering...is that something that is always going on with you two? Like when you're in that carriage or on the balcony or is that hands-all-over-each-other thing something that only happens in Colorado?"

"I said Get Out!" Maddie reached for a pillow and hurled at him; even though her own face was cracking, her own smile pushing out. Kyle dodged the pillow and slipped out the door, amidst wild laughter from the other side. Maddie turned to look at Harry who smiled up at her from his pillow. "I'm never going to live this down, am I?"

"No," he shook his head. "I'm sorry love but no..." His phone buzzed out from the nightstand and he reached for it. "Oh look. It's my father. You want to tell him that line about grandchildren? Or should I handle this?" His lips curled up as he tossed her a wink and answered the phone.

And Maddie sank back into her pillow with a sigh. She was irritated somebody had taken photos, even more so that they had sold them to be printed. But as she looked up at Harry, smiling as he dealt with his father, she had absolutely no regret; not when it came to this man beside her. She would take the fun making that would come with this, she would handle it all with ease and aplomb because after all, at the end of the day—she was waking up with him.

And that was something she planned on doing for the rest of her life.
Chapter 141

The weekend before Harry's departure was spent at Highgrove with family. Charles and Camilla had been up for a few days and Maddie and Harry met Will, Kate and Arthur there on an unseasonably bright Saturday afternoon. While their things were unloaded, they all took advantage of the weather and set out on the grounds. They had time before dinner, before games and laughter.

Harry carried Arthur, telling him tale after tale of the mishaps of his older brother while Will laughed and rolled his eyes in the background; counterpointing nearly everything Harry said with his own version of the truth. Camilla and Kate strolled leisurely behind discussing their respective holidays, their other families. And Maddie brought up the end; a slower pace, slower thoughts. She took in the land, taking note of where work was being done, where she should pay attention in the spring. She inhaled the fresh air and tried to relax; tried to push all the muck from her mind.

And then she had company.

Charles, noticing her meander, noticing her preoccupation, dropped behind the group and took stride with her. Though he never spoke a word, never forced himself into her space, he offered her a smile and a companion and he kept pace with this young woman whom he knew was fighting with a whole host of storms inside of her. And for whatever reason that Maddie simply couldn't delve into at the moment—the way he reminded her of Harry, the way he reminded her of her father—Maddie felt better. She felt lighter and easier and safe. So she smiled her thanks and she continued on.

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Sunday morning came too soon. Their evening spent in warm spirits drew quiet and the new day woke them with more clouds, more chill; less warmth. The brothers woke early to hunt with their father, leaving their wives and Arthur at the house; playing and preparing for the next day.

As part of the grand plan, the larger picture, Maddie and Kate had been schedule to attend an event that would overlap Harry's departure and travels and then another into the evening. Though deals had been made for media silence, they weren't taking any chances. A grand diversion had been orchestrated and Maddie and Kate were a part of the show. It made sense; Maddie knew that. She just hoped that she would be able to stand up and walk tall and do what was being asked of her.

And a lot was being asked of her. She knew that. Harry knew that. They all knew that.

"She'll do wonderfully," Charles assured his son as they stilled in the cold air; the ice and snow crunching under their feet.

"They are going to swarm her," Harry's voice was low as he pulled back the bolt action of his rifle, sliding it back into place and lifting it to his cheek. "When the announcement is made, they'll surround her."

"Yes," Charles nodded, his eyes lifting and squinting at the target in Harry's sites.

"I'm only asking that you not leave her hanging out there alone," he paused, inhaled and fired. "Keep her close."
"Of course," William reloaded his gun, finding the reminders misplaced and unneeded. After all he had seen from his sister-in-law, he couldn't imagine ever needing to pull her in—and he couldn't imagine a moment when he wouldn't do so even without Harry's requests.

"You do know we're going to look after her," Charles spoke up, watching the exchange between his boys. "There's absolutely nothing for you to worry about back here."

"I know," Harry exhaled and cocked his gun. "But she's stubborn sometimes, not always open to help and intervening."

"I can only imagine what that must be like," Charles' dry voice drew both sons' eyes to him and he chuckled. "How the two of you managed to seek each other out is a tale to be told I'm sure."

"Sorry, are you making fun of me right now?" Harry lowered his rifle and turned bemused eyes to his father. "I'm pouring my heart out and asking a favor and you're poking fun?" He couldn't help the way his lips tipped up at the pleased look on his father's face.

"She'll be fine, son." Charles moved forward and placed a warm, steady, assuring hand on his shoulder. "Nobody is going to let her fend for herself. Nobody is going to let her waver in the press alone. You should know that by now."

"I do," Harry exhaled and looked down, stubbing the snow with his toes. "Kate's ready for tomorrow?" He swung the attention away from him, to something he felt more comfortable with.

"I would say she's excited for tomorrow," Will lifted his rifle, closing one eye as he peered through the sites. "And not just because you'll be leaving for four months." He smirked and fired; his eyes flashing to his brother as he lowered his gun.

"Lovely," Harry grinned despite himself. He could always count on his brother to keep it light, to keep it leveled.

"She's excited for 'girl time'," Will's eyes rolled slightly on their own accord, as though it was something that happened automatically, something he made no thought of. "She's been wanting to ease back into things and I think that going out with Maddie, being there to try to help her...distract..." He shrugged at his choice of words, not sure if that's what he was going for. "I think it's going to help both of them to be completely honest."

"Fair enough," Harry nodded, scrubbing his hand rough over his face. "You'll keep an eye on..."

"Oh for Christ's sake," Will huffed as he lifted his gun; firing, reloading, and firing again before he turned to Harry. "I'll keep an eye on her. Father will keep an eye on her. Kate will keep an eye on her. What would you have us do? Move her into the guest room for four months? She's going to feel like she has stalkers if we're following her every move." He watched his brother flinch at his words and a part of him felt bad for the harshness in them. Taking a breath he took a step forward and his voice lowered. "She's been through worse than you flying around in a helicopter for months. She's a strong woman who would be driven mad by everyone constantly on her. Will's hand stretched out, slapping Harry's cheeks lightly. "Have faith in her brother. And we'll be here if she needs us."

"Fine," Harry's jaw tensed as he pushed his brother's hand away and looked off on the horizon. "Fine."
Harry took a shot and lowered his gun but before he could turn back to the two of them, Will spoke up again.

"Don't make this the worst thing she's been through," he was quiet and Harry could hear the sadness through the cold air. "Be careful and come home. I would hate to have to hand her another loss."

Harry's head nodded; heavy and slow. Blinking at the ice cold tears that pricked to his eyes, he cleared his throat and reloaded. "I love you too big brother."

He lifted his gun, inhaled, and fired.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ It wasn't long before Will sloughed off, leaving the hunt to head back to the house. He wasn't having much luck at the shot and he had other pressing things to attend to before they all left for London. And he wanted to give his father time with his brother; time that was spent abandoning the stalk and turning towards the grounds.

They were well away from the house, deep into the grass and the chill when Charles came to a stop and took a breath. Harry watched his father move; waiting for the lesson, the words that came in moments such as these. There had been so many between them over the years; conversations twisted up in walks, resulting in transitions. From boy to man most often. Harry tucked away those memories and he watched his father ponder.

"It's coming too fast..." Charles shook his head, his eyes squinting out across the horizon. Harry's head turned in the same direction; facing the light and the wind and searching for what his father spoke of. "And I'm always too far away."

"Are you..." Harry's voice cracked into the cold air much like the snow and ice below them. "Sorry are you writing poetry right now?" The grin on his face was half way there, as if even his lips weren't committed to his attempt at humor, as if even his mouth knew what was happening there that chilled morning.

The silence softened between them as Charles turned to look at his son; his baby. So much like him, so much like himself. He regarded him with warmth, with eyes that remembered him crawling around their home at Kensington, sticking his tongue to reporters through windows while he squirmed in his mother's arms. He chuckled to himself, humored at the idea that he was still sticking his tongue to reporters—in his own way, through his own methods.

"Too far away to keep any of you from trouble," though he smiled as he said it, his eyes were stuck in someplace else; running over the list of times he wished he had been there but hadn't—couldn't. Harry opened his mouth, ready to offer some glib, wise remark; about Vegas or weed or the most recent photos of his wife's hands all over him, but the words fell silent and he took a step back. He understood his father in that moment—as most he could without being a father—the guilt that came, the responsibility.

"I'll be alright," he offered; hesitant and unsure. Was that what he wanted to hear? Was that what he wanted him to say? "I know what I'm doing and..."

"I don't doubt that," Charles nodded, his large, strong hand coming to rest on the shoulder of his son. In silence he swallowed, adjusted his breathing. In silence, his fingers tightened their hold on him, as though it were twenty years earlier and he was pulling him back from a jump he was about
to take off a cliff into the water, pulling him back from bolting without looking. His fingers tightened their hold on him and his thumb stroked love there; protection and love. His father through and through.

Harry's eyes pricked wet with unexpected emotion, with waves of something that rendered him breathless for a moment. Without looking to the old, warm, wise man next to him, he lifted his hand to pat over his; pressing his protective hold closer, holding him tighter as he tried to sit in the space for a moment.

And he felt afraid. He felt young and inexperienced and afraid—and he blinked against it. But he got it, he understood this poetry his father was speaking. Too fast, too far. He got it.

The moment in Bendal when he realized a shot had been fired.

The moment the first photos of Maddie were offered up to the press.

The moment they knew her name.

The moment he heard his father on the other end of the line talking of and earthquake and then the call about aftershocks.

The moments between that call and Maddie's.

The moment she said yes.

The moment the code was called and Jim had held him back.

The moment he watched his brother worry over Kate in the operating room while loving over his son.

The moment Khenda had left this world; her love, her son.

The moment he watched Maddie crack at the news of his deployment.

Too fast. Too far away.

He could only imagine the images that flooded his father's mind.

He felt his knees give just a bit and at the same time he felt his father's fingers; strong and supportive and holding him there—upright and strong.

"You're doing your duty," Charles spoke in low, calming tones. "We all know the responsibilities and guilt and...devotion with which you walk." He squeezed his son's shoulder. "We feel it too. We feel it towards you. You do what you're supposed to do; your call to Queen and country. And we'll do what we're supposed to do and...when you come home, we'll all walk a little easier." He cleared his throat and with one final squeeze, he lifted his hand from his son and took a few steps away. "It's always too fast Henry. It never slows down."

The drive home from Highgrove that afternoon was dark and dreary and the cold in the air permeated through the Range Rover and settled into their bones. As the countryside drifted away, giving ground over to the city, Maddie turned her eyes from the now drizzling rain to look across
the backseat to her husband; quiet and pulled inside.

"Did you always know?" She called out to him in the grey space between them; her hand tucked closely into his.

"Know what?" He turned his face towards the sound of her voice; his eyes gazing distant and far off.

"That you wanted to be in the Army..." She smiled as his eyes snapped back to the moment and she drew his hand into her lap; sandwiching it with both of hers. "You wanted it since you were a child, no?"

"I did," he nodded, his fingers flexing around hers. "It was hard not to. My grandfather served, my uncle served. We've been around the military and the regiment of it all since we were born..." He smiled and took a deep breath. "My brother and I used to play at it when we were young and then...I don't know. Somewhere along the way I realized it was an actual option." His thoughts blinked back over his memories of training, of schooling.

"You love it, don't you." She didn't need an answer, she knew it; just as well as she knew him, she knew it.

"I do," he answered, tugging her hands towards him, his other hand leaving its home on his knee and moving to cradle hers. "Though this part gets more difficult; leaving you."

"I know," she whispered her agreement; feeling tears prick at her eyes. She turned for a moment, letting her eyes flitter over the scenery that was flying past. "Tell me your favorite part?"

"Of the Army?" His eyebrows lifted; the surprise evident in his voice.

"Mmm," she nodded and sniffed, turning her eyes back to him; a smile pressing through her sadness, her worry—something in her thinking it might help them both. "What's the best part? Is it the normalcy that comes with it? The brotherhood? The food?" She took a stab at a joke and was rewarded with a laugh; and her smile tugged wider.

"All of those things..." He tightened his hold on her; falling more in love with her for what she was trying to do right then. "Even the food sometimes."

"Nice," she grinned, allowing her lungs to ease up just a bit, noticing that they were turning through the gates of Kensington. "What's your favorite meal?"

"The breakfast..." He answered; feeling tired and weary of what the next twenty four hours was going to bring his way. "There's a pretty good hot breakfast ration. Though...to be fair, we eat in the mess mostly."

"Good. Good," Maddie's voice grew quiet and the car drew to a stop, the crunch of the gravel below the tires the only sound that roughed up the silence.

Their doors were opened and the chill rushed in, pulling them both from this blip of warmth, of humor they had found in the cloud that followed them; the promise of departure. It was heavy and unavoidable and they desperately wanted to keep it away just a moment longer. Just a little bit longer. But the chilled air surrounded them and their fingers slipped apart as they stepped from the vehicle out into the drizzly afternoon.
Maddie rounded the car to him and was not at all surprised to find him waiting for her. He didn't take her fingers back into his, he reached instead for her shoulders, wrapping a strong arm around them and tucking her into him. With her arm wrapped around his waist, they fell into step up the walk. Their team stayed behind; loading into the cars, returning to posts.

And it was just them. Them and this slow pace Harry had fallen into. Maddie's cheek pressed to his coat, the wool rough and soft at the same time; his scent just everywhere. For a beat she closed her eyes, letting it all blow around her; the crisp air, the smell of him, the warmth from his body. She just let it happen—like so many other things around her.

"I think..." Harry's voice was slow as he pulled her tighter; wanting her closer. "I think when I get home we should have a serious discussion about my future with the Army." He felt Maddie's feet stop below them, felt the surprise rush to her brain even before it registered there and her eyes pulled open. "I think we should talk about what this is going to look like for our family..."

"Harry..." She shook her head, her emotions bubbling up and threatening to spill. Her hands pressed against his torso, hard and muscular from all of the workouts, trying to stop him. "You don't have to...

"Shhh..." He squeezed his hold on her, bringing her closer. "When I get back."

"Harry..." She moved then, pulling herself from the warm confines of his arms and moving to stand in front of him; the wind tossing the strands of her hair every which way as they came to a stop outside their door. His hands seemed to not know where to go without her under his arm, so they pulled close; tucked into his pockets. And she shook her head, blinking at tears she wasn't ready to cry. "You don't have to leave something you love for..." She couldn't say it, not out loud, so she closed her lips; pressing them together in a pink, trembling line and she held his eyes. Without comment, he turned his eyes from hers, looking far into the distance and he could hear his father's voice, he could feel his hand warm and strong on his shoulder and he could feel the bottom of his stomach giving out and he hated so much about what was happening right there—but he loved it even more.

Without words, he turned back to her. His hands slipped from his pockets and moved straight to her face; cupping her cold cheeks in their warmth and before she could speak, his lips were on hers; his mouth taking her next words.

Her body flinched in surprise; moving towards him instinctually—as she always did when he drew her in. Her hands lifted to his chest, her fingers curling as though they intended on fisting his coat in them, as though they had plans to jerk him closer. But they were full of the same sort of sadness as the rest of her and they fell flat against his chest; pushing inside his coat, seeking closeness to him. To his heart.

"Tomorrow," he whispered against her lips before he pulled away. His fingers stroked at her cheeks, his eyes pressing closed as he committed this version of her to memory. "Tomorrow I'm leaving something I love for another..." His hands moved from her face then. As one reached behind her to open the door, the other slipped into her coat bypassing her blouse and moving straight to skin. He needed the closeness too. His eyes pulled open and found her already watching him. "When I get home we're going to talk about it."

His words were final, his voice resolute and his eyes were the kind of serious she knew he held onto, he reserved, for moments when he meant it. He dipped back to her then, kissing her once more before he took a step back. His hand gestured inside, his forehead nodding in the same
direction. Maddie let her hands fall from him as she turned and took the few small steps into their entryway.

Harry had followed behind, his eyes never tearing from her, his thoughts never straying as the door shut and closed them off from the rest of the world. As she unwrapped the winter from around her, shedding a scarf and a coat, slipping off boots and shaking the cold from her bones—he watched. His hands worked quickly over his own coat, over his own layers of wool and cashmere and before long they were done. Winter had been shed and the heat from their home was bringing a new color back to their cheeks.

The need he felt for her was primal. He felt it so much deeper than his bones, so much further than that pit in his belly. And the gasp that fell from her lips when he crossed the space between them and gathered her into him only strengthened that pull. Before she could gasp again, his mouth was taking hers and his hands were searching behind them for a place to steady their bodies—now pressing against each other madly. Finding the molding that ran the outline of the entry to their living room, his fingers wrapped tight and he moved her back against it.

And maybe he was rough, but she made no protest. In fact, her fingers had come alive once inside and were fast and steady as they pulled at his layers; the soft sweater, the starched button-down, the cotton t-shirt. They sought skin and found it with greed and delight.

Maybe he was emotional, but he made no excuses. The groans that pulled from his gut were telling. The tears that gathered in his eyes, in his throat, even more so. But he had never held back from her before, he sure as hell wasn't starting now. Not now when she was wrapped around him, when she was sighing against the palms of his hands, rough against the breast he had exposed. Not now when she was nodding her head as he pulled at her pants, not now when she was working over his buckle, when she was pulling at his belt, when she was moaning his name into his ear as she pulled at the red mess of hair he had buried in her neck.

He had taken her so many times before, in so many ways; in love, in lust, in need, in want, in happiness and sadness and the desperate need to erase or celebrate or fix. He had taken her before; in haste, in luxury, in the sweatiest mix of the two. He had taken her before with the intent to rid her mind of everything else, with the intent to claim her as his own, with the sole purpose of making her a mother.

But God...as they shed layer after layer there in their entry way, as she opened herself up to him, as her fingers pressed into the flesh of his back and her legs wrapped around him and she cried out as he pushed into her...

God. She had taken him.

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Morning had come prematurely, tearing them both from the escape they had created the night before. They were tired; emotionally and physically and in all the ways that counted. Everything about this deployment had played out differently than the one before. In stark contrast to the night before the last time, when they had spent time talking things over, making plans and promises—this time they said very little. There was very little left to say; very little left to convey that their silences couldn't get across.

At some point, deep into the night, after he had loved over her in a soft slow way meant to ease the rough desperation from before, they had tangled up in each other and they had given in; letting the night and the sleep take them.
And it had. It had wrapped them up and lulled them off and then, when it was over, it had tossed them right into the harsh realities of the morning. Striving to focus on duty and not emotion, they had stepped from bed together, they had showered together, they had let the night and all the fluff it had surround them with wash away. Together.

Harry left while Maddie dressed, smiling small to the ladies who had come to help; the staff who were there to prepare her for a day of duty. A day of responsibilities. He had nodded politely and stepped out of the room. He knew that his presence there wouldn't help her and now, as they faced what lied ahead, the least he could do was help her with this.

But it all happened so fast; just as his father had warned. And before they could run from it, it was time for her to go.

When Maddie rounded the corner of their staircase, dressed and done up for the event, she looked to the bottom. And there he was; sitting on the third to the last step, his bare feet resting on the floor. He didn't turn when he heard her, his eyes stayed focused ahead and there was a part of Maddie that didn't want to descend. There was a part of her that thought if she stayed there on the landing, if she didn't take another step that maybe she could hold off reality just a bit longer. Maybe she could hold onto him just a little bit longer.

Tears pricked to her eyes then and she wondered who had been the genius to decide that she should go out to an event at which she had to wear makeup and appear presentable. She already wanted to cry and she was only looking at the back of his head. Pulling her eyes from him, she turned away for a moment and blinked. A few deep breaths and she had it under control; for the moment.

It wasn't going to be easy—saying good-bye to him. It was going to be excruciating. But she had somewhere to be, she was part of the plan; the distraction. So she took a deep breath and began down the stairs.

He wasn't dressed in military camo. He was still as a civilian; jeans and a t-shirt, no socks, no shoes. He had done that for her, she had no doubt. He was going to change after she left, when he was alone and she, along with Kate, had taken the attention for a moment.

Her hand reached out to his head as she stepped next to him; sliding down his neck to his back as she lowered herself to the same step; careful in her heels and her ensemble. He reached behind him to take her hand, pulling around in front of him and holding it in both of his. Without a word, he bent to kiss her fingers, to hold her hand to his face; to feel her against him.

"The cars?" His voice was low and cracked as he spoke.

"Outside in ten," she answered, leaning her shoulder into his.

"Your staff?" He nodded to where she had just come from.

"Gone," she whispered; sniffing at her watery eyes, at the emotions that were swirling around in her stomach. They were alone in the house; this she knew for fact. Thomas and Bernard had given them these last few minutes of solitude before she was called to duty. Maddie looked to their joined hands, studying the muscles of his arms, the fuzz of hair on his skin, the length and girth of his fingers; the bracelets of support, the Ubuntu engraved one she had given him for their first Christmas together. And then she noticed what was missing. Her fingers stroked at his now naked ring finger and she cleared her throat. "Are you leaving it here?" That made sense in her mind;
that he would leave it behind, not wanting it to get in the way of what he was doing, of his safety.

"No," he shook his head and reached into the front of his t-shirt; an old worn shirt from a Sentebale charity event. Pulling out the chain around his neck, his hand slipped down to the dog tags at the end and she saw it. The band she had slipped on his finger nearly seven months earlier on a chain around his neck with the tags meant to identify him.

"Ah." It was hardly a word, barely a sound, as her eyes filled with tears. "You're taking it with you."

"I am," he nodded and tucked the chain back into his shirt. He took a deep breath and steeled himself as much as he could and then he turned to face her; holding her hand tight in his. He looked her over and though he smiled, though he always smiled when he saw her, his heart sank in his chest. "Baby..." His head dipped to the side as he took in the look in her eyes.

"I'm trying," she smiled weakly, sniffing as she tried to recall the tears in her eyes. "I really, really am."

"I know," he nodded, looking her over. When he saw what she was wearing, he smiled; genuine and warm. "Is that my sweater?"

"Ha!" She laughed, despite herself, looking down at the soft, tan sweater she wore belted over a button down and a wool skirt. She had asked Rosie Tellington to work it into her outfit for the day and she had; beautifully. Her hands smoothed over it as she met his eyes. "I wanted part of you with me today. I hope that's okay."

"It is," he nodded, warming to her smile, to her laughter. "You know the press is going to recognize it. They'll comment for sure."

"Yeah," Maddie shrugged. "I don't care. They should get used to it. I plan to wear all of the clothes in your wardrobe while you're gone."

"Lovely," Harry grinned. "I'll have to keep that in mind for the times when you leave me."

"Ha!" Maddie's laughter filled in the awkwardness between them and they both felt a bit lighter. "Now that's something to see."

"It will be," he nodded as the laughter settled; faded.

And there it was. Everything.

"I love you Harry."

"I love you too." His words were out of his mouth before Maddie had even finished hers.

"Please be careful," she whispered, sitting closer and closer to him as the time moved past them. "I know you will. I know. I just..."

"I promise." He kissed her fingers again, holding them to his lips a little longer. "You know what to do if you..."

"Yes," she nodded, turning her hand to his face, running along his cheek as she turned him to look at her. "I do."
"Okay," he nodded. Taking a deep breath, he tried to move the conversation from the inevitable. "You be careful too. You know the North Pole is really just a giant piece of floating ice..."

"I know," she stroked his fingers in hers.

"It's not...actually land..." His voice faded. She knew.

"I know," she smiled; a strangled sort of expression she clearly had to work for.

"Yeah," he sighed and pulled her closer. Her hand slid to his knee as his arm moved around her; his hand strong on her back over to her shoulder. He had so much to say, so much he wanted to convey but the words weren't coming. So many words had passed between them in preparation for this moment; words of planning and logistics, words of love and need and want and...maybe the words were done. Maybe this moment was meant to be silent.

His head tipped down, his hand reaching across for her hand, pulling it into his. This time was different for him too. He was leaving so much behind; so much. She had balked at first, fought against it; against him. But she had come around. She had pulled from the well of strength he had watched her walk with for years. She had gathered it all in and put it together—for him. He knew she had done it for him. He wondered if she would ever really know what that meant to him, wondered if she would ever really understand that in this life, in this relationship, she was the heavy; she was the weight, the gravity, the center. He wondered if she would ever really get just how much sense she made in his life.

So many things to say without any words to say them; without any time.

It all happened so fast. It never slowed down.

And then it came; that soft knock on the door they were both expecting. Their eyes rose in unison; sadness and a touch of anger at the source of the interruption, at what it meant.

"That's Arthur," Maddie whispered, afraid that a louder voice would crack the fragile exterior she was grasping to.

Harry nodded; happy it was Arthur walking with her today. He knew she had mixed feelings about how this was all going to roll out; not sure she would be able to hold a straight face at the event she was headed too. But he knew that Kate was waiting in that car and honestly, he wasn't sure that he would be able to leave her if she didn't have a place to be, a place with those who loved her.

Maddie's hands tightened their hold on him; though she knew it was time to go. She twisted her fingers around his, blinking and breathing and trying. With one slow, deep inhale and one long slow exhale, she pulled her eyes to him and in a sweet, sad way that broke his heart, she asked, "Kiss me?"

Harry's voice caught in his throat and he coughed, fighting for clarity as he shook his head; a crooked smile on his lips. "I might mess up your make up," he warned.

Maddie nodded, her heart already hurting, her tears already threatening to do just that. With a squeeze to his hand, she rose to her feet and took a step away from the stairs, away from him. The loss of contact with him made her body ache. "Well we can't have that."
Her attempt at humor, at lightening up the moment fell flat at his feet. Harry's eyes swung to hers and blinked just once before he was off the stairs, before he had stepped right into her space, right into her. His hands moved around her, his arms wrapping and pulling and holding her as tight to him as he could possibly get her. Taking three steps forward, moving her back, he pressed her against the wall and lowered his lips to hers. And every single thing he had leaned into her; into that kiss. It was different from the night before; sweeter and softer.

Final.

Her hands pulled at his face, at the back of his head; wanting him closer. His clutched at the soft fabric of her sweater—of his sweater; needing to feel her.

And the knock came again.

And they pulled apart.

"I don't know how I'm ever going to do this," Maddie laughed, wiping at her eyes, her fingers sliding to her lips; the heat of him still there. "Smile and wave and shake hands and...I don't know how I'm going to do this."

"Just..." Harry swallowed and took a step back, giving her room to collect herself; to prepare. "Just imagine me right here." He cracked a smile and waved towards the stairs. "I'm just here; waiting for you to get home, waiting for you to tell me about the children who came out, the funny little curtsies, the hilarious things they say to you when they're trying to be adults." Maddie chuckled and watched as he took another step back. "I'm here with Bernard's pizza and some wine and you're going to tell me about whatever hilarious story it is that Kate tells you about Arthur and we're going to laugh and get drunk and fall asleep on the couch..."

"Harry..." Her hand moved to her chest as he took another step away from her. He had to step away; he was going to be too far away to keep her, too far away.

"I'm just right here."

Maddie nodded, knowing that it was ridiculous; she could play mind games as much as she wanted. But she knew the truth, knew it in her bones. She was coming home to an empty house; an enormous, sentiment filled, empty house. But for the moment she would allow her mind this tiny bit of reprieve.

"As long as we're living in this fantasy land..." She took a step towards the door and turned a smile to him; a genuine one—sad, but genuine. "Maybe we'll go for a run later?"

"Ha!" Harry laughed, his hand clutching at his chest as he nodded. "We'll absolutely go for a run later."

"Okay," she sighed and turned her body square to his; conscious of the distance he had placed between them when he moved back to the stairs; standing tall and ready to tell her good-bye. Maddie took in a deep breath and let it puff out through her lips. "I'll see you soon?"

"You will," he nodded; a solemn oath. "I promise."

"Okay," she nodded and a third knock came and she knew that they were only going to be patient with her for so long, they were only going to allow her these moments of weak humanity for so long. "I have to go." Her voice croaked.
"I know," Harry kept the smile on his face; despite the way his insides were crumbling. "Have a
great day, Love. Tell Kate hello for me?"

Maddie nodded and turned away from him, reaching for the handle and turning. And she stalled,
taking a few deep breaths before she turned back to him. "I..."

"I'll miss you too," he wrapped his arms around himself as he spoke; holding it all in. "I love you.
More than anything. I'll miss you...terribly. And..." He trailed off, finding the façade of ease more
difficult to keep up than he had planned.

"Pizza tonight?" Maddie supplied, seeing his waver and extending grace; the way they worked.

"And a run," Harry's eyes teared over.

"I love you Captain," Maddie smiled; wide and sure.

And then she turned away from him and pulled at the door. Without turning around to look at him
once more, without turning to take in the way his eyes had welled over or the way his shoulders
had slumped or the way he had to sink to the stairs at the weight of watching her go, at the
heaviness of watching her pretend to be okay when she clearly wasn't—without turning to see the
way this broke his heart too—Maddie stepped through the door of their home and out into the
crisp air of London.

And the door shut softly behind her.

With her head held high and her eyes trained forward, Maddie walked right past Arthur and down
the walk. She couldn't turn to look at him for fear she would break but she could hear him
following behind her. She needed the space between the house and the car to pull it together;
knowing fully well that seeing Kate would bring the emotion back to the surface.

She stepped up to the car and the driver reached for the handle. "Good Morning Ma'am," he
nodded his hello; his voice soft and gentle. There were so many people in on this grand secret.
Maddie met his eyes as she swallowed back sobs and nodded; thankful for his kindness.

"Good morning," she sniffed, her eyes fluttering back towards the house just once before she slid
into the car and the door shut behind her. She looked down at her hands for a moment before she
took in a breath and glanced to Kate. Their eyes met for a moment of sadness, a moment where
they both understood the breakdown that very well could take over the backseat. And then Kate,
in a moment that Maddie would forever be thankful for, took a deep breath, pulled out a bright
smile and did what she felt was her true job that morning.

"Would you like to hear the story of Arthur peeing on Will last night during bath time or...about
how he spit up on a total of three ties this morning?" Kate bit at her lip to keep her own sadness at
bay, to keep from crying at the look on Maddie's face, at what she knew lied ahead.

Maddie chuckled and took a deep breath. As the car pulled away from the drive and towards the
gates, she lifted her head and laughed again. "Both. I think I'm going to need both."

And then she reached out, taking Kate's hand in her own and squeezed.

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The click of her shoes drummed out a slow cadence as Maddie moved up her walk that night. The exhaustion pulled at her eyes, at her shoulders. It was hard work to put on the face, to pull up the small talk. It was hard work—pretending.

Not that it had been fake. Not that it had been disingenuous.

She was devoted to the work she did, she believed in the cause. Meeting the people, shaking the hands, smiling at their stories. All of that had been real.

The pretending came from inside; from the way she had to answer questions about Harry as casually as they were asked. The way she had to not shed a tear when she looked at the Union Jack flying in the breeze, the way she had to keep her thoughts from drifting during times of silence. The way she had to keep the smile frozen on her face when Thomas leaned in to tell her that the 'package had been delivered safely.'

The way it had taken everything she had not to laugh in his face and thank him in a bitterness that wasn't really meant for him. Thank him for delivering her husband safely to a war zone.

It was hard work—being present when she wanted to fade.

"Good night, Ma'am," Arthur spoke softly, not wanting to disturb her peace, not wanting her to feel the complete disconnect she was grasping for.

"Good night, Arthur," she turned a smile to him; grateful he had been with her that day.

And then she stepped through the door and she froze. And tears pulled to her eyes. He wasn't there and she was done pretending.

She stepped right out of her shoes, leaving there in the entryway, in the path of anyone who dared to breach her sorrow that night. She dropped her clutch to the table in the middle of the room and she moved right past the step he had sat on that morning. She ignored the way her heart fluttered, she ignored the fact that he had sat her running shoes there in his place. She ignored the tiny inclination she had to laugh, to let in the warmth of that gesture. She didn't want to be that person anymore. She wanted to wallow.

She pulled at her gown, at her hose, at the pins that held up her hair and by the time she had reached their room, she was already transforming. She felt older and angrier and she felt his absence in every corner of her tired body.

She dropped her uniform to the floor in front of her closet and went straight for the laundry. She felt purpose and a bit crazed as she dumped the hamper contents onto the floor in front of her. But when she found it, the soft worn Sentebale t-shirt he had been wearing that morning, she felt the first breath of relief she had felt since she had woken.

She pulled it on, sucking in the scent of him, and then she stepped right over the pile and went for sweat pants, for oversized polo socks. She pulled his pillow from their bed and made a mental note to insist the staff not wash the cover. She pulled the soft thick chenille blanket from the large chair under the window where she liked to read and she left their room.

She didn't even bother to try to lay there that night; not that first night. She didn't even go through the motions of trying to sleep in the bed that was theirs, in the sheets they had been tangled in only twenty-four hours earlier. She kept her rings on, kept her head high and she went back down the
stairs.

She saw the shoes.

She saw the note addressed to her on the stand.

She saw the jar of candy near the door.

She saw every single fucking reminder that he had left her that morning; every single good-bye he had orchestrated for her to find in his absence.

She saw all of it, but refused to acknowledge it. Not this night, not that moment.

She moved with purpose, with a rhythm and pace full of purpose and determination. She went first through their living room, to the mantle under the painting of Bendal, next to photos that told the story of them and she reached into one of the two identical round, port vases she had purchased for this. She pulled out one antique stone marble and she cursed the tears that slipped onto her cheeks as she worried it over in her fingers.

The sound of the one marble falling into the empty vase was loud and clattering and it resounded in her heart making her chest hurt.

Without bothering to wipe at her tears, without bothering to sniff away the sobs, without pretending anything anymore, she turned and moved down the hallway in the dark—to his office.

She didn't turn on a light, she didn't want to see him. She didn't sit in his chair or look through his jumbled hand written notes like she would at a later date—when she was searching for reminders of him. She didn't look at the framed photo of herself that sat on his desk. She didn't lift the well-worn ball he would twist in his fingers when he lost thought. She didn't look through the titles on the shelves, she didn't try to drum up his voice or remember the blue of his eyes.

As if she would ever be able to pull those away; as if it they would ever cease to be among the records she kept close to her heart.

Instead she moved to the long, soft leather couch.

They had slept there before. They had made love there before. When they had learned of his deployment, this had been the place where they had sought and found the other after they had pushed.

This would be where she would sleep that night; nestled in her throw and his t-shirt and all of the pain she had been pretending not to feel that day.

It was there that she let it all go.

The tears she had been holding back, the presence of mine she had fought to secure, the phone calls to family and friends that would have to wait till the next day.

The smile that would return after she had this night to sink, the upbeat positive attitude that usually walked with her, that would walk with her again...

She let it all go.
Closing her eyes, she finally let her heart feel the ache she had held off, she finally let the tears loose and the emotions wash.

And there, in his office, in the dark, on his couch, in his shirt, she let herself fade.
Chapter 142

Day Four

"The Duke of Sussex, an Apache Commander and Captain in the British Army, has been on base in Khundu for the past three days. According to a statement from Saint James Palace released this morning, Prince Harry will serve out a standard four month deployment—his third during his tenure in the Army and his first in Khundu."

With a snarl at the TV Maddie turned it off and tossed the remote away from her; reveling in the thud it made as it hit the wood floor. She kicked it with her toe as she walked past it on her way to the mantle.

"The world knows, Captain," she sighed, speaking out loud into the room. Reaching into one vase, she pulled out a marble and looked it over. Every one of the antique clay marbles Harry had given her for Christmas was unique. None of them were the same. They had rich, deep colors and she loved to look them over before she moved them. "Day four." She dropped the marble into the more empty of the two and she turned away.

She could hear her phone vibrating on the coffee table; it had been vibrating for hours. Bending down to scoop it up, she took a deep breath.

32 texts.

13 phone calls.

7 voicemail messages.

The incoming call? Ella Bishop. Deciding that she could handle that particular phone call, she ran her finger across the screen and answered.

"Mrs. Bishop," her smile was small and tight, but it was genuine.

"You have to call me that?" Ella groaned a bit over the line.

"It has a nice ring to it," Maddie's shoulders eased up just hearing her friend's voice.

"I suppose," Ella yawned. "Though not as nice of a ring as Her Royal Highness."

"Ha! You got me there," Maddie sank back to the couch.

"I saw the news," Ella offered and Maddie sighed. "You doing okay?"

"I don't know," her voice was low as she spoke honestly; as honest as she could in that moment. "I have so many phone calls to return you know? And all of them are going to want to talk about it, to know how I'm doing, to know how he's doing, if I've heard from him....it's just going to be an afternoon of talking about the exact thing I don't want to talk about."

"Yeah..." Ella sighed; holding the space for a moment. "$I do want me to come over? I can't drink with you but I can eat the hell out of a cheesecake."
Despite her melancholy mood, Maddie felt a laugh push through her lips. "Do you have a cheesecake with you right now?"

"No," Ella laughed along with her. "But I would bet a thousand dollars that if I call Bishop and ask him for one, he'll deliver."

"He's a good man," Maddie pulled her knees up under her chin; hugging her legs to her.

"He is," Ella agreed. "So what do you say?"

"I can't," Maddie sighed, glancing to the clock that stood tall in the corner of the room. "I have an event this afternoon."

"That's right," Ella smiled as she remembered. "The Children's Chorale talent thing at the Children's Hospital?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded; her nervousness for the outing battling her excitement at seeing the children.

"You're going with Kate?"

"No," Maddie shook her head and looked down at her bared knees, her painted toes. "I'm going in place of Kate."

"Is Kate okay?" Ella's concern was genuine; not imposing or gossipy, but Maddie laughed it off. "She actually has a touch of the flu. Her and Arthur," Maddie grimaced at the way Kate's voice had sounded when she had talked to her the night before. "So she's going to stay home and they asked if I could accompany Will. They like to have a woman go out with him, to soften the ticket." Maddie snickered. "And I'm apparently the only one available." In truth, she was happy to be getting out; happy to have her mind somewhere else.

"Please," Ella laughed lightly. "I've seen reports, I've read the articles. You're in demand right now."

"Yes, well..." Maddie shrugged. "That will pass, it always does."

"Good luck tonight," Ella was worried about her best friend; about the tone of her voice. "And I'm here...if you need anything."

"Including late-night, personally delivered cheesecake?"

"Including that," Ella laughed.

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Despite her once sour mood, Maddie felt her spirits lift as she readied for the event. She smiled as Tara brought with her hilarious tales of her new nephew and she actually laughed when Rosie Tellington handed over her outfit for the day.

A simple wool pencil skirt.

A crisp white button down with three-quarter sleeves.
A bright, belted cardigan to go over it.

And the killer piece.

"Harry's turtle tie?" Maddie looked up from the smooth length of fabric Rosie had laid in her hands.

"Harry's turtle tie," she nodded. "You told me to work his clothes into yours while he's away. We'll put this under your cardigan and it will look amazing. Trust me."

And Maddie did. So she nodded and pulled on the skirt, the shirt and the cardigan and then she held her breath as Rosie tied the tie around her neck and tucked it into her layers. When she stepped aside and allowed Maddie to look in the mirror, the full effect of it hit Maddie like a sack of bricks.

Her fingers ran over the blue fabric and her eyes welled up and it felt nice and sweet and incredibly intimate; to be wearing his clothes, out in public, while he was away. But it made her feel close to him and it made her smile.

"You were right," she called out to Rosie as she stepped into her heels. "This really sets the look off." She loved how Rosie was doing as she had requested and making it look so flawless. It was so seamless that Maddie was sure that if people didn't know, they wouldn't even notice it was Harry's tie.

"I told you," Rosie smiled back at her, tucking and pulling at her outfit until it sat just so. "You're going to knock them out this afternoon. And I'm not just talking about the outfit."

"Thank you," Maddie smiled sheepishly. She wasn't so sure. She was excited about the event, even more so that Will would be there to shoulder some of the questions, some of the attention she was bound to get now that the news had dropped. But she was still a little nervous; hopeful that her emotions would hold up while they were out.

A soft knock sounded on the door and Thomas Smith appeared with a smile and a nod, alerting her to the time. "Your Royal Highness, the cars are here."

"Thank you Mr. Smith," Maddie smiled back at him; watching as Libby stepped in, gathering the clutch she had put together to take for the night with lip gloss and her cell phone. Tara sprayed Maddie's hair one last time and Maddie was done.

As she rose to her feet she very much felt like she was pulling on her royal exterior just as she had pulled on the cardigan, the skirt, the shoes. Sliding her rings onto her finger, reaching for her watch and a bracelet Harry usually wore that he had left behind, she was finished; ready to go. It felt very much like a uniform that night; what she wore to work along with her smile. Her eyes glanced back to the mirror at the tie. All except for the tie. The tie was hers.

Maddie stepped from her home just seconds before William stepped from his; smart and crisp in his suit and a smile. With their staffs and security around them, he moved to greet her; kissing her cheeks.

"Are they feeling any better?" She asked, nodding up towards his place.

"Oh no," he shook his head with a half a smile. "It's not a pretty scene up there."
"I would guess," Maddie laughed and moved around to her side of the car. Slipping inside, the doors shut behind them both and in seconds they were in motion.

"Thank you for doing this with me," Will's eyes shifted to her as they moved along. "I know it was incredibly last minute but I appreciate you going through the bother."

"It's no bother at all," Maddie smiled across the backseat. "It's actually nice to get out of the house, to not sit and stare at the phone or the TV."

"Or the papers?" Will offered, understanding the feeling more than she knew. "Or the computer?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded and a quiet moment settled between them, both thinking of him.

"Has he called you?" Will glanced over to her.

"No," she shook her head. "Not yet. You?"

"No," Will echoed her reply. "But I cannot imagine that I'm higher on the list than you." Maddie chuckled softly. "They're going to come at you, you know. At the event, the crowd is going to want to see you and talk to you and make sure you're okay."

"I know," she took in a deep breath.

"They mean well, they really do," he assured her; knowing that it was overwhelming, even when they meant well.

"I know," Maddie nodded and looked down at her hands.

"But don't worry," Will sat taller as they rounded the final corner. "Thomas and Libby will be there to pull you along..." He shrugged and looked out at the crowds. "And they brought me along for comic relief. So, you can't go wrong."

Maddie looked up to him and caught his wink, caught his stab at breaking the ice, and she laughed. "Can't go wrong." She echoed and the car slowed to a stop.

Without time to think, their doors were open and they were stepping from the car. Seeing as Maddie had been a last minute substitution, the organizers of the event were well aware that she would be there, but most of the on-looking crowd were not and there was an audible gasp when they realized.

And then a rushed murmur as everyone began to ask the questions to each other that they were gearing up to ask her. Will stood still on the opposite side of the car and waited for her to join him before they both turned towards the crowd offering smiles and waves. And then they stepped forward up the carpeted walkway to meet their hosts for the night waiting at the doors to greet them.

Just as they had all expected, the shouts from the crowd all came at once.

"Maddie!"

"Will!"
"How is Harry?!"

"Maddie!"

"How are you?!"

"Have you heard from him?!"

"Maddie! Maddie! Maddie!"

This was why they stayed towards children, Maddie smiled politely as she passed by the reporters and honed in on the group of little ones along the side; bending down to greet them, she found solace in their wide eyes and innocent questions.

"Well hello there," Maddie shook little hands as they stuck out to reach her.

"Are those turtles on your tie?" One little girl pointed to the small design.

"As a matter of fact, they are," Maddie's smile reached her eyes; her hands smoothing over the fabric.

"I like turtles," the boy next to her added in.

"Me too," Maddie agreed. "I think it would be neat to have your home with you all of the time."

"Yes," the boy contemplated that for a moment. "And also heavy."

"And also heavy," Maddie laughed in agreement. "Tell me are you all going to be taking part in the performance tonight?"

"Yes ma'am," the little girl nodded in delight.

"Wonderful," Maddie clapped her hands and looked up to Will who had come to a stop next to her.

"Are you making new friends?" He smiled down at her.

"I'm speaking to some of tonight's talent. Would you like to meet them?" Maddie tossed a wink up to him and he nodded, dipping down to their level and extending his hand to a chorus of tiny hellos.

The little boy studied William for a moment before he asked. "What do you have on your tie?"

"Sorry?" William looked down at his necktie.

"She's wearing turtles on hers, do you have animals on yours?"

"No," William shook his head and smiled softly to Maddie as he realized exactly what she was wearing. "Mine is just a boring old design. I think her tie is much better. Don't you?"

"Yes," the little girl agreed quickly, laughing as the others nodded along.

"Well now if you don't mind," Will rested his hands on his knees. "I'm going to have to steal my
sister here away from you so that we can get to our seats before your show begins."

"She's your sister?" The boy looked from Will to Maddie and back again.

"She is," Will nodded. "She married my brother so that makes her my sister."

"Ewwww!" The little girl's nose wrinkled up. "Don't marry boys! They are stinky!" As the crowd around them bubbled over in laughter, Will rose to his feet and offered his hand to Maddie so that she could follow him.

"It was nice to meet you all," Maddie smiled down at them, turning back towards her duties with lighter shoulders. "I look forward to seeing your performances."

And as they all waved good-bye, Maddie held her head high and followed Will the few short steps to their hosts for the evening. Introductions were given; bows and curtsies performed and then, with her protective brother beside her and his hand on her back, they moved into the hospital for the evenings' event.

The evening was an unmitigated success. The pictures that hit the internet mere minutes after they were taken showed a happy Will and a delighted Maddie and a whole host of excited children. They sat through the performances, they applauded, they met scores of people and then in closing, Will made a speech. Following the long night and the slew of photos, Maddie and Will were slipping back in the car and on their way back to Kensington.

"You know..." Will turned to her in the dark car. "Harry was right about you."

"Oh?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted.

"You're really very good at this." His compliment was warm and authentic as they pulled through the gates.

"Ha!" Maddie couldn't help but laugh at the notion, at the image of Harry telling him that. "Well, your brother is quite biased."

"He is," Will agreed with a small shrug. "But he wasn't wrong. Politely passing up the reporters, your solid rapport with the children, the kind way you made small talk with the event planners. It's really no wonder people like you so much. You're a natural." He met her eyes and smiled; he was trying to be genuine with her and despite her instinct to shrug it off, she felt compelled to take it.

"Well thank you very much for saying so."

"Mmm," he smiled and the car rolled to a stop. "Thank you, again, for doing this."

"No need," she shook her head. "I enjoyed myself a great deal. It was much better than sitting in an empty home...missing him."

"I suppose it is," their doors pulled open and Will paused for a moment. "You know if you need anything, we're only a few steps away."

"I do know that," Maddie nodded. "Thank you. Give my love to Kate and Arthur?"
"Will do. Good night Madeline."

"Good night William."

And then with soft, sweet smiles across the backseat of the car, they both stepped out and moved in opposite directions towards their homes.

**Day Seven**

"Ma'am," Libby's voice called out to Maddie who was pulling out of the funk that had been with her since Harry had left and was putting in some hours at the office.

"Yes?" Maddie looked up from the briefings she was reading on The Delphinium Project and its progress.

"The Duke of Cambridge is here to see you."

"Oh!" She hadn't been expecting him at all. Dropping her file onto her desk, she rose to her feet and smiled at her assistant. "Please bring him in."

Libby nodded and stepped out only to step right back in a few seconds later with Maddie's brother-in-law looking slightly more casual than he had a few nights earlier.

"Hi there!" Maddie came around the desk to greet him as Libby slipped back out. "What a nice surprise."

"Sorry to just drop by," Will kissed her cheeks.

"Don't be," she waved her hand. "It's really nice to see you. How are Kate and Arthur?"

"Much better," Will nodded and moved to the couches she had in her office. "They have both recovered their ability to eat and keep it down. Thank goodness." He chuckled.

"Are they up in Bucklebury?" Maddie sank onto the couch opposite him.

"They are. I'm headed up to meet them after this."

"Fantastic," she smiled and studied him; noting the look in his eyes, the way he watched her, the way his hands pressed together in front of him. "Will?"

"Yes?"

"Want to tell me what this is about?" She waved her finger between them with a bit of a smirk.

"Ah yes!" He clapped his hands together and moved forward. "I was wondering if you might be willing to do me a favor; a few favors in fact?"

"Sure," Maddie shrugged, intrigued. "What can I do for you?"

"Well," he cleared his throat and moved to the edge of his seat. "I thought the other night at the Talent Night at the Children's Hospital went really well."

"It did," Maddie agreed.
"Also, as you know, Kate has been doing remarkably well with her recovery from...Arthur's birth. She's been seeing Gerald and she's been doing...really well." Maddie could see the love and affection he held for his wife wash over every corner of his face and it made her heart warm.

"She's an amazing woman."

"No argument there," Will agreed wholeheartedly. "Something you said that night struck me; that it was easier to be out and busy than at home alone..."

"Surrounded by reminders that Harry's not there," Maddie finished for him. "It is. Much easier."

"So it got me thinking," he took a breath. "I'm wondering if you would be willing to step in for Kate for a few more events. It would get you out, it would allow Kate more time with Arthur and more time to continue this recovery and it would help me out. You're big with the public right now and you have an amazing way with the people you meet. I thought it might be a beneficial option for all of us."

"Oh wow..." Maddie's lips curled up at the thought.

"You can say no," he hurried ahead. "I'm here, personally, to ask you. I'm not in any official capacity at all. It's a suggestion that I thought you might be interested in and..."

"Yes," she cut him off, catching herself and smiling in apology. "Sorry. Yes. I would love to do a few events with you; Kate can be with Arthur and I can be...not at home."

"Exactly," Will nodded. "There are really only four that I'm thinking of. Three smaller ones that are local and then one weekend in Wales all over the next month or so."

"I'm in," she nodded emphatically.

"Wow, that was easy," he laughed at how excited she seemed. "I'll have the dates sent to Libby to be sure there aren't any clashes with your current schedule?"

"That would be great. And thank you Will...for thinking of me. I appreciate it."

"Of course," he nodded and brought his hands together. "Would you like to come with us? To Bucklebury?"

"Oh wow," she laughed. "Thank you for the invitation, truly. But I think I'll stay put."

"Okay," he nodded and rose to his feet. "I'll see you in about a week then?"

"You will," Maddie followed suit, leaning in to accept a hug; kissing his cheeks before he pulled away.

Day Fifteen

The first of the three smaller negotiated events Will had presented to Maddie found them both in brighter spirits and a shared eagerness. They were going to meet some of the rescue workers who had been involved in the evacuation of a hotel during a fire in the London area. Everyone had made it out unharmed due to the diligence and abilities of the men and women they were going to meet that afternoon.
Will looked across the backseat of the car at Maddie, his eyes narrowing as he studied her outfit. "Sorry, are you wearing one of Harry's flannel shirts?"

"I am," Maddie glanced down at the neatly pressed shirt under her jacket, over her cropped pants and heels. "Funny that you recognize it."

"He wears it all the time," Will's lips twitched up.

"I'm working his clothes into mine while he's away..." Her cheeks blushed at the admission. "It makes me feel closer to him."

"Sure," Will nodded. He could appreciate the gesture, the sentiment behind it. "Have you heard anything?"

"No," she shook her head, smiling softly at Harry's big brother. "Nothing yet."

"Mmmm..." Will's lips pressed together in thought. "Tell me. Did I see you running around the gardens this morning?"

"Yes!" Maddie's eyes flew wide as she looked to him, exasperated. "They have me waking up early! And they have me running miles!" Will started to laugh at the look on her face. "Don't laugh! I'm serious! This man is just...intent on taking me down."

"Well we can't have that," Will shook his head. "Would you like me to have him thrown in the tower?"

"I would love that!" She clapped her hands together, smiling at the banter between them. "Can you do that?"

"Psh..." He blew air through his lips, cocky and assured. And then he shook his head. "No not really. But if I could..."

"I appreciate the thought," Maddie laughed and relaxed into her seat finding herself more at ease and excited for the event they were about to attend.

Day Eighteen

"Ohmygod..." Maddie moaned around a mouthful of cheesecake as she sat in Ella and Bishop's kitchen eating with her best friend. "This is amazing. Did you make this?"

"Ha!" Ella laughed, scooping up another bite onto her fork. "Please. Do you not know me? I don't bake!"

"Ha!" Ella laughed, scooping up another bite onto her fork. "Please. Do you not know me? I don't bake!"

"Then who?" Maddie reached for another bite.

"Who do you think?" Ella raised her eyebrows, her smile smug.

"Bishop?" Maddie's lips tipped up. "No!"

"No," Ella giggled. "But you should see your face."

"Nice," Maddie rolled her eyes.
"I had Bishop pick it up this morning before you came over." Ella shrugged and nodded over to a stack of magazines on the counter. "I also had him pick up those."

"What are those?" Maddie glanced over without moving away from the cheesecake.

"Articles about your lovely, royal self."

"What?" Maddie sat up straight and leaned a bit, looking closer.

"Yeah, I know you have people to do that now but occasionally I'll pick up a few just for fun; to see how on or off base they are. And I think the pregnancy hormones have drawn me to the ridiculousness more so than ever before." Ella smiled sweetly. "They've figured out what you're doing with Harry's clothes by the way."

"Really?" Maddie's eyebrows shot up; amused.

"Mmm..." Ella nodded and took another bite before reaching for the top magazine. "They took longer than I thought they would too. I mean...I figured after the turtle tie they would get it but it took the shirt to make them realize and then they went back over your other outfits and found the sweater and the tie..." She thumbed through the pages as Maddie reached for her cup of tea. "They love you right now, you know? You're quite the media darling."

"Come on," Maddie adjusted in her seat, feeling slightly uncomfortable at the attention drawn to her. "They have been everywhere lately but we both know how fast that fades. And I think they just miss Harry so they're clinging to me."

"Maybe," Ella shrugged. "But they can't get enough of you right now. It's fascinating to watch; how they seem to want to look out for you, take care of you while he's gone. Of course now that they know you're wearing his clothes, it's only going to get worse. It'll be a veritable 'Where's Waldo' of Harry's clothing every time you go out."

"Ha!" Maddie snickered at the image of people scanning her pictures for something that they had seen Harry in.

"Speaking of..." Ella tossed the magazine to the table. "What are you wearing to your next event?"

"Bunny tie," Maddie smiled and reached for another bite. "Around my waist like a belt with this clip that makes it look like a bit of a bow. Rosie's really outdoing herself with this."

"Sexy," Ella winked at her best friend and sighed, leaning back into her seat. "Ugh." Her hand rubbed over her growing stomach. "I'm enormous."

"You're gorgeous," Maddie corrected, her eyes sliding to focus on Ella's belly. "Can I?"

"Of course," Ella reached for her hand and moved it right over to the side. "He's been moving so much lately."

"Yeah?" For some unknown reason, Maddie's voice dropped to a whisper. "Does it feel strange on the inside?"

"Like a bloody alien," Ella laughed; her hand resting over Maddie's and holding it close. Her eyes
locked with her best friends’ and her head tilted to the side. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah," Maddie sighed, her head nodding heavy. "I am."

"Have you heard from him?" Ella's thumb rubbed over the back of Maddie's hand.

"Not yet," she shook her head, blinking back the nervousness and sadness she knew was coming to her eyes. "Not yet."

**Day Twenty**

"Oh wow..." Maddie let out a breath as she and Will drove away from their next event. "That was...different?"

Will started laughing next to her making no attempt at hiding it or control it. "Different?! Ha!" He clapped his hand to his knee. "That's the mildest way to put it. I wasn't sure if that woman was ever going to let you go."

"She had a lot to say," Maddie grinned as she remembered. "She was very sweet though."

"She was," he nodded in agreement. "For all fifteen hours she spoke to you about her cat."

"Ha!" Maddie couldn't help but laugh. "Not quite that long but...what can you do...." She let out a long breath. "Some people really love their cats."

"True," he shook his head and relaxed back in his seat as a thought occurred to him. "Listen. Kate's with her mother tonight and I'm not going up there till tomorrow afternoon..." He shrugged and smiled. "Would you care to stop off and get a drink before going home?"

"You know..." Maddie's smile was wide and real and felt easy for the first time in twenty-one days so she nodded. "I think I would."

"Fantastic," Will smiled and leaned up to the driver. He was quick with the name and address of Leo's place and before Maddie had time to tease him for knowing that off the top of his head, the car was turning and they were on their way.

It would be nice, she thought, to be out of the house, with friends and family, having a drink after a day at work. Sure, the friends owned the club and the family was the future King of England and the day at work had been documented by international press. Though those were things she pushed aside as they stepped from the car and hurried up the short walk to Leo's club to meet Leo who already had a table ready for them.

And there they stayed for nearly three hours. Leo had joined them, as did Sean and Kiki when they arrived about midway through. They sat in that corner booth and had drink after drink as Will told her some of the most hilarious and heartwarming tales of him and Harry as children; stories she would take with her that night when she finally crawled into her bed.

After they were sufficiently tipsy, Will held tight to her arm as Leo snuck them out the back and he hugged her close before they parted ways outside Kensington and went to their separate homes. And that night, when Maddie peeled her clothes from the day off of her body, leaving them in a pile on the floor, she felt lighter. And when she pulled on Harry's t-shirt and boxer shorts and crawled into his side of the bed before passing out on his pillow, she had a wide smile on her face and warmth in her heart.
She knew that this was how family worked; looking after the other, the small things that made big
gains. She had an amazing family of her own—all of whom had been looking after her, keeping in
touch with her since Harry had left. But it was different with Will. If there was anyone who loved
Harry nearly like she did, it was Will. And forming this bond with him, this connection, made
Maddie happy during a time that had been notably than happy.

And it made her heart not hurt quite as bad, knowing that she wasn’t the only one desperately
missing him.

Day Twenty-Two

Maddie wished she could explain to people how much differently she slept when Harry was
away. It wasn’t just a physical difference; an empty bed, a colder pillow. It was a mental
difference. Noises in the night were louder, pauses in the quiet were longer. It took her longer to
come down, took her longer to fall asleep and once she did—it was as though she never really fell
completely. Her eyes felt perpetually half open, her ears always on alert. For what, she was never
really sure. But when at nearly three in the morning on Day Twenty-Two her phone rang out in to
the quiet room, she sat straight up in bed and grabbed blindly for the phone. With a slide of a
finger, she pressed it to her ear and holding her breath, she answered.

"Hello?"

"My darling..." At the sound of his voice, her eyes welled with tears and her heart crept into her
throat.

"Harry." It was him; her husband, her heart.

"I know I woke you but..." His explanation came quick but she cut him off.

"It's okay," Maddie shook her head, pulling her knees into her chest.

"We've been running different shifts and I just couldn't wait any longer to try to catch you at a
better hour."

"You can always wake me up, Captain," she hugged her legs closer and smiled through the tears
in her eyes. "Always. How are you? Are you okay?"

"I am," he was smiling, she could tell. "I'm well. All limbs present and accounted for."

"Good."

"But tell me about you. About home. How is everything? How is Ella? Is she still pregnant? How
is Arthur?"

"Ella is still pregnant," Maddie's smile pulled higher. "She's round and huge and very pregnant.
And Arthur is just amazing. I think I have Will and Kate convinced to let me have him for one
night."

"A sleepover with Aunt Maddie? I'm not sure who I'm more jealous of, you or him."

"Nice," Maddie snickered. "I've gone to a few events with Will in place of Kate."
"Oh?" The concern in his voice peeked through. "Is she okay?"

"She is," Maddie was quick with reassurances. "She's spending more time with Arthur and...I think they're trying to help me get out of the house."

"Nice of them," Harry chuckled.

"It is," Maddie agreed.

"And you?" He grew soft; quiet and gentle. "How are you love? You holding up okay?"

"No," she shook her head, dabbing at the tears in her eyes with the back of her hand. "Yes. I'm...I'm fine. I...I've been trying to stay busy."

"Running?"

"Ha!" She laughed out into the empty bedroom. "Yes. Actually yes. I've been training more so you know I love that."

"I would imagine."

"I've..." She cleared her throat, her fingers playing with the fabric of their comforter. "I've started sleeping in our bed again."

"Where..."

"Your office," she admitted, pulling his pillow closer to her.

"Ah..." Her words were hitting him heavy; making him wish he were home, able to pull her from his couch into his arms, into their bed.  

"And I..." Her voice cracked just a bit as she sniffed at the tears in her eyes and in her throat. She hadn't wanted to cry when he called, she had wanted to be strong and brave, but this particular bit of information couldn't be told without emotion. "Oh Harry...you remember Christmas Eve night when we exchanged gifts with each other and then we..."

"Yes," he breathed.

"I started my period," she sighed. "No baby." She pushed her lips into a smile and leaned her head to the side to rest on her knees. A calm, quiet moment passed between them as they each let the news register.

"Okay," Harry was the first to break the silence, optimism in his voice, in his words. "Well when I get home from here I'm sure I'll be more than ready to remedy that." They shared a light laughter between them, the promise passing from him to her and then they faded back into the quiet.

"I miss you." Her words were simple and heavy and when she spoke them it made her chest ache.

"Oh baby," he groaned, pressing a hand to his heart. "I miss you too. So much."

**Day Twenty-Three**

Maddie hummed to herself as she stepped back into her home. Having spent the morning with
Kate and Arthur, she was in a great mood. The call from Harry, the additional events on her calendar, the time she was spending with Will, Kate and Arthur—all if it had gone miles to ease the tension she carried in her shoulders. She hummed as she returned home, ready to change into her running clothes and shoes and head out with her trainer—who she wasn't hating quite as much lately.

As soon as she pulled her hair high into a pony tail and hurried down the stairs, she heard her phone ring out. She had been tempted to let it ring, to catch it when she returned. But she didn't want to miss him. So she ran to grab it; snickering as she saw the caller.

"Mrs. Bishop!" She pressed the phone to her ear. "What can I do for you on this lovely morning?"

"You heard from him, didn't you?" Ella's grin could be heard through the phone.

"I did," Maddie's smile stretched higher. "He called in the middle of the night last night and I'm not going to lie to you Ella, I'm a changed woman."

"I can tell!" Ella laughed into a sigh and took a breath. "So listen. I was at the doctor this morning..."

"Everything okay?" Maddie cut in as she sat to put on her running shoes.

"Yes, of course. It was just a regular appointment. Everything's fine," Ella hurried along. "But while I was in the waiting room, there were these women flipping through the magazines and the newspapers and they were talking about an article they read in The Mail."

"We're calling them articles now?" Maddie snickered, reaching for her other shoe.

"Well I checked it out when I got home and then I looked at a couple of blogs and...It was about you."

"Yeah?" Maddie shrugged. She had been all over the place since Harry had left and she was growing more and more immune to it as time passed. "What now? Too fat? Too skinny?"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

"Well then what?" Maddie finished tying her shoes and rose to her feet.

"Okay, well..." Ella sounded a little nervous. "Remember when Harry deployed last time and there were those pictures of you and Collins that ran with a story alluding to you...God. To you stepping out on Harry while he was away?"

"Yeah..." Maddie was cautious. "I remember."

"Well..." Ella let off.

"But..." Maddie shook her head with a laugh. "But that doesn't make any sense Ella. Last time they at least had photos and...a man. This time...I mean. I haven't even been out with anyone but Will. Who in the hell do they think I'm stepping out with?"

The silence on the other end of the phone, the overwhelming sense of awkwardness and discomfort drew Maddie to the conclusion Ella desperately did not want to speak out loud. Maddie's breath sucked in as it dawned on her and Ella continued.
"They have photos of you out with him a few nights ago, getting drinks and sneaking out the back..."

"Oh my God."

"They have photos from the events where you're talking close and laughing and his hand is on your back and..."

"Oh. My. God."

"I'm sorry Maddie but...they haven't said it outright but they are absolutely alluding to something with...Will."

"oh my God," Maddie groaned and slumped back to her seat; her head pounding and her stomach sick.

And just like that, the media love and coverage of the new Duchess began to shift.
"Maddie?" Bishop was shocked to see her; even more so in the breathless, sweaty state she was in.

"Hi..." She panted, leaning her hand against the doorway. "Is Ella still here?"

"Yes, she's..." He looked her over then; her clothes, her shoes, the agent behind her dressed the same. "I'm sorry, did you run here?"

"I..." Maddie swallowed and nodded. "Can Sampson come in and take a look around?"

"Yes, of course," Bishop stood to the side and called out to his wife. "Ella love, Maddie's here." He turned back to her then. "I'm not even joking right now, did you run here?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded, catching her breath as Sampson returned with an all-clear nod. She stepped inside and smiled as Ella joined them. "I ran here."

"You what?! A bubble of laughter fell through Ella's lips.

"But it's miles!" Bishop shook his head, confused and perplexed by all of it.

"Do you still have them?" Maddie ignored Bishop and focused on Ella. "The articles, the blogs, do you still have them?"

"Please tell me that you did not just run here from Kensington Palace so that you can read that garbage and..." Ella shook her head at her best friend. "You're insane Madeline."

"What articles?" Bishop looked from one woman to the other.

"Can I see them?" Maddie stayed on topic.

"Well I would be quite an ass if you ran all the way here for them and I refused to show you." Ella took a deep breath and despite her urge not to, she waved Maddie inside. "Come on. Right this way."

"What articles?" Bishop asked again, following behind the two women.

"The ones about Maddie and Will," Ella called back and Bishop stopped in his tracks.

"No," his voice was stern as he spoke to them, drawing their attention back to him. "No. We're not going to..." He caught up to them, stepping right up to Maddie and looking her square in the eye. "Don't do this. Don't go there with this. Don't start reading this bullshit and..." Maddie turned away from him then and continued down the hallway. "This is insane Madeline. You see that right? You ran all the way over here to look at that nonsense. What did I tell you about..."

"Stop it!" Maddie yelled, spinning around to face him. "I know it's crazy. I know that it's rubbish but you don't get to tell me how to react!"
"They don't know what they're talking about love," he grew soft with her.

"And you don't know what it's like to have them question your loyalties to your wife," her anger deflated and the room grew sad.

"No," he agreed with a shake of his head. "I don't."

"I appreciate what you're saying, what you're doing but..." Maddie trailed off and swallowed her emotion, turning to Ella with sad eyes.

"Come on," Ella reached for her hand, smiling softly at her husband as they continued on towards the living room where her laptop was with the copies of the article she had picked up. "We can get drunk."

"We?" Maddie snickered as they moved onto the couch.

"Well maybe you and Bishop," Ella looked pointedly to her husband who raised his eyebrows and pointed to his chest.

"I thought that if mommy couldn't drink then..."

"I'm making an exception," Ella's voice leveled out. "You may get drunk with Maddie."

"What?!" Bishop was flabbergasted.

"Well she ran all the way here," Ella groaned and nudged him with her foot. "And she's about to read articles about her and her brother-in-law. Now can you go get a bottle of wine and..."

"I'm on it," Bishop nodded quickly; rising to his feet and looking to Maddie. "Madeline?"

"Well I can't really deny you the one free pass you've been given now can I?" She smiled between the couple and shrugged. "I'm in."

As Bishop stepped out of the room, Ella pulled up the original article and a few blogs that were running with it, some discussions. When Bishop returned, both women were deep in concentration as they read through it all. He shook his head as he stepped over to them, handing Maddie a glass of wine.

"I just..." Maddie took a sip, her head shaking slowly as she sat back on the couch. "I can't believe this. Of all the things..."

"I know," Ella patted her knee, sitting back against the couch with her best friend.

"I'm actually not that surprised," Bishop shrugged, taking a drink from his glass with a smile.

"Really?" Maddie's eyes narrowed as she looked to him.

"Yeah," he shrugged again, taking a larger sip. "It was the same when Harry hooked up with Kate. It appears these brothers like to share."

"Ugh," Maddie groaned, her head tipping back. "As if anyone would ever believe that shit."

"Well why not?" Bishop lifted his eyebrows. "It was in the papers, in the blogs. There was
massive discussion about it; even some...creative works of fiction."

"Really?" Ella smirked.

"Mmm," Bishop nodded. "There was quite the uproar at the time."

"But why would anyone believe that?" Maddie looked to him. "Kate would never, ever. She adores Will. And Harry? He'd rather die than do something like that to his brother. I've never seen somebody so devoted and loyal and...." She stopped in her thoughts and nodded. "Ah. I see what you're doing."

"If you know that..." Bishop leaned forward on his knees. "If you know the response to that so quickly, what are the chances that other people know that about you and Will? I promise you that Harry knows that. That Kate knows that. That everyone who knows them, knows that."

"I hate you sometimes." Maddie tipped her drink to her lips and took a long, slow sip.

"I know," he shrugged, smirk firmly in place. "And I'm okay with that. Just...don't get caught up in the crazy Maddie. Not now."

Day Twenty-Four

It had only been a day since the discussion had tipped to the salacious. Maddie had handled phone calls from her mother and Jenna who were checking in on her. She had turned off the news and turned on music and she had reached for a glass of wine. She was midway through her second when she heard a loud, sharp knock on the door. With confusion on her face, she moved to answer it. When Maddie swung open the door, Kate was standing tall on the other side; arms crossed and eyes set. A tipsy bubble of a laugh pushed through Maddie's lips. "You look mad."

She smiled at the brunette.

"I am mad," she nodded.

"Why?" Maddie breathed, her eyes hazy as she lifted her eyebrows, her mouth twitching into a smirk. "Because I've been sleeping with your husband?"

There was a beat of a moment when Kate's face held tight, a cloud of heaviness hanging over them and then both women eased, Kate's hands dropping to her side as she rolled her eyes.

"Well there's that," she sighed. "And apparently you're getting drunk without me."

Maddie laughed lightly and stood to the side. "Come in?"

"Thanks," Kate stepped in the door and waited until Maddie shut and locked it before she turned to her. "Why haven't you returned my calls? I've been trying to get in touch with you since yesterday."

"I know," Maddie groaned, leading her into the living room where she reached for another glass and moved to the couch. She took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. "I'm embarrassed."

"What? Why?" Kate took the glass she offered and sat back on the couch. "You can't really think that I'm worried about any of this can you?"

"No," Maddie groaned again. "But..."
"But what?" Kate laughed. "Do you think I've slept with Harry?"

"No!"

"And I don't think you're sleeping with Will. It's just as absurd. Now."

She swallowed another sip and put her glass on the table. "Get your shoes. Get a coat. We're going out."

"What?" Maddie laughed at her. "You can't be serious."

"Dead serious."

"Why would we do that? We have alcohol here and we're home and..."

"And nobody can see us together," Kate sighed. "Come on. We're going out and we're going now and I won't take no for an answer."

With a tad of reluctance, Maddie sat down her glass and did as Kate told her. She put on shoes, she grabbed a coat and after checking her hair and face for anything too crazy, she set out with her sister-in-law for some public girl time. And even though Kate had every intention of being in a place where photos would be taken, she also had every intention of having a good time. With all that had happened with Arthur, with Harry being deployed, they both needed it. And they had an amazing time.

The pictures of Maddie and Kate out on the town ran hot the next day. Though there were stories that ran speaking to how ludicrous the rumors were given how close the two women seemed. There were also counter arguments made that pointed to PR stunts and strategy. As though there were a chance somebody from the palace called them up and sent them out.

Maddie was confused and upset and tired and... she felt like she couldn't win.

This was what Harry had talked about when he warned her that the press would come for her. He had foreseen this; he had known. And Maddie had believed him, though she was surprised at the timing, given his deployment. But it seemed as though nothing was sacred any longer. Brothers betraying brothers; wives cheating on husbands. Nothing was sacred any longer.

What she desperately needed was some perspective. So she took a step back and looked at all of it as a greater part of a whole. The gossipy stories seemed to be holding court exclusively in the less reliable sources around town; The Sun, The Mail, The News of The World. So she took a breath and she took a step back. She took advice—Kate's, Bishop's, her mother's—and she sucked it up and went about her work.

Day Thirty-Six

Because Maddie and Will were coming from different sides of town for their next event, they were set to arrive separately.

"Ma'am," Libby called her attention up from her fidgeting fingers. Despite her logical understanding of the gossip, she still felt nervous about being seen with him in public again.

"Yes?" She smoothed her hands down over Harry's shirt that was belted around her and she lifted her eyes to her assistant.
"Just a reminder," the young woman smiled. "It's Heinrich van Otto and Louisa Stallman."

"Yes, thank you Libby." Maddie smiled gratefully across the car as it rolled to a stop. Libby nodded sweetly and Maddie's door swung open.

Here was an audible reaction and a flash of cameras when Maddie stepped out of the car. It seemed that despite the stories, the people, the public still had a great deal of affection for the Duchess. Maddie smiled to them, thankful for their sentiments. Will's car had pulled in just in front of hers and he came back to meet her.

She smiled as she curtsied and he held a bemused smirk as he kissed her cheeks. Without much time to address the crowd gathered to catch a look at them, they were moving inside; through the main doors, down a short hallway and into an elevator. Once alone inside, Will looked down to her with brotherly concern.

"Are you okay?" His voice was low. "You seem nervous."

Maddie nodded; small and shy. "Just thinking of all the ways my actions can be twisted..."

"Don't let them do that," his eyes were stern and fixed on her. "If they get to decide how you behave...they win. Don't change based on a few pieces of fiction." He tugged at his coat and stood tall. "Let it go; relax."

And she did. Once inside, she let it go and focused on the task at hand. And it was smashing success. They spent the afternoon meeting with the elderly population listening to the services that were being provided, concerns they still had. It was an incredibly productive and informative afternoon.

But of course all that ran the next day were articles discussing her hemline, how she looked in Harry's shirt and musings drawing attention to the fact that she and Will arrived and left in separate cars. "A new, jealous mandate from Kate? Perhaps."

She couldn't seem to catch a break.

But she tried. She tried to let it go, tried to ignore it. She didn't want it to taint the real work she was doing, she didn't want it to hang over their heads on their trip to Wales. But when The Telegraph ran an opinion piece by a mildly respected reporter, Trini Burniss, discussing the new Duchess seeking solace "within the palace," she wondered just how long she would last before she simply exploded. She had seen a lot of stuff printed about her at this point, but this was reaching a new kind of low.

Day Fifty-Six

Their trip to Wales was upon them before they knew it. While Will traveled by helicopter to a local airstrip, Maddie took the longer journey by land. They both met up at the hotel that was hosting the charity benefit they would be attending that first night. The stories about them had fizzled but had far from faded; pictures surfacing of the two of them being friendly before her engagement to Harry, after the announcement, at the wedding. Though it stayed in the discussion, Maddie had done her very best to keep her mind from it. But she knew, just as he did, that their overnight stay in Wales was only going to fuel the fire that seemed to simmer under these ridiculous notions.

Once she arrived in her hotel suite, time seemed to fly; Tara was doing her hair, Rosie was pulling
her dress for the night. It was a formal affair; Maddie in a dress and Will in a tux and all sorts of fancily dressed people wanting to shake their hands and take their turn to meet them.

Maddie had just finished dressing, getting one final spray to her updo, slipping on the beautiful jewelry she had been loaned for the evening, when Libby stepped forward to let them know that the Duke was ready; it was time to go. With a grin and a deep breath, Maddie stepped into the hall, their entourage of security and staff around them dressed and ready to go.

"Good evening," Maddie smiled up at him.

"Madeline," he leaned in to kiss her cheeks. "How are you? Are you doing better with all of this...shit?" He spoke low and only to her as they began to move through the hallways. They were on their own private secure floor of the hotel where the event would be taking place.

"Yes. I am. I'm...letting it go..." With a smile set in place she pulled air in through her nose and blew it slowly out of her mouth.

Will watched her with amusement. "Are you drunk right now?" He chuckled.

"No," she shook her head. "Just...zen." Maddie laughed lightly. "I did yoga, I meditated, I ran forty miles."

"Yeah?" Will snickered.

"I'm trying."

"Okay, well," he shrugged and moved past it. "You look nice."

"Thank you. So do you."

"Where is Harry in all of this?" He waved his hand at her formal attire.

"Cufflinks," she held up her arms showing him the ends of the three-quarter sleeves of her fitted tuxedo jacket that she wore over her dress.

"Nice," Will nodded approvingly as they rounded the corner and the mood shifted to a more serious one as they grew closer to the venue. "You know...he wouldn't want you to worry about those stories."

"I know." Just the mention of him made her heart thump.

A pause sat between them; both of them thinking of him, thinking of all the craziness surrounding them. And then Will's assistant, Fynn, looked to him with a nod. It was time.

"Are you really okay Maddie?" He turned to her; his hand on her elbow as he spoke low.

"Yes," she nodded, her lips pulling into a smile. "I'm really okay. Let's go."

Will turned with a nod and matched her smile with his own and as the doors to the ballroom opened, their names were announced and the applause and excitement rushed out around them; greeting them and pulling them inside.

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The evening was beautiful; the speeches were sincere and the food was impeccable. Maddie watched as the night unfolded around them with expert timing. Everything was wonderful, even when she and Will began to circulate with their respective assistants; meeting and greeting. She shook so many hands, smiled so much her cheeks hurt but at the end of it she felt lighter; felt better. It was always wonderful to be in the middle of it; the work they were sent out to do or acknowledge or inspire. This was what it was all about; this new royal life of hers.

They were there later than they had anticipated, later than they had planned. But things were going so well and they were both enjoying the evening, meeting the people of Wales who had come out to meet them. It wasn't until well into the night that the lateness began to draw Maddie to an end. Seeing this, Libby spoke quietly with Fynn and moved about bringing the night to a close. Maddie said good-bye to her tablemates, spoke her thanks and gratitude to the host for the evening, posed for a few last pictures and then with a goodnight to Will, she followed Libby out of the ballroom, ready for sleep. She was mere steps from the door when she heard a woman's voice call out to her.

"Your Royal Highness!" Maddie stopped and turned as a tall brunette hurried in her direction. "Your Royal Highness!" Maddie glanced to Arthur and then to Libby and she waited for the woman to close the few feet between them. She was slightly breathless when she finally came to a stop. "I'm so sorry. I was hoping all night to have the chance to meet you. I'm so glad to have caught you before you left!"

"I'm sorry," Maddie smiled sweetly, a slight shake of her head. "I'm afraid I don't know you."

"Oh my yes," the woman nodded, recovering her composure as she held out her hand; dipping into a curtsey when Maddie took it. "I'm Trini Burness."

"Trini Burness..." Maddie repeated her name, something about it registering familiar. And then it hit her; realization washing over her. And every single stressful moment she had suffered over the last month at the hands of the media came rearing back. Her smile faded and every feature on her face hardened. That name would stick with her forever. It was an odd feeling; to finally put a face with a name, with the piece of trash she printed. "Ah. Yes. I recognize the name."

"Yes," the woman nodded; smug and pleased with herself. "I'm a reporter."

"Interesting," Maddie nodded, taking a deep breath to try for calm. "We've really begun to stretch the definition of the word reporter now, haven't we?" Libby's eyes snapped up to her boss; her face covering her surprise nearly as quickly as it had materialized.

"I..." Trini glanced around; confused and more than a bit stunned. "I beg your pardon."

"No," Maddie shook her head, taking a half a step closer to her; lowering her voice. The calm simply wasn't coming. "You're the one with the article on the opinion page, the blog that accompanies it. That pathetic Royal Watcher nonsense." The woman's eyes flashed wide but Maddie continued. "The one who writes up pieces of fiction that would make the day time soap writers jealous and prints it as though it were the news." Maddie was seething; her jaw clenching around her words. "While my husband is fighting in a war and my sister-in-law is home with a new baby and..." She stopped herself before she said too much but her anger didn't end. "He's my brother. Don't you understand? Have you no self-respect? No dignity? No professional code of ethics?" Maddie caught herself then; pulled at all of her professional training and the young reporter could see the transformation as she fought for control. Maddie sucked in her breath and stood tall, her fingers dropping her hand as though it were diseased. She took a step back and for
the first time in her life, she stared down her nose at somebody. Libby, watching the moment closely and being the professional she was, stepped forward and took control.

"I'm sorry Ma'am but we should be going," she held her arm out and tossed the most polite smile she could muster back to the reporter. Maddie nodded to Libby, more grateful than she could articulate, and without turning around to look again, she moved right out of the ballroom.

Maddie was sure her cheeks were red when she returned to her room and there was a good chance there was steam coming from her ears. Thanking Libby outside her door, she pushed into her suite and let the door slam loudly behind her.

"Trini Burness," she huffed, tossing her clutch to the table that sat behind the couch. "What the hell kind of nerve. Walking up to me and..." She took a deep breath, wanting to calm down. It was all so frustrating and alienating. With each breath that passed through her lungs, the anger began to give way to something else; something worse. Shaking her head at the impending sadness, she reached into her clutch for her phone. Pulling it into her hands, she moved around to the couch; sinking down into it still sparkly and well-coiffed from the night.

Staring at the blank screen, she willed him to call. Her forehead creased as her mind focused only on him, on hearing his voice. She needed it. She needed to hear from him more than ever. She wanted his calm voice and his understanding. She wanted him to be pissed at Trini Burness with her, to rub her shoulders and try to move the stress away. She wanted him to help her navigate this mess she seemed to be in, to help her pull from this place of mistrust and upset.

She wanted him.

She missed him so much; nearly two months in and the ache in her heart that reminded her that he was gone still hadn't faded. It hadn't given in one bit. She had been wearing his clothes and sleeping on his pillow—but even that had lost the smell of him. Her eyes fell closed and she pulled his face forward; dancing blue eyes, enormous smile, wild red hair that was more indicative of his personality than anything else about him. She wanted to hug him and run her hands through his hair and hear his laugh and his voice. Her eyes opened and focused on the phone in her hands. Blinking at the prick of her tears in her eyes, she huffed out a breath.

The phone simply wasn't ringing; he wasn't going to call. Despite the tears in her eyes, her lips curled up just slightly—knowing he would make fun of her later for her attempt at mind control. Allowing just a few tears, she wiped at them with the back of her hand and she laid the phone down on the table in front of her. She needed to get ready for bed; needed to take off the jewelry and the makeup and get some sleep. She would feel better in the morning.

So she took a long, deep, calming breath; just like those she had coached Ella through in Bendal, just like she had coached Kate through in the bathroom. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

And when she finally felt like she could stand and get ready for bed without breaking down or
breaking something, her hands moved to the cufflinks on her jacket, twisting and pulling them through. She smiled down at them as she worked them over in her hands; thinking of how many times Harry had worn him, all of the places they must have been. Holding them in her palm, she rose to her feet. It was time to take off the dress and unpin her hair and let go of this night. She moved towards her room, stopping to look at herself in the mirror. A softer smile pulled at her lips as she looked herself over, as she was reminded of all of the wonderful things that had happened that night; pushing out the one bad.

The knock on the door pulled her attention from her reflection, from her memories. Her fingers held tight to the cufflinks in her hand and she moved to the door. Since they were on a secure floor with only them, she felt incredibly comfortable answering the door.

"Will?" She was surprised; a small smile curling her lips.

"Can I come in?" His forehead was creased, his jaw tight and though it threw up a blink of concern for Maddie, she wasn't put off.

"Of course," she stood to the side and he stepped past her into the suite. Maddie shut the door and turned to face him. "Is everything okay?" She watched him move a few steps past her before he turned on her.

"Did you have a run in with a reporter downstairs?" His arms crossed over his chest and his eyes narrowed in on her.

"How did you..." Jesus, Maddie thought; that was fast. "I don't know that I would call her a reporter." She snickered at the use of the word.

"She is." His voice sounded firm and final.

"Or that I would call it a run in," Maddie continued, moving further into the suite; her eyes narrowing in confusion.

"She would." Will's eyes pulsed and Maddie caught it; anger or upset or...frustration. She wasn't sure exactly what it was, but it gave her pause.

"I'm sorry," she studied him. "Am I in some kind of trouble right now?"

"Madeline," the way he said her name made her feel like she was sixteen and about to get chastised for breaking curfew. "You cannot go after reporters like that."

"Hold on," Maddie held up her hand, her defenses flying up. "I did not go after her. She came up to me and..."

"You cannot talk to them like that," he shook his head as he cut her off. "You cannot call them out on the carpet in front of their peers and..."

"She was alone. It was only Libby and Arthur and do you know who we're talking about here?"

"Yes." He nodded. "And it doesn't matter."

"It does matter," Maddie felt all of the frustration she had worked to ease rush back to the surface. "She published an article that said that you and I were..."
"I know what it said," he cut her off, not caring to hear it all again. "And it doesn't matter."

"It does matter." Maddie hated that her frustration made her teary, hated that this interaction with Will was going this way; hated that Harry wasn't there to support her.

"To Whom?" His expression was incredulous, his voice just the same.

"To me!" Maddie pressed her hand to her chest, her eyes blinking; trying to be rid of the tears that threatened.

"No." He shook his head.

"No?" Maddie nearly laughed in his face; did he really think that he could command her feelings? This was the first time she had seen this side of Will and it was shocking and unsettling. "No?"

"It shouldn't."

"But Harry is..." Maddie began her explanation, her reasons, but Will moved forward; coming in close as his hand rose to cut her off.

"Your husband doesn't believe this rubbish and neither does my wife." His voice dropped an octave as he spoke to her. "You think either of them is the least bit concerned about the two of us having some kind of affair?! No! And if anyone is, they are the pathetic ones. This is standard operating procedure for them Madeline and I know that you're new and this can be unsettling..."

"Unsettling?" Her eyes flashed wide but he continued.

"And I know that Harry isn't here to reel you in..."

"Reel me in?" Maddie repeated his words in disbelief.

"But you cannot go around snapping at anyone who writes something that's less than flattering and..."

"Excuse me?" Maddie cut him off; her fire coming back to her. "Did you come in here to chastise me?"

"I came here to tell you to back off." He bit off the last two words. "To let it go. The way you spoke to the reporter was not okay."

"The way I spoke to her." Maddie shook her head, laughter coming up from a place of craziness.

"You're risking too much for too little reward."

"Too little reward?" She repeated, her mind still having trouble wrapping around all of this.

"Your public capital for a moment of satisfaction at getting in the last word?" He threw his hands up in the air. "Do you know what this kind of thing could do to your image, to your ability to work successfully with the public, with the press?"

"I don't care about that." Her head shook quick and furious.

"Then you're not nearly as wise as Harry has built you up to be." The words flowed from his
mouth so easily; so freely that it caught Maddie off guard.

"Wow..." She felt like she had been slapped; like the air had been knocked out of her. And her eyes began to well up, her fingers tightening around Harry's cufflinks. "You know, I think maybe it's time for you to go."

"Madeline," he softened for a moment, catching the harshness in his voice, the tears in her eyes. "I should not have been so blunt. I merely came here to warn you to the potential ramifications of what you said tonight, that it could come back and bite you when you least suspect it. My brother's not here to protect you from these things and I thought that I should..."

"Reel me in?" Maddie took a breath and nodded, still hardened, still guarded, still pulling it all together. "You've certainly said what you came to say..."

"Maddie." His hand extended to her then, the look in his eyes returning to normal as he took in her reaction.

"Thank you for looking out for me Will," she met his eyes with a coldness he hadn't seen from her before, with a detached feeling she hadn't felt with him before. He took a step towards her with an apology on his lips but Maddie spoke first, moving away from him. "I think maybe it's time for you to go."

"Madeline..." He was sorry; his voice had been too harsh, his words too pointed. He knew that. He got this way when he was protecting family; Harry had always teased him, Kate had warned him off before. But Maddie didn't know that and now she was looking at him like he was a different person. But before he could tell her that, before he could explain, a loud, sharp knock pulled their attention to the door.

Maddie moved to answer it, assuming it was Libby coming for her jewelry. She swung it open to see Fynn; his phone in hand and gravity in his eyes.

"Fynn?" She questioned.

"I need to see the Duke." Maddie nodded towards Will and stood to the side. Fynn walked right past her, right up to Will and he held out the phone that Will didn't even hesitate to pluck from his fingers; assuming it had to be important for an interruption such as this.

Maddie glanced back out the door, seeing Libby standing in the hallway along with a mixture of her and Will's protection. "What in the world?" She spoke under her breath; mostly to herself as she slid her eyes from the group gathered in the hallway back into her suite.

She studied Fynn for a moment; stiff and pensive and then she looked to Will. He stood tall and graceful in his tux from the night but there was something about his face, about the way he pressed his phone to one ear and fingers to the other so that he could hear; so that he could understand.

Maddie turned back to the group in the hallway, ready to ask them what was going on, why they were all there, who was on the phone. But before she could open her mouth to form any of those words, she heard Will suck in his breath and her head snapped right back to him.

And she knew. The look on his face, the way her stomach clenched and ached.

Something was wrong.
When his eyes rose directly to hers, avoiding everything else in the room, she felt her heart flutter in her chest and she knew.

Something was very wrong.

She swallowed at the sudden dryness in her throat, opened her mouth to say something, took a step back; her body wanting to pull her from this moment before she even really knew what was happening. But she was unable to speak, unable to move, unable to tear her eyes from her brother-in-law in those last few seconds of his phone call.

And then the call ended and the room came rushing around her.

Will was in motion immediately, the phone sliding into his pocket as he took long, hurried strides to where she was standing by the door. He stepped right up to her and when his eyes met hers, she saw something there she had never seen on him before; fear and sadness and a great deal of uncertainty. He was miles different than the man who had entered her room.

His hands moved in, wrapping around her upper arms in a way that was meant to be supportive, meant to hold her to him—meant to hold her up and then he swallowed the lump of emotion in his throat and he said the words that brought her world to a screeching halt.

"It's Harry."

Maddie's head began to shake, her eyes clouding with tears and her heart cracking in her chest and as Will's fingers tightened their hold on her, she realized that her whole body was shaking. Will's eyes blinked a few times, his jaw adjusting as though he were trying to keep it together, trying to get it out.

"His Apache has gone down somewhere over the water."
Chapter 144

The world around Maddie swarmed into an organized sort of chaos. She could feel her knees weaken, hear a buzzing in her ear as everything jumped into action. Libby stepped into the room as Fynn stepped out. Without a word she began moving around and collecting items, their protection detail began to radio back and forth, planning and deciding.

"Don't fall apart on me yet, okay?" Will spoke to her in a voice that mixed the sweetness she had seen in him so often with the authoritarian she had only begun to see tonight. He needed her to stay with him just a moment longer; just enough to get through this.

But all Maddie could do was look up at Will with her heart beating in her throat and ask the question she knew, with one hundred percent certainty, she did not want an answer to. "Is he..." Her eyes clouded over and she could feel her own breakdown on the horizon.

Will shook his head roughly, his fingers still wrapped around her arms. "They don't know. They..." He cleared his throat. "They know that the Apache took on enemy fire. They know that they lost radio frequency and they know that they went down over the water. They are sending a rescue and recovery team out in the area right now but it's a war and it's the sea..." His hands flexed and the lump in his throat bobbed as he swallowed. "They don't know. And they don't know when they'll know."

"I..." Maddie tried, fought with her own instincts, her body's own natural inclination to crumble to the floor, the way her stomach felt like it wanted to heave; the way her mind spiraled. This was it; her worst nightmare being played out in a hotel suite in Wales with Harry's older brother standing over her as she fell apart. "I don't know what to do. I..." She shook her head, at a complete loss of words and thoughts; she was all feeling.

Will nodded. He understood. His own emotions were swirling around in the pit of his stomach, threatening to take him down. But for this moment, for this brief glimpse of time, his survival instincts had taken over, his training had seized control and he knew what needed to happen before either of them broke down. "We're leaving for London." His voice was low as he spoke to Maddie. "Libby is packing up your stuff and Fynn is going to pack mine and they'll follow behind on land."

"Oh-Okay..." Maddie agreed absently. She had nothing to say, nothing to ask, nothing to add. She had nothing. And in that moment all she could do was listen to him.

"We're leaving right now," he glanced up to the head of his protection team who nodded quickly and firmly; they were ready. He turned back to Maddie and let go of his tight hold on her, his hands smoothing down over her arms. "We have to get out of here before anything leaks, before the press gets wind of..." He bit at the skin of his lip and soldiered on. "We don't know what happened yet, we don't know what the next phone call is going to bring us and we do not need to be at some hotel in Wales when this falls down. We..." He took in a long shaky breath. "We need to be in London and we need to leave right now."

Maddie nodded, too numb to disagree; too numb to do much of anything. All she could think about—ALL she could think about—was Harry; somewhere in the ocean. Harry, being shot out of the sky. Harry, in a rushed panic to save the aircraft, to save the crew, to save the mission.

Harry.
She shook her head harshly, swallowing back the lump in her throat, trying to settle the bile in her stomach. She had to stay focused. She had to stay out of the deep dark hole of 'what if'—at least for the moment. So she looked up at Will and she nodded again; looking up to Libby who held something in her hands as she approached them.

"Your wallet and your cell phone Ma'am," Libby was sweet and gentle with her.

"Thank you," she managed, wrapping her fingers around the items and slipping them into her jacket pocket; the cufflinks still wrapped up in the palm of her hand. "How do we..." She let her eyes leave Will's and glance out at their detail waiting; ready to leave.

"There's a helicopter waiting outside on the back lawn. It'll take us to the airstrip not far away and then we'll fly to London." His hand on her elbow guided her out of her suite and into the hallway. Maddie followed without thought to her clothes and her shoes and everything she was leaving behind—he had told her Libby was taking care of it. And Maddie trusted that.

They were going to go to London—she understood that. Through some sort of miracle, Maddie's mind willed her feet to move and she and Will began down the corridor; their team around them in a sober expression. Will reached forward to press the elevator button and then he turned to face her. "I know this is going to be hard and I know that it's going to take more than I should dare ask of you right now but..." He took a breath. "I'm going to need you to dry your eyes and I'm going to need you to force a smile. At least for two minutes."

"What?" She was shocked; stunned really. "Why?"

"Because..." He sighed as the elevator doors closed on their entourage. "In order to get to the helicopter...we have to walk through the lobby. Full of people from the event tonight."

Maddie's heart sank into her stomach and she suddenly felt the undeniable urge to vomit. "I..." She stuttered; her eyes fluttering up to look at the numbers as they ticked down.

"You can," Will assured her, keeping his eyes forward—knowing that if he looked at her, if he let himself slip, she would let herself slip and they'd both be a mess.

She nodded, swallowing at the lump in her throat, wishing she could keep it down. Holding up her free hand, she whispered, "I'm shaking. I...I can't make my hand stop shaking."

"Then give me your hand," Will held out his, unsure if she would take it, unsure if she felt enough trust in him in this moment. But she didn't blink, she didn't flinch. Seemingly setting all of their back and forth aside, Maddie slipped her cold trembling fingers into his hand and he moved them quickly through his arm; tucking them into the warm bend of his elbow. "Keep them there." He whispered as the elevator neared the bottom and began to slow. "I'll walk you through the lobby. Okay?"

"Okay," Maddie nodded; her eyes trained forward, her mind struggling for, and gaining, temporary control of her heart. With a deep, shuddery breath, she pulled her head high, squared her shoulders and willed her eyes dry. "Okay."

As the doors parted and slid open, a smile slid onto both of their faces and out they stepped into the crowd, into the revelry; into the open.

In the end, there would be pictures of this moment; of this ninety second walk. In the immediate
future there would be twitter posts and blog musings pointing to the way they walked together, how close they were, how her hand was tucked in his arm. There would be gossipy rumors that floated about the way he spoke to her under his breath, about the way she stayed tucked in close next to him. There would be speculation.

And later, when the world heard news of what had occurred that night, there would be a great shame that would settle over those who had jumped. There would be a public outpouring about the strength and the grace and the pride with which the two of them walked. And there would be a photo that stuck out from the others, taken just before they slipped through the doors to the hotel to head outside—of Maddie looking back with distant eyes and a fake smile—one that nobody caught until they knew; until they understood and realized just how quickly assumptions could turn to accusations could turn to disappointment in themselves and acceptance of how very little they knew of what was happening behind closed doors.

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The closer they came to the helicopter, the blades whipping through the cold crisp winter air, the more undone Maddie became. Under the cover of the noise, of the dark, she began to let go of the duty that had held her together inside. She felt her breath start to gasp and she felt her eyes start to tear up; the freezing cold pricking at her from every angle. Her dress swirled around her in the wind putting this beautiful flow of motion around this jagged, harsh night. Will held onto her hand, keeping it there on his arm until they reached the helicopter where he held onto her hand as she climbed the few steps onto the aircraft and then he followed her in.

Maddie found her seat, sitting quickly and reaching for the belts and the harnesses as everyone moved quickly to get ready for takeoff. But she couldn't do it. Her fingers were too cold, too shaky to pull the buckles together. Her frustration mounted quickly; her eyes welling up and her teeth biting at her bottom lip.

"Here..." Will was calm and gentle as his hands moved hers aside; working with the ease and quickness of an expert as he buckled her in place next to him. "There you go..." He tugged a quick check at her belt and then Maddie watched as the strong man who had just led her through the hotel, through all of the people, through the beginning of this unyielding uncertainty that would plague their night—she watched as he wavered.

Sitting next to her his shoulders slumped. He quickly strapped himself in and his eyes grew dark and sad and far off. And as the helicopter lifted off the ground, she watched as the sorrow she was feeling washed over his face. They were up in the air and moving when it began to surround them; surround everyone on board—protection detail, flight crew. Everyone on board had sad eyes and a heavy heart.

And Maddie began to cry. It wasn't the deep, heavy sobs of a breakdown. It wasn't the kind that overwhelmed your lungs and your throat and your body. It was the soft, slow, steady kind. The marathon, not the sprint. It was as though the emotions inside of her had just been held back as much as they could and they simply could not be held any longer. So they began to trickle.

Turning her eyes from Will, she looked out the window, trying to focus on the lights in the distance, trying to turn her attention to something solid and concrete. But she couldn't. She just couldn't. It was too much.

Because when she looked out into the deep darkness of night with just a smattering of light, all she could see was the ocean.
The deep, dark, black waves of the ocean.

And Harry.

Struggling with a sob, she pulled back from the window, she turned inward and her eyes met Will's and she cracked. "What if..."

"He's..." Will cut her off; his voice quick but unstable, his hand moving over hers—stalling her. He took in a breath and let it fall from his lungs before he continued. "He is an unbelievably well trained soldier. He's been through the strictest of schools, the harshest of trainings..." He spoke as though he were trying to convince her; trying to remind himself. "They've gone over and over emergency procedures; they've drilled them into their brains, their muscles. It's not even a conscious thought anymore. He...he's incredibly smart," his eyes welled up with water and the lump in Maddie's throat grew at the sorrow and fear that rested there. He was so incredibly worried about his little brother. "He plays it off and brushes it away but he is...he's very smart and quick and he has amazing instincts and if anyone has a chance at...at surviving, it's Harry." Will choked up and cleared his throat. "It's him."

By the time they landed at the small airstrip, the wind had picked up and the night had grown painfully cold. As they stepped from the helicopter, they were escorted quickly to a hanger where a private plane waited for them. They needed just a few more minutes before they could take off and in those few minutes, the world around Maddie began to close in again.

Though Will had followed the pilot inside the hanger, seeking warmth and shelter from the foggy night, Maddie had stayed outside. She needed the fresh air piercing her lungs. She needed the cold wind hitting her face. She feared that without it, her thoughts would take her over and she just might crumble. And though they were no longer in public, no longer under the scrutiny of the cameras and the crowds, she knew that it wasn't time to crumble. Not yet.

So she walked the few feet from the hanger to bench that was stationed there; maybe for workers wishing to take a break, maybe for onlookers who came to watch air traffic. She didn't know, nor did she care as she sat down on the ice cold metal of the bench. Her arms wrapped around her middle; hugging herself in efforts to keep warm in the soft fabric of her dress, the thin fabric of her jacket and she looked out across the night sky.

She could see the runway extend far down the lane. She could see the cloud cover breaking open in small patches, allowing the smallest smattering of stars to peek through. She could see the trees and the plants and the grass in the distance bending sharply in the wind. She blinked at the harshness of the breeze, sniffed away the tears that threatened.

It was the hardest night of her life. This night. On this bench. The unknown had always been the worst. Even when her father was sick, it had always been worse when they were waiting for news. Once the bad news came, they could mourn, they could plan, they could grieve. But the waiting, the unknown, it had always managed to twist her stomach into knots, pinching her forehead in a way that brought on headaches.

She had never been incredibly religious. Nor had she ever really given too much thought to an afterlife in which the deceased kept watch over the living; where they could hear the thoughts and words of their loved ones. She had never denied it but she had never given it much credence. But there on that bench that night, her wide, cold, watery eyes turned up to the heavens and she called upon her father. She called upon his mother.
She called upon God.

She wasn’t ready to lose him. She wasn’t ready to make her current sleeping arrangement a permanent one. She wasn’t ready to be a widow; to give up on babies and grandbabies and the promise of growing old with Harry. She wasn’t ready for any of that. And she absolutely wasn’t ready to bury him; to stand next to a casket, to wear all black and mourn for her husband in front of the world.

She wasn’t ready to lose him. She wouldn’t make it; wouldn’t survive.

So she called to those spiritual beings above her and she begged, she pleaded, for whomever was listening, whomever was watching, to have mercy on her heart, on her husband. She called out to them to watch over him and keep him and deliver him home to his family—to her.

She knew she wasn’t alone outside. She knew that Arthur was there behind her; allowing enough distance to give her privacy but staying close enough to whisk her away if needed. There was a piece to it that was unbelievably comforting and a piece that was oddly unsettling; that this man, this man she had only met in the days right after her engagement, would now be privy to these most intimate moments of her life.

When she begged God...and her father...and his mother to bring her husband home to her.

"Madeline," Will’s voice broke into the night as he approached her. Maddie turned back to look up at him. Unable to find her words, she lifted her eyebrows and he nodded to the seat next to her. "May I?"

"Of course," she whispered, turning her eyes back to the distance as he rounded the bench and sat next to her; slow and heavy. "Have you..."

"No," he shook his head. "Nothing yet."

"Oh," she nodded and took a breath; her eyes turning back to him. She could see the hurt in him too. She could see the creases on his forehead, the worry in his eyes. She could nearly see the way his heart clenched in his chest—the way he sat, the way he breathed. She knew he was hurt just like she was. And for some reason that made her shoulders ease just a bit; that this was shared and not hers alone. But before she could open her mouth to saying anything comforting, before she could offer him sympathies or understanding, he opened his mouth and shocked her with his words.

"I'm sorry." It was clear and loud and drew a look of surprise to her face.

"I..." She stammered, unsure where this was coming from, why it was coming now.

"For tonight," he breathed, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees; rubbing his face with his hands.

"But..." It wasn't his fault; none of this was his fault.

"In the suite," he clarified, seeing her confusion. "About the reporter."

"Ahhh..." Maddie nodded as it came back to her. "You know we really don't have to do this right now and..."
"We do," he insisted, his hand reaching over to cover hers. "I should not have been so harsh with you. I shouldn't have yelled and..." His fingers tightened over hers and he turned to face her. "Harry's in Khundu. Kate is home with Arthur and she's recovering from..." His eyes shifted towards the darkness as he fought for control of his emotions. "You're the only one I can help right now Madeline. You're the only one I can protect and..."

"Will," Maddie's voice was soft as she turned to him. "You don't have to..."

"Sometimes I'm a little intense," a small hint of a smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I can be fierce and stubborn in my need to protect my family. And right now my family is spread thin and tonight when that happened, all I could see in my own tunnel vision was how I needed to protect the only part of my family I could." He met her eyes and Maddie softened. "I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you. Please...please accept my apology?"

She was too choked up to respond right away. He had called her family, he was trying to protect her. And though his means had been a little rough, a little off center—he had been trying to keep her close, keep her safe; keep her protected. What was she supposed to say to that? As she sat there on that dark winter night begging for the life of her husband? "Of course," she whispered, covering his hand with her own. He was Harry's brother; her brother. Her family. They could make it through this too. "Of course."

"Thank you," he smiled lightly and the quiet night surrounded them both as they sat next to each other on that bench; hands together and hearts aching. "We should get to the plane," Will told her, pulling his hand from under hers and bringing his together in front of him. "They were nearly ready when I came out here and..."

The ring of his cellphone in his pocket startled both of them. Recovering quickly from the flinch, Will pulled the phone out and answered with a swipe of his finger.

"Hello?"

And then he listened. Maddie had never studied something so closely as she did his face in those few seconds on the bench at the small airstrip in Wales. She had never paid so close attention to somebody's breathing, to the way their eyes blinked. She watched as he took in the news from the other end of the line.

She watched as his eyes closed, as his shoulders slumped; as he leaned forward. And she watched as the call ended, as he stuffed the phone in his pocket, as he took a minute to himself before he turned sadness to her.

"They've found the crash site."

Maddie's lungs paused mid-breath.

"There's a significant amount of wreckage," he swallowed. "But they are certain it's their Apache."

Her heart pounded into her ears.

"No people," he shook his head, his own eyes tearing up. "No bodies. Nothing."

The small cry that pushed from her lips was involuntary, it came from a deep dark place in her heart that she no longer had control over.
"They've managed to secure the area and they are widening the search and sending in..." Will sucked in a breath. "Sending in divers."

"Oh my God..." Her hand moved to her stomach as felt the blow of his words.

Will nodded in agreement; his stomach felt the same, his heart, his lungs. His own personal cry to God. Pulling strength from a place Maddie assumed had been constructed throughout a lifetime of attention and personal losses, Will cleared his throat and rose to his feet, holding a hand out to her.

"Let's get on the plane and get back to London. My father is at my place with Camilla, Kate and Arthur. Hopefully by the time we land, they'll know more."

And because her only real alternative was to crumble into herself and fade on that bench at the airstrip in Wales, she took Will's hand. She let him pull her to her feet and she followed his lead back to the hanger. With Arthur following protectively behind.

The flight to London was quick and easy and warm. And though Maddie was exhausted in more ways than she could count, she didn't dare nod off; not for a second. Not when there were people searching the night, searching the water for him. Him and his crew. So she stayed awake. She kept her eyes open the entire flight and when they finally landed, she took a deep breath and rose to her feet to deplane and it was almost as though her body was acting on its own, through rote memory.

Stand up.

Take a step.

And another.

And another.

It was amazing really; how the body could take over when all other systems seemed to be failing. It was late, she knew that; though she had no idea how late it was because she hadn't been wearing a watch that night. She only had on the brilliant jewelry that still adorned her; the upswept hairdo and the beautiful gown. Her outside such a contrast to her inside. It gave her a tiny bit of amusement as they moved down the steps towards the waiting car; knowing that to an onlooker they seemed to be having a glamorous night in gowns and tuxedos and private planes and cars.

And in reality it was the worst night either of them had faced in quite some time. Will paused at the bottom of the stairs, looking back up at her with the same eyes she turned to him. When she reached him at the bottom of the stairs, her hand released the cold steel of the handrail and moved to squeeze his arm. The soles of her heels scratching against the wet, dark pavement as she took in a deep breath and felt the worry and the doom creep back into her lungs.

And then the door to the waiting car opened and outstepped the well-dressed man Maddie knew as Mr. Nye the Principal Private Secretary to her father-in-law. When she saw him, her feet stalled beneath her; the fear that his presence meant something terrible caused her heart to jump into her lungs. It was the middle of the night and he was impeccably dressed, his hands smoothing over his tie, buttoning his suit coat as he waited for Will and Maddie to approach.
He had been sent to collect them.

With a bow of his head to Will and then to Maddie, he cleared his throat and stepped forward, moving in closer to the two of them, and Maddie wondered if she would ever really be able to breath normally again or if there would always be this lump in her throat. Her fingers tightened around Will's arm as she forced her eyes to watch as he gave them the news he was sent to deliver.

"Your Royal Highnesses," his voice was low as his eyes focused on Will; well collected, well trained. "Your father sent me to take you to him at Kensington." Maddie knew that wasn't it; she could see the tension in his neck. "And he just called and asked that I relay news to you and the Duchess right away."

"What is it?" Will was exhausted too; his voice taking on an edge to it.

And then it happened. Mr. Nye's eyes shifted to Maddie and his face grew soft.

"The rescue and recovery team has located the crew." A gasp of air fell from Maddie's lips. "They were found nearly two kilometers from the crash site on a small atoll." Her eyes hazed over with tears. "Though there was one casualty, the crew is together and intact and ma'am..." Even this well-trained, impeccably professional man couldn't keep the corners of his mouth from turning up just a tiny bit. "Though he has suffered injuries—the extent of which we do not know yet—the Duke...your husband...he's alive."

And her heart—her heart that had been clenched in her chest since Fynn had walked past her with Will's cellphone—her heart cracked open and released her from all of the worry, all of the stress, all of the anxiety.

"Oh my God..." The words rushed from her mouth and her knees gave just a little. Both Mr. Nye and Will reached out to steady her; to hold her upright as the tears fell from her eyes.

He was alive.

He was alive. He was breathing and pumping blood through his veins and still on this Earth with her. In that instant, with those words, her life had been brought back from the edge. Were it not for the hands of Mr. Nye and Will, she would have fallen to her knees right there; thanking God for this moment. Thanking God for him.

"They have loaded the crew onto the helicopter," Mr. Nye continued. "They are taking them back to the base where they will treat what appears to be a great deal of injuries scattered among them. Once he's been examined and treated, we'll know more."

"Is he conscious?" Will asked.

"We don't know," Mr. Nye shook his head. "All I know, all I was sent to tell you was that he has been found, alive, and that they are in the process of taking the crew back to the base." He nodded to the car. "I'm supposed to escort the two of you back to Kensington now. Ma'am..." He looked to Maddie who sucked in her breath and nodded.

"Okay," she nodded again. Gathering her footing, gathering herself, she smudged at her cold tears with the back of her hand and she looked down at the closed fist of the other. Turning it over, she slowly opened up her fingers revealing her palm.
And Harry's cufflinks.

"Of course," she whispered as she saw them there. They had been there in her hand this entire time; pressed so tightly that she had indents in her red skin. She had been holding them with her this entire journey.

"What is it?" Will looked to her.

"Nothing," she shook her head, closing her fingers around them softly. "Nothing." And then, with her closed hand pressed tightly to her chest, she followed Mr. Nye and Will to the awaiting car.

It was time to be with their family and wait; for more news on Harry.

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Though the news of Harry's rescue, of his survival, had certainly alleviated the ache in Maddie's stomach, the furrow of William's brow, there were still many unknowns. The fact that there was at that time at least one fatality in the crew saddened them both in such personal, private ways. And for some reason that Maddie couldn't seem to sort out, she still felt that ominous feeling that it wasn't all over; that it wasn't resolved.

That they weren't done with it all quite yet. She wondered if anything other than his blue eyes and red hair in front of her would be able to bring conclusion to this terrible night.

As they neared the gates of Kensington, she wondered how it all would go now; wondered how it would all play out. Turning to Will, she sought his wisdom. "What happens next?"

"With Harry?" He lifted his eyebrows as he looked to her. Maddie nodded and he took in a deep breath. "I don't know," he shook his head; his hands running down his legs as he thought it over. "Depending on the severity of his injuries, his recovery time...who he is... I don't know Maddie. They might send him back to London."

On a deep, intense, spiritual level, she wanted nothing more than to have him back in London. But there was something inside of her that held up a red flag; that called her attention away from any sort of celebration. Maddie's voice cracked as she spoke. "When they pulled him out of Afghanistan early..." She wavered just a bit. "When they pulled him home, he hated it. He just..." She shook her head and sniffed. They both allowed the tiniest of chuckles to pass between them.

"I remember," Will nodded. "I think he broke a lamp or two."

"I'm sure he did," Maddie smiled and turned her eyes away from him, afraid she would fall apart at her own words. "He loves being a soldier and a pilot and if they bring him home early..." She felt the sob work its way into her voice. "He'll hate it."

"Hey..." Will tried for comforting; still wrapped up in the uncertainty. "One thing at a time, okay?" He reached across and squeezed her hand. "We don't know what kinds of injuries he has. We don't know what kind of treatment he'll need. And besides, this time is different. He has so much more to come home to. So much more."

She nodded her head, unable to look back at him; her eyes trained out of the window as they passed through the gates of Kensington. They were home. Hours of instability, of travel, of the worse kind of wait—and they were home. As the car pulled to a stop outside of Will and Kate's, he released his hold on her hand and she took a deep breath. Their doors pulled open and they
were greeted with a rush of cold air and the bright stars shining over London.

Maddie stepped from the car with a small smile for Mr. Nye who had opened her door. She nodded to Arthur who stood to the side, waiting to put eyes on her, to watch her walk inside before he was released. And then she followed William inside his home. With each step they took closer to the door, closer to their family; to warmth and security—she grew more and more tired, the emotional upheaval of the day had taken a lot out of her. At this point in time she felt like she was grasping at the one thin strand that was holding her upright and awake.

The second they walked through the door, they were surrounded by a rush of family. Kate threw herself into William's arms; hugging him close and tight after having spent the night separated and worried. And Charles, with his deep soothing voice and his natural warmth moved to Maddie. With sad eyes and a soft hand at her cheek, he regarded her as he would a daughter, a tired, hurt, upset daughter. He kissed her cheek and pulled her to him; warm words whispering in her ear as he hugged her close.

Maddie's eyes pressed tight and closed, unable to fight the tears that came with this moment; with all of the collective weight they had shouldered.

"I'm so sorry that you've been going through this tonight," his voice was warm on her hair. And the tears in her eyes increased because that was so exactly like him. He had been hanging in this emotional limbo throughout the night—just as she had. He had been here in London worried about his son just as she had been worried about her husband. She wanted to tell him that, wanted to tell him she was sorry for his stress too, she wanted to tell him that she was sorry for his worry; for his ache. But she couldn't speak. So she hugged him tighter and nodded her head in his shoulder and took a few breaths; trying to calm down.

"Why don't you come in," Camilla's hand was soft on her shoulder. "We've all been waiting in William's office for phone calls and I'm sure we'll be hearing from them again soon."

"Yes," Charles stepped back from Maddie, smiling down at her as she sniffed and wiped at her eyes. "Come on in and relax a little bit. I do believe we're through the worst of it."

"I hope so," Maddie exhaled. Taking a second to pull it together, she nodded. Maddie accepted a hug from Camilla and then turned to Kate who met her eyes with strength and love and sympathy.

"Can I get you anything?" She moved in to hug her. "A drink? Some food? You want to peek in on Arthur while he's sleeping?"

"Ha!" Maddie let out the first real laugh of the night, her hand pressing to her stomach as she smiled. "I don't think I can eat a thing and a drink..." She shook her head. "I think I would pass out. But peeking in on Arthur..." She perked up at the thought.

"Done," Kate smiled and nodded; linking her arm through Maddie's as she turned to the others. "We're just going to open the door and look and then we'll be in."

They were all together in Williams' office when the next call came in. It was very early the next morning and the wear of the day could be seen on all of their faces. William had sent Kate to bed who reluctantly but eventually went. She had a full day with Arthur ahead of her. Charles had gently suggested Camilla do the same but she had stayed right next to him for the duration.
Maddie was sitting on the soft leather couch under the window in his office; wrapped up in a blanket as she looked out the window; her vision blurring out of focus as she stared across the horizon. The room was quiet and the lighting soft and if any of them had been able to tear their minds away from thoughts of Harry, they would have surely fallen into a deep, lasting sleep. But as it was, none of them would rest until they heard more.

It was well past three in the morning on that fifty-sixth day when the phone rang out into the room, startling and calling all of their attention. Will's eyes moved quickly from the phone to his father who was already on his feet and moving to answer it. Maddie sat up straighter, holding her blanket tighter.

"Hello?" Charles' voice was low and cautious and as the news was relayed to him, his shoulders eased and his forehead relaxed and everyone in the room could feel the relief radiating off of him.

He looked first to Camilla, sharing tearful smiles between parents who understood the way it felt to worry about a child and then he turned to Maddie, his hand covering the receiver as he let them all in on what he knew.

"He's in stable condition on the base. He has some scrapes and a few small burns from the crash and he took a hit to the head that will be monitored over the next seventy-two hours but all things considered..." Charles pulled his eyes from Maddie as the caller pulled him back to the phone call. He was quick to thank the person on the other end, asking a few clarifying questions.

But Maddie heard none of it as an intense wave of relief flooded her. Folding over, she hugged her knees and she cried; tears of joy, of release, of thanks that this night—this stressful, horrendous night—had ended with this news and not another.

Her prayers had been answered. Harry had been delivered from the dark black of the ocean, of the night and he was, at that moment, in a bed; alive and well. And just as she began to allow her heart and her mind to tip toe into the possibility that he could be coming home early, that she might be able to see him with her own eyes, to verify this news with her own hands, her own lips...something jarred her from the moment.

The ringing of a phone. Confusion crossed her face as she looked up to Charles who still held the phone in his hand; still in conversation.

"But..." Maddie stammered, pointing at the phone in Charles' hand that couldn't be ringing if he was on it.

And then it hit her.

"It's you," Will pointed to her with wide eyes. "It's your phone that's ringing."

With fumbling fingers and quick breath, Maddie pulled her phone from her pocket, her entire body trembling as she slid her finger across the screen and pressed the phone to her ear and nothing in her life—nothing—would be ever be as sweet as the moment she heard his breath.

As the moment he spoke her name.

"Madeline..." It was a gruff, rocky, whisper but it was him. Oh God, it was him.

"Harry?" She croaked, the tears creeping into her voice as her forehead knotted and her eyes welled over. "Oh my God. Harry?" Charles ended his call and William rose to his feet and
Maddie pressed her hand to her chest, trying to keep her pounding heart inside.

"I'm here," he cleared his throat, a move that made him groan. "I'm still here."

"You're still with me Captain?" She smiled through her tears.

"All ten fingers, all ten toes..." He chuckled very lightly. "I love you so much baby."

"I love you too," she whispered; overcome with emotion. "I..." She trailed off, her feelings getting the best of her. She struggled to pull in a breath. "I'm here with Will and your father and Camilla...in Will's office and..." She laughed at herself, at the way she couldn't quite reign it in. "Oh baby, we've been so worried."

"I know. I'm sorry..."

"No, no," Maddie shook her head, wiping at her tears. "Don't be. I'm so happy to hear your voice, to know you're okay to...I can't wait to see you for myself. I..." A beeping sound rang out from her phone and she pulled it away, glaring at it as she looked. "My phone it's...it's lost its charge. It's..."

And the line went silent as her screen faded to black. The day had even been too much for her phone.

It was abundantly clear that her emotions had taken a toll on her. She knew it the second the loss of the call made her feel like she was losing him; made her tears surge and her heart ache and all she wanted to do was to hold him—to gather him in her arms and wrap him up in her. She desperately wanted to protect him and keep him with her and never ever let him go. She wanted to take care of the gift that God and her father and his mother had delivered to her.

And when the phone in her hands died she felt the waves of the day wash over her again.

She was exhausted; physically, mentally, emotionally.

And when Will's office phone rang out into the room, her eyes flew to the desk. He was quick to answer, quick to push the speaker phone button.

And when Harry's voice rang out into the room, the panic that had hit her ebbed again and she was sure she was losing her mind. This irrational rollercoaster was going to take her down eventually.

"Harry, it's Will," his brother called out, his eyes trained on Maddie; seeing the effects this was having on her. Any ability she had to keep her game face on had been lost hours ago; phone calls ago. "I'm happy to hear you're okay, brother."

"Me too," Harry agreed with a sigh. "Me too. Father?"

"I'm here," Charles called out, his own voice wavering at the sound of his son's. "We're all here."

"Maddie...is she?"

"Yes," Charles nodded, smiling at his daughter who was still crying on the couch. "It's been a long, dark night for her."
"I know," Harry's voice dropped with sadness.

"A long, dark night for you too," Charles spoke to him. "I'm sorry you lost a man in the crash son."

"Thank you," the emotion on the other end of the line was evident. "I don't know what to...thank you."

Charles allowed a beat for it to sit there and then he pressed forward. "They tell me they'll monitor you for seventy-two hours."

"Yes," Harry grumbled a bit. "They are sending a few men back to the hospital tomorrow; their injuries were just too great. But I've spoken to the commanding officer and as long as the next seventy-two hours are fine, I've convinced them to let me stay."

His words echoed through the room, though Maddie's heart and her eyes flashed wide in surprise. Will ran his hands over his face and Charles feet adjusted; shifting weight from one to the other as he took in Harry's words.

"Sorry," he rubbed a hand at the back of his neck. "You've convinced them to let you stay?"

"Yes. They wanted to send me home; of course they wanted to send me home right?" He laughed bitterly at the way they had rushed to pamper the Prince. "But because the crash went as well as it could have, because we managed to get everyone to land, even..." He sucked in his breath. "If the next seventy-two hours goes well, they're going to let me stay and finish out my deployment."

It was like Maddie had been punched in the gut. Her stomach clenched and her heart hurt and her breath pushed from her lungs. Just as if somebody had hit her.

And he had. In the only way he really ever could or would; he had delivered a heavy blow. And she was done.

It had been an inexplicably long day and she had asked of herself more than she ever thought she would have been able to deliver. She had smiled when she wanted to cry. She had walked when she wanted to crumble. And she had pushed on when all she had wanted to do was curl up in a ball and let it all fade away.

And now he was okay. He was alive and breathing and speaking to them. He was still with them and still fighting and while that was the single best news Maddie had ever heard...news she would be forever thankful for...she had nothing left inside of her to give.

No more compromise, no more understanding, no more show.

And while he let them all know about the deals he had made, the convincing he had done to keep himself out there, to keep himself in the Apache, at the trigger, in the war—Maddie wasn't sure she would be able to control her instinctual urge to fight him; to demand that he come home to her and to not take no for an answer.

She wasn't sure she would be able to keep herself from screaming if she opened her mouth to talk.

She had been through too much, she was too tired.
So, as Charles and Will began to ask questions, Maddie unfolded the blanket from around herself and very calmly, very quietly, she rose to her feet and walked out of the room. She had made it as far as the front door when Will caught up with her.

"Maddie!" His voice was a hushed whisper.

She turned to face him, her hand on the doorknob and exhaustion in her eyes. "I can't," she shook her head; her voice cracking as their eyes locked across the foyer. "I'm sorry Will I just I can't. Today has been..."

"I know," he nodded; his body had felt heavier than it had in a long time. Every step he took required more energy, more focus.

"I need to go home," she sniffed and wiped at her eyes. "I need to plug in my phone and take off this dress and...I need to sleep. Before I can pretend to handle...that," she waved her hand towards his office where Charles was still speaking to him. Just looking towards the room made her want to cry more.

"Okay," Will agreed; not having come to find her for a fight. He held his hands up, "I just wanted to make sure you were okay before you..."

"I am," she nodded, a tiny, sleepy smile on her lips. "He's safe. For now he's safe and that's all I've been begging for all day." She felt the lump in her throat bob as she swallowed and took a deep breath. "I just need to..."

"Go," he waved his hand; gentle and sweet with her in a way she had learned he could be. "If you need anything..."

"Thank you," she nodded and then, taking a moment to really look at him, to really reflect on his role in this day, in her life, she let go of the doorknob and took a deep breath. With a deep breath she pulled herself tall; her shoulders square and with a smile she leaned in. Her hand rested softly on his arm and she pressed a kiss to his cheeks; first one and then the other. And then she pulled back and with tired, teary eyes, she met his gaze. "Thank you."

The sincerity in her voice, the emotion in her eyes, silenced him. After all that had passed between them, the bond that had formed that day was strong and evident there in that foyer. Swallowing back the lump in his own throat, Will nodded.

Though he knew he would have to tell Harry that she had left, that he would have to try to explain her sudden departure, her absence, he stood tall and watched without a fight as Maddie turned and left his home. The door closing softly behind her.

The walk home was a short one; a welcomed one. The cold air filled her now wide open lungs, bringing her back from this abyss of crazy she felt she had been swimming in for hours. It brought her clarity and a small amount of peace.

"He's okay," she stopped at her front door and turned to speak to Arthur who had been following behind her since stepped outside. "He called and he's recovering but he's going to be fine."

"That's wonderful news ma'am," Arthur smiled and nodded to her; clearly happy at the news.

"You'll pass that on to his team?" She smiled back; not wanting those that were close to Harry to...
worry any more than they had already. And though the news of this night had not dropped to anyone outside military personnel and the family, she knew that their detail was well aware of this occurrences and she wanted them to be able to relax too.

"Of course," he nodded. "And thank you."

"Mmm..." She took in a deep breath and let it out. "Thank you for everything today Arthur..." She reached for the door handle and pushed. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight Ma'am."

Stepping into her home felt foreign at first; as though she were returning to a different place than she had left. Without flipping on the lights, she moved inside; kicking her heels off to the side. She moved slowly; her body ready to collapse and sleep at any moment. She walked past the long table on the wall, past the archway to the living room and she stopped; looking to the mantle that held up her vases of marbles.

Her hand slid into the pocket of her jacket, running lightly over the marbles she had with her, the ones she had taken for the days she would be away and she stepped inside. And for some reason, dropping these two—57 and 58—was more emotionally charged than all 56 before them. But she let them go, one at a time, and then she turned from the room and moved upstairs.

Once she hit their room, her body began to give. She took off the jewelry, setting it carefully on her dresser for the collectors in the morning. She plugged her phone into the charger next to her bed. She pulled off her dress and her stockings and all of the undergarments that went into pulling off this look. She traded the gown for a t-shirt and the stockings for sweats and then she gathered her clothes from the day and she tossed them to the chair in the corner; knowing somebody would collect them.

All except for the jacket.

With the slick black fabric folded softly in her hands she moved to Harry's dresser. Her fingers tucked into the pocket of her jacket and with the last bit of strength she had left in her, she pulled out the pair of his cufflinks she had carried with her all day.

She moved them about in her fingers; her mind spiraling out as she remembered every step along the way; sitting in the suite missing him, the news that his Apache had gone down, that they hadn't found them with the wreckage, that they had found him ashore, that he was alive.

That he was alive.

Maddie turned her eyes away from the small silver studs and blinked; her breath coming up heavy as her mind began to give into her emotions, as the control she had executed throughout the day gave way—to something darker, something primal.

She remembered with glaring clarity the moment he said he was staying.

Her jaw tightened and she looked back to the cufflinks and then, with a mixed up mash of emotions, she let them fall to the dresser with a small clatter. And then she turned away, crawled into their bed.

With his pillow hugged close and the blankets pulled over her head, she took a deep breath...and she let go.
Day 59

When Maddie finally woke on Day 59, she had slept well into the day. She had crawled into bed after that exhausting day and crashed. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought she had taken medication to help her sleep. But her body had needed this; her mind had needed this.

She pulled herself from bed, pulling on her robe and a pair of Harry's polo socks and without much thought to anything else, she stepped from their room, padded down the hallway and moved down the stairs. In all of the craziness of the day before, she had barely eaten anything and now she was starving. Making her way to the kitchen she started coffee and looked around.

It felt like she hadn't been in her own home in ages; even though it had been days. Bernard had been there they day before and it was impeccably clean, a few of her favorite dishes had been made and stored. She smiled softly as she found some muffins; eating the top off of one as she waited for her coffee to brew. As soon as it was finished she made herself a cup and took a sip.

As she began to wake up, perking up from the warm liquid, the events from the day before settled over her. She took a deep breath and looked out over their large kitchen wondering if it had all really happened? Was that truly her reality?

She took another sip and let her eyes close.

Yes it had. Yes it was.

Before she could sink into it, before she could sort it all out, she heard a loud heavy knock on the door. Her eyes snapped open and she took a deep breath. She debated over who it could be. William? Charles? Arthur or Sampson? Thomas? Libby? It could have been any of them. In truth, the knock was coming much later than she would have guessed.

"Here we go," she murmured to herself, moving towards the sound; her fingers wrapped around the mug. In pajamas, robe, crazy hair and all she tugged at the handle and pulled open the large door.

"Good morning," Kate smiled back at her; looking bright and beautiful as always. "You look lovely." Their eyes met and Maddie could see the friendship and sincerity that had always been offered from her sister-in-law—since long before she and Harry were even engaged. So she stood aside and opened the door wider.

"I've literally been awake for all of ten minutes," Maddie sighed with a small smile. "Want to come in?" Kate nodded and followed Maddie inside; the door shutting behind them. "Can I pour you some coffee?"

"No thank you," Kate shook her head, joining Maddie as she sat down on a stool at the large counter in the kitchen. A beat of comfortable quiet passed between them before Kate let out a breath and turned to her friend; her sister. "I'm really sorry about Harry."

Maddie felt her eyes tear up just a bit, her heart heavy in her chest as she smiled through the ache. "Thank you." She sipped at her coffee. "He's okay though, Will told you?"

"Yes," Kate nodded quickly. "I just meant...the part where he's staying."
"Ah." Her voice went short. "That."

"Yeah," Kate echoed. "That."

Maddie took a moment, a long deep breath as she still battled the internal urge to scream and then she shrugged and turned to Kate. "Well...what can I do about that?"

"I don't know," Kate shook her head; saddened by the look in the blonde's eyes—resolve and surrender. "But if you want me to sit in the bathroom with you for a few hours...I will."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed through the threat of tears, clapping her hands together in front of her. "You're a great friend Kate."

"You too," Kate smiled and reached out to rub her shoulder. "You know he's been trying to get ahold of you." Her voice was soft and timid as she spoke.

"Yeah?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows lazily. She couldn't deny the way her heart tore; desire and anger battling for control.

"He's called Will about seven times..." Kate sighed as she twisted her wedding ring around her finger. "He says he's called you twice that. He said he was going to send your detail in to make you answer the phone."

"Ha..." Maddie chuckled bitterly. "I would love to see that happen. Is that why you're here? To make me answer the phone?"

"Not at all," Kate shook her head fast. "If I were you I wouldn't speak to him either."

"Ugh..." Maddie groaned, leaning over so that her forehead rested on the counter before her. "It's not that I'm...not speaking to him. I just...I was sleeping. I'm exhausted. And he's...in a bed for another day before he goes back out. He's just..."

"An ass?" Kate offered with a small smile. "Sorry. I shouldn't put words in your mouth."

"It's okay," Maddie laughed lightly. "I've had that very same thought. Is that terrible? I spent most of the day worried out of my mind that my husband was..." She trailed off, the lump in her throat preventing her from continuing; her eyes dropping to the cup in her hands. "And I finally find out that he is okay and the very next minute...I'm just...pissed. Is that terrible?"

"No," Kate shook her head, her hand resting on Maddie's arm. "It makes sense. To me, it makes sense."

"But..." Maddie took in a long, deep breath and blew it out, seeking calm and serenity. "But somewhere in London there's a family receiving terrible news, getting the phone call that could have been mine..." It was catching up with her. Despite the coffee and the muffin—the gravity of it all was catching up with her.

"I'm sorry for that too," Kate met her eyes and Maddie could see that meant it. "Will said that Harry's pilot broke his collarbone, that they'll be flying him back to London soon. The two men in the water whose rescue they were providing cover for...one of them died in the attack and one of them is there with him; recovering in a few days and heading back out."
Yeah," Maddie nodded, her mind kicking into gear. "I need to call Thomas and see if he can get me some phone numbers. I should go see Harry's Pilot when he returns to London and..." She swallowed. "I could call the family of the man who died and..." She sighed; shaky and unsure. "I wouldn't want to be an imposition but..." Her eyes welled up as her words fell down.

"Hey..." Kate's voice was so soothing as her hand reached out to cover Maddie's. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "But thank you very much for asking."

Thomas had answered her call immediately; jumping right to her request, happy to help. And by the time Maddie had showered and pulled on some semblance of an outfit, he had arrived at Kensington and was waiting patiently for her in Harry's office. When she stepped into the office—wet hair and barefoot—Thomas stood and offered a bow of his head and Maddie smiled. Even in their home, he was brimming with propriety.

"Your Royal Highness."

"Good afternoon Mr. Smith," Maddie smiled at him, nodding towards the couches where he had been sitting. "What do you have for me?"

"Lance Corporal Jeffrey Peters," he laid a piece of paper down in front of her. Her eyes swung down to look at the picture and back up to Thomas.

"He's the soldier who passed?"

"Yes Ma'am," his face was solemn as he continued. "His body is going to be returned to his family tomorrow morning. I spoke with his brother...Adrian Peters right after you called. He lives just outside of London. The Army did inform him of the details surrounding his brother's death and he said it would be okay for you to stop by tomorrow afternoon. His parents were in Spain on Holiday and will be returning tonight; they will both be there."

"Okay," her voice was soft and small and heavy with the emotional weight of this conversation, with the plans to speak to people who had just lost a brother, a son. Her eyes welled up as she looked back down at the picture. "It was really okay?" She wanted to be sure. "You didn't...pressure them to receive me or..."

"Of course not ma'am," he was quick to reassure her. "Mr. Peters thought his parents might find some sort of solace in the condolences of the Royal Family."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, sniffing at the tears in her eyes. "Would you please arrange it at their convenience?"

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded and made a quick note before pulling out another sheet of paper. "This is Captain Mark Dennon."

"Harry's Pilot?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted as her attention shifted.

"Yes Ma'am," Thomas nodded. "He has a variety of injuries, the most severe of which is a fractured clavicle."
"Ouch." Maddie grimaced at the thought.

"Yes Ma'am. He should be returning to London in about three days. I would be happy to check with his family as well...if you were wanting to schedule a visit."

"I would love that," she was quick to nod. "Thank you."

"Yes Ma'am," he made another note and reached for the sheets he had laid on the table in front of her.

"Can I keep these?" Her fingers rested on the pages; wanting to keep their information with her before she met them.

"Of course," he nodded and brought his hands together in front of him. "Would now be an appropriate time to discuss the upcoming press release?"

"About the accident?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted in surprise. She wasn't sure if the family, if the military would be reporting out any information involving the accident.

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded and cleared his throat. "Because they are bringing home Lance Corporal Peters tomorrow and Captain Dennon in a few days, The Palace wanted to come out in front of any leaks."

"Sure," Maddie swallowed at the lump in her throat, the idea of it being public knowledge making it more real, more upsetting for some reason. "When?"

"Tomorrow morning," he tried to offer her a smile but it was a weak one; too twisted up in the tragedy that had occurred—the loss of life that continued to build, the near loss of Harry. Maddie could see the upset in his eyes as he thought it over. "There will be a press release tomorrow morning and a follow up story in the afternoon. You should be prepared for an onslaught of concern and questions."

"Okay," she let out a breath and let it sit for a minute. "Do you by any chance know what the rest of my week looks like?"

"I do," he smiled across the space between them. "You're clear for the remainder of the week; through the weekend—with the exception of these two visits of course."

"Of course," Maddie nodded, her eyes flashing up to him. "I don't want these to be...official or public or...anything like that. Just a personal visit."

"Absolutely," he nodded, in complete agreement with her; no cameras, no press. He wanted to respect the privacy of the soldiers just as much as she did.

"Okay," Maddie sighed and looked up to him. "Is there anything else that you need or..."

"No," he shook his head. "And I should be asking you that question. Is there anything you need from any of us?"

"No," she smiled softly. "Thank you very much Mr. Smith. You should know that Libby was amazing; the entire time. She went above and beyond her duties...though I'm sure she would disagree."
"I am sure she would too," he nodded and rose to his feet. "I will contact you later today about these meeting times?"

"That would be great thank you."

"And if there's anything else that you need..." He paused and softened; his gaze, his voice, his stance. "Ma'am, if there is anything else that you need, please don't hesitate to call. At any time."

"Thank you," she was touched by his words, even more so by the soft, fatherly smile he offered. "I appreciate that very much Mr. Smith."

"Are there any phone calls you would like for me to make? Anyone you would like me to notify...before the release in the morning?"

And then it hit her. She had to tell people. She had to bring people into this story she had been living out for the last twenty-four hours; her mother, Bishop.

"No," she shook her head slowly, swallowing back tears. "I'll make the phone calls. Thank you though...for offering."

"Of course," he nodded and then, with a courteous nod and a warm smile, he slipped from the office; leaving Maddie alone in the house.

She sat there for a long time on that couch; staring at his desk with a blank look in her eyes. There were things to be done; she knew that. She needed to call her mother before the news dropped about Harry's accident. She needed her to know that he was okay before a wave of worry ripped through her family. And she needed to call Bishop. He would be a mess if he heard about this from anyone else but her. She needed to get up from the couch and do things.

But she was finding it ridiculously difficult to do anything. But sit. And stare. And fume.

She wished that it was Harry who had to make the calls. She wished that he would have to be the one to shoulder the responsibility for the way her mother's voice was going to crack when she told her. She wished that he would have to be the one to see the look on Bishop's face when she explained it all. She wished that it was Harry who would have to tell them that yes...the unthinkable had happened and that yes...he had survived and that Yes. He would be staying, going out again, flying into fire again. She wished it could be him to bring this news into their lives.

But it wouldn't be him. It would be her. With a deep breath and a heavy heart, Maddie rose to her feet. Moving over to his desk, she let her hands run along the soft, dark top and she sank into his chair.

It was time to call her mother.

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The phone call with her mother had gone better than she expected. Hannah was infinitely more understanding than Maddie felt and she was quick to offer sympathies to her daughter. She offered to fly out but settled for telling the family as Maddie had asked. Though she was drained when the phone call ended, she still had one more person to tell and she had to do that in person. With a quick call to Ella, she pulled forth her most casual voice and she invited them both over to the house.
After they agreed, she ended the call and plugged her phone back into the charger and she looked around their room with a yawn. She was tired; still. It had been such a long few days and everything about her was exhausted.

But she couldn't pass out quite yet.

So instead she did something she had never in her life sought out to do on her own free will; she went for a run.

She tied her hair up and back, she changed into her running gear and she strapped on her ipod, put the buds in her ears and she stepped out her door; nodding to Williams as he followed behind her. Though he kept up with her pace, he gave her some room, and together they ran out of the gates and across to the park.

She ran for a long time; she had no idea how far though she guessed that ever since she ran all the way to Bishop and Ella's a few weeks back, her detail was a little leery anytime she jogged past those gates. But Williams kept up; seemed to be just fine as they ran back home.

It was then that she realized just how long she had been gone; Bishop and Ella were waiting for her just outside the door. As she ran up the short walk, she pulled the ear buds from her ears and came to a stop.

"I'm so sorry..." She panted, her hands resting on her hips as she looked from Bishop to Ella. "I had no idea what time it was and..."

"We just got here," Bishop waved his hand dismissively. "It's quite alright. Are you okay?" He looked her over.

"Yes," she nodded, sucking in a breath and turning a smile to Ella. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry to leave you standing."

"It's fine," Ella shook her head, watching as Maddie moved past them to open the door. "I'm fine standing just...Jesus Maddie..." She snickered as they followed her in the house. "Were you running again?"

"Yes," she held onto the table next to the door as she pulled off her running shoes and reached for her water bottle sitting there. "I was running..."

"And listening to..." Bishop pointed to the steady beat coming from her ear buds; eyebrows raised in question.

"A little Tupac," Maddie smiled as she shut the door behind them, taking a long drink. "Come on in..." She waved them towards the living room; turning off her ipod and dropping it and the earbuds on the table as she moved through the door way.

"Tupac?" Bishop's lips twisted into a smirk; his hand on Ella's back as they followed along.

"Don't worry, I have some Biggie on there to even out the rap wars," Maddie shrugged, laughing at her own little joke. "I'm sorry I look like this..." She waved her hand over her outfit. "I had every intention of being home and showered before you arrived. I just...lost track of the time.

"While you were running?" Bishop shared a look of amusement with his wife as they settled onto
"Yes," Maddie rolled her eyes and moved over to the bar; abandoning her bottle of water and reaching for the scotch. "Bishop? Can I pour you a drink?"

"No thank you," he watched, his eyes growing wide as he watched her pour herself a glass and take a sip.

"Okay, what the hell is going on?" He leaned forward on the couch, his hand resting easily on Ella's knee.

"Sorry?" Maddie sank into her favorite chair.

"You invited us over and you lost track of time running. And now you're drinking scotch?!" He laughed and shook his head. "What exactly is going on at the Sussex household tonight?"

In her chest Maddie felt the flinch that came with Bishop's question, the turn of her stomach as she thought of why she had invited them over. With a deep breath in, she leaned forward and sat her drink on the table between them; her eyes shifting to avoid both of them.

And they knew in that moment that something was really wrong.

"Maddie?" Ella watched her friend closely, her hand stretching out over her stomach.

"Yeah..." Maddie sighed and brought her hands together in front of her, pulling together her courage before her eyes lifted to meet Bishop's now sober gaze. "I need to tell you something." He blinked but stayed silent. "A story is going to run tomorrow in the papers and it's going to be huge and I just wanted you both to hear it from me and not them."

"What is it?" He leaned in more, his hand squeezing Ella's knee.

"What I need you to know, what I need you to hear first is..." She sucked in a breath and tried in vain to keep the tears at bay. Bishop saw it and prepared himself for a blow. "What you need to know is that he's okay." Nobody in the room needed clarification as to who 'he' was.

"Oh my God," Ella whispered, her fingers flying to her lips.

"What happened?" Bishop's entire face washed with concern.

"Bishop," Maddie moved in, her hands reaching out to his arm, forcing her eyes to hold his. "He's okay."

"Fine," Bishop shook his head, not satisfied with just that. "What happened?"

"He was providing cover for a rescue helicopter going in after two soldiers who had gone down over the water," Maddie's voice was calm and quick; wanting to give him the details as fast as she could. "They took on enemy fire and something malfunctioned on board. They went down in the water."

"Oh my God." Bishop's hand moved to his mouth.

"He and his pilot and the two men in the water managed to swim to some land not far from the crash site."
"Maddie..." Bishop groaned into his own palm.

"He's okay," she blinked back the tears in her eyes. "He has some cuts and scrapes and a few small burns..."

"Jesus Christ." He shook his head.

"And he took a hit to the head that they were monitoring for a concussion but...he's okay."

"I..." Bishop's eyes were wide and swimming with concern and upset. He bit nervously at his lip and pulled his hands together in front of him.

"His pilot is coming home in a few days with a fractured clavicle," she wanted him to have as much information as she did; as the world would in the next twenty-four hours. "One of the soldiers in the water died and..." She choked on her own emotion as his picture flashed into her mind. "And the other is still there with Harry."

"You're sure he's..."

"Yes," Maddie nodded, her lips pulling into a small smile as she looked from Bishop to Ella and back again. "I heard his voice yesterday or...last night. He called us at Will's. He's...he's okay Bishop. I promise. He's okay."

Bishop nodded then, a slow pained movement that took him time, just like it was taking his brain time to let it all register. Reaching for Ella's hand, he pulled her fingers into his and he sucked in a breath. "When is he..." He cleared his throat. "When is he coming home? With his pilot in a few days or..."

"No," Maddie shook her head, sitting back into her chair as she seemed to disconnect from the moment, from her feelings; from everything. She reached for her glass and in a move that surprised everyone in the room, she drained its contents; sitting it back onto the table with a clang. "He's not."

"Sorry?" Bishop's eyes squinted; confused.

Maddie met his eyes with great sadness and surrender and she shrugged. "They were going to send him home and he convinced them...to let him stay." She watched the surprise flash over the two of them. "He'll be finishing out his deployment as originally scheduled."

And then she watched as Bishop sat back; as her words sank into him. And she watched as the sadness took him over.

And she felt terrible.

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He had called her twenty-three times that day; twenty-three times since she had walked out of William's office and returned to their home, to their bed. He had been trying to reach her all day and she had been avoiding him; avoiding the call. She knew it was childish, knew it wasn't the right thing to do, but she had done it anyway.

But that night, long after Ella and Bishop had finally left, when she was getting ready to head up
the stairs to bed, the phone in her hand rang out and as she sank down to sit on the stairs, she
looked at the numbers on the screen and she decided it was time to face it; to face him.

It took everything she had inside of her to answer his call. She had hated the way his unilateral
decision had made her feel...insignificant. She had hated the way it made her feel unnecessary and
unneeded. But she knew that if she didn't speak to him, she would regret it. She could hear the
voice in the back of her head reminding her what it was like to spend hours willing to trade
anything just to hear his voice again.

So she answered; with a sharp intake of air and a swipe of her finger, she answered.

"Hi." It was small and quiet and barely there; but it was something.

"Maddie..." He let out breath of relief; a breath that seemed to trip over a lump in his throat. "Oh
Thank God..." He whispered in slight disbelief as Maddie fought back the inevitable tears. But it
was a battle that was lost and she began to cry. And though she couldn't see his face, though she
would never really know, Harry was overcome with emotion as well. "I thought you would never
answer."

"I'm sorry..." She wiped at her eyes. "I know I should have answered sooner. I just..." She shook
her head as her eyes welled over.

"You're mad at me," he answered for her; resolve and sadness in his voice. "I know you are."

"I..." Her voice cracked and she took in a deep breath; calming herself as she sniffed. "I'm trying
really hard not to be." She admitted honestly.

"You know that too," he agreed. A moment of silence passed between them while Maddie tried to
curb her tears, while Harry tried to prevent his. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and soft
but full of conviction. "Can I try to explain it to you? Why I'm staying."

"You can try..." She waved her hand with a small, bitter laugh.

"The other soldier, Lance Corporal Benning. He was in the water with the man who died..."

"Jeffrey Peters," Maddie could see his face when she closed her eyes.

"Yes," Harry swallowed the lump in his throat. "His injuries are worse than mine Maddie and
they are keeping him here. He lost his friend, a brother and they are keeping him here. I can't in
good faith leave and come home when he has to stay here..."

Maddie nodded in the dark, her vision blurring with tears. She had known he would have reasons
—good ones in fact. But it didn't stop the way her heart ached, the way her stomach turned. It
didn't stop the way her mind spiraled or the way all she wanted to do was scream. It took her a
moment to pull it together, to find her voice, and when she did, she wavered as she spoke. "After
the bookstore...after the shooting...after Ella and I came out of the pile of rubble in Bendal..." She
took in a breath. "The first thing I did, the next thing I did was get home to you. I left Collins
and...Khenda in Bendal in the devastation and I came to London and I..." She wiped at her eyes.
"And I put myself in your arms, Harry. I put myself in your arms."

"I'm sorry," he whispered. And he was. He was sorry that he couldn't be there to ease her fears,
sorry that it would be months before he could; sorry he was putting her in this impossible situation.
"I know you probably hate me right now and..."
"I love you," she cut him off. "I don't hate you, I love you. It's just...God, Harry...you're standing way too close to danger for me right now. Way too close."

"I know," he hung his own head as it washed back over him, twisting his stomach and his heart. "I'm sorry." He whispered again.

A full minute clicked by between them; both doing what they could on their ends of the line to pull themselves together, to bring it all back to center. Harry taking deep breaths as he searched his mind for some way he could make this better, some way he could ease her concerns. Maddie sniffing and wiping at her eyes while she commanded her heart to stop clenching, while she ordered the tears to stop. There was nothing she could do to bring him home—she knew that. All she had was her love for him, her desire to be near him, to have him safe.

And that wasn't enough. It hadn't been when he had received his orders and it wasn't now—even after the accident.

So she tried to suck it all back in, tried to find a place in her mind and in her heart where she could be okay with that—where she could accept that. But it was a struggle. Twenty-four hours after she had been swallowed up in the images of him shot down over the ocean, it was a struggle to try to move past that.

But she took a deep breath and she pressed her eyes closed and she tried; for him, for them.

"I'm going to see Jeffrey Peters' family tomorrow," her voice wavered as she let him in on her plans; hoping the conversation could move away from her heart break. "They are bringing him home in the morning and I'm going to his brother's house tomorrow afternoon."

"You are?" He pressed his hand to his pounding heart. This was news to him; news that hit home.

"I'm going to meet his brother and his parents and..." She let out a breath. "I don't know why. I don't know that it's going to..." She shook her head. "I just felt like I should and they told Thomas it would be fine. So I'm going to go."

Harry had to take a moment, a breath before he could speak. "Madeline...that's an amazing thing to do. Truly. I don't know what to say. I'm so...touched that you would think to do that."

"Yeah, well..." She shrugged. "They got the phone call I managed to avoid this time."

"Yeah..." Harry nodded, feeling her words as though she had slapped him with them. "It's a wonderful thing to do."

"I just don't know what to...I don't know what to say. You know?"

Harry cleared his throat and nodded. "You tell them you spoke to me. You tell them that I told you how brave he was; how strong and fearless he was. You tell them that I told you he was a great man and a hell of a soldier and that they should be very proud of him...and then you tell them that you're sorry for their loss and that he, and they, have the respect of a thankful nation..."

"Harry..." She whispered, needing him to stop. She appreciated his words, appreciated the suggestions but it all seemed to be hitting too close to home for her. Those were the very things they would have told her had this gone the other way.
She was struggling.

"I know," he stopped; his own heart thudding in his chest. "I know."

He was struggling too.

It had been half an hour since Harry’s call had ended; half an hour she had been sitting on that bottom step in her dark home, her mind turning over and over and over the events of the last few days. She wanted to move; she was tired and her ass hurt and it was getting late. But she couldn't find it inside of herself to move from that step, from that spot where she just continued to sink.

It wasn't lost on her that this was where she had left him on Day One. His lips in half a smirk, his eyes dancing as he told her he would see her after the event; he'd be there, they would go for a run. It wasn't lost on her that this was the last place she had seen him smile, had heard his voice. Her phone sat next to her on the step and her eyes were trained forward as she played it all over in her head; the day he left, the first time he called, every day without him, the terror she had been hit with when she thought she had lost him, the excitement she had felt when she thought he was coming home and the deep dark disappointment when she had learned that he wasn't.

Even now, having just spoken to him; the confusion of emotions was making her crazy. She needed to get up.

Her ass hurt.

Her brain hurt.

Her heart...she wondered exactly when her heart would stop hurting. She wanted to take the good from the night, she wanted to be able to stand up and go to bed and relish in the fact that Harry was alive. She wanted to be able to focus on that and not all of the other. But she had always been the kind to let her mind spiral. That had always been a fault.

The knock at the door had come at a complete surprise; startling her from her descent. She looked quickly towards the sound, her brow knotted in confusion. It was late and she wasn't expecting anyone. But this was Kensington Palace—people couldn't just 'show up.'

The knock came again and she rose to her feet. Maybe it was Kate again. Or William. Or maybe Bishop had come back to check on her. She wasn’t sure. But as she moved to the door and pulled it open, when her eyes swung up to look—she wasn't expecting the face that was there to greet her.

"Kyle?" Her eyes instantly welled up, her voice going hoarse. She shook her head as her tired mind tried to process it. "What are you..."

"I promised," he cleared his throat and offered a smile. "I promised him that if anything happened, I would be on the next flight to London."

"But..." She wiped at her eyes, still reeling in disbelief. "But I just called my mother tonight. How did you..."

"William," he shrugged lightly. "William called me this morning and told me and..." He chuckled softly. "I thought there was a chance you might need me. So I'm here. Now...are you going to let
me inside or am I going to have to sleep in that immaculate garden and..."

Maddie launched herself into his arms. All of the jokes that had passed between them, the banter and the competition, all of those things faded for a moment. All that was left as he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight was their deep familial bond and a love that had lasted a lifetime.

And there in her cousin's arms, on her doorstep in London, late on that cold, foggy night, Maddie let out her tears and her sobs and all of the emotions she had been holding back while she had tried to hold it together.

She was done holding it together and that was fine. Because that was exactly why Kyle had come—to hold her together. At least for a while.
"Two weeks?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted excitedly. "You're here for two weeks?"

"Longer if you need me," he shrugged as she stepped back out of his embrace. "But we'll start there."

"Wow..." She breathed, shaking her head as her mind processed it all. "I don't know what to say...thank you."

"You're welcome," he rubbed her shoulder. "Now...I've been on a plane for quite some time. You want to let me in? Tell me why it is Will called me?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded as she swung open the door, breathing through the emotions that perked up. "Come on in."


It didn't take too long to fill Kyle in on what had happened over the last few days, Maddie had the story down to a sad, detailed paragraph at this point. But they sat in the kitchen over hot tea and cookies while she walked him through it; the call at the hotel, the quick and hurried travel back to London, the updates along the way, the final call when he simultaneously made her night and brought her back down. She was honest with her cousin about her feelings; about the elation and relief mixed with the anger and abandonment. And Kyle, for all of the teasing and poking he had given her over the years, he listened with a sympathetic ear and understanding.

"So..." Maddie exhaled, pulling her eyes from his down to the mug of tea in her hand. "There it is. I'm...ha...do you think I'm crazy?" She looked back up at him; nervous.

"For being mad?" He lifted his eyebrows and she nodded. "See...this is where it would have made more sense for Harry to have asked Derek to come out."

"What?" Maddie's nose scrunched up. "Why do you say that?"

"Because..." He exhaled slowly. "Derek's the military man. He gets it." He shrugged and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not and I don't. I mean...the whole notion behind it all boggles my mind. Falling in line? Taking orders without question? Sacrificing everything? Everything?" He shook his head. "I don't understand it. I'm too stubborn for it, too weak for it..." He turned his eyes back to Maddie's. "Do I think you're crazy for being mad? That he didn't come home after he was shot out of the sky? No. I don't think you're crazy. I'd be just as pissed."

"Thank you!" Maddie waved her hand to him as though she were justifying her feelings to some third party. And then in the next breath, in the next beat, her lips turned down. "Then why do I feel so shitty?"

Kyle took in a long, deep breath and pushed it out with a roll of his eyes. "Because...he's doing the right thing. He's...Jesus. He's staying because he can't leave his brothers behind without him. And they are his brothers. He's staying because he has this overdeveloped sense of duty and loyalty and...Maddie...you love those things about him. Family, duty, loyalty, stubbornness. You love that about him. Even when it annoys you."
"I know," she whispered, feeling the tears rise to her eyes as she mulled over Kyle's words. "But...if I hate it and I love it and...what do I do now?" She turned teary eyes to her cousin and his heart ached in his chest just a bit.

"Maybe that's why Harry chose me..." He smiled softly.

"Why is that?" Maddie sniffed.

"Because I'm not going to let you sit in this house and let the confusion and upset spiral you out of your mind," his smile tipped higher. "He told me that I was the only one who had the balls to say this to you..."

"Say what?"

"I'll give you one night," he held up a finger. "One night to be upset and sad and depressed. One night to hate him; to cry and mope and pout and scream if you want to."

"And then what?" She arched an eyebrow, her own inner stubbornness inching to the surface at Kyle's words.

"Then you're going to get your head out of your ass and we're going to get out of this house and you're going to get back to work."

"Work?" She scoffed. "What do you mean back to work?"

"You know..." He waved his hand with a sigh. "Whatever the hell it is Duchesses do."

**Day 60**

Maddie couldn't help but think that the rain that pattered against the roof of the car was eerily appropriate; that it fit the tone and mood of what she was about to do. The clouds had taken over London and the rain had been coming down since she had woken that morning. Dressed in somber black, with only her Protection detail along with her, she was going to visit the family of the late Lance Corporal Jeffrey Peters.

It was a quick drive across town to his brother's home where his brother and his parents were waiting; having agreed to receive the Duchess for a short visit. Kyle had offered to come along, seeing the sadness in Maddie's eyes. But Maddie had declined. She knew that her presence was going to be enough for them to handle, what with the security that came along with her. She didn't think an explanation about her American cousin would do anyone any good. So she had set out alone, with Sampson as her shadow.

The rain gave in just a little, turning into not much of a mist when the car pulled to a stop outside of Adrian Peters' home. As Maddie stepped from the car, the driver was waiting with an umbrella. They were quick up the walk and before she had even finished knocking, a somber-faced man opened the door.

"Adrian Peters?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows.

He nodded his head and stood to the side. "Your Royal Highness." With a small bow he held out his hand welcoming Maddie into his home.

"Thank you very much for allowing me to come and visit," her voice was quiet and full of the
weight she had carried with her since it had all happened.

"Of course," he nodded and gestured towards a living room off to the side. "My parents are right this way."

Maddie's smile was small as she and Sampson followed close behind Adrian down the short hallway to the living room. The older couple sitting on the couch rose to their feet when she stepped into the room and when they both stepped forward to meet her, bowing and curtseying as they were introduced, Maddie couldn't miss the sorrow in their faces, the permanent tears that had taken residence in their eyes. Before she was overcome with her emotions, before she let her own sadness take control, Maddie took a deep breath and held onto his mother's hand as she took a seat in the chair next to her.

"I want you to know..." Maddie cleared her throat and met Lance Corporal Jeffrey Peters' mother's eyes. "I've spoken with my husband since the accident and...and I want you to know that he told me what an amazing man your son was; what a first class solider he was. And..." She blinked at the tears in her eyes and tightened her hold on the older woman's fingers. "And how incredibly brave and strong he was throughout the entire night...right up until the end."

**Day 61**

"Jesus..." Kyle shook his head in disbelief, his eyes wide as he watched the TV, as he glanced down at the magazines and newspapers in front of him. The news of Harry's accident, his heroics, his decision to stay out his deployment had dropped the night before and when they woke up that morning, the world seemed to have been wallpapered with it.

"What?" Maddie glanced up from her muffin, looking to the TV where a reporter told the story of Harry's military history while pictures of him filled the screen.

"It's just..." He waved his hand around him at all the items Thomas had dropped off, at all of the print work Maddie had wanted to see, wanted to show him. "It's everywhere."

"Yes," Maddie nodded and smiled up at him. "There's not much that Harry can do that isn't...everywhere..." She waved her hand around them.

"I just..." He chuckled and turned off the TV, turning his attention back to her. "I know that the media is interested. I mean, I see the photos in magazines at home and on the internet and occasionally on the news. But...this is just...wow."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded again. "It gets a little crazy sometimes. But..." She took a sip of her tea. "It's different back home. We don't really have an institution quite like the royal family, you know? These people in this country, in the commonwealth, they watched Harry's parents meet and marry. They watched the day Diana brought Harry home from the hospital, they watched him grow up. They watched him make mistakes and they watched him have great successes and they very much feel like he is a part of their family. And as much as they gossip about him and lay out his dirty laundry..." She sighed and relaxed back into her chair. "They love him. It's hard to understand because we don't really have something like it...but they do. They claim him and they love him."

Kyle nodded, understanding her words even though the idea that the press followed him around through every step was bizarre to him. "And you?" His eyes squinted as he looked to her. "How do they feel about you?"
Maddie laughed; a mixture of amusement and bitterness. "The pendulum tends to swing wide on that one." She let out a breath. "My guess is that with this news, I'm going to be more favored than I was three days ago. But it can change in a snap of your fingers Kyle. A snap of your fingers."

"And here I thought it was a fairy tale over here," he chuckled as he sat next to her.

"Ha!" Maddie's head tossed back. "I see you've bought into the illusion."

"Aw come on," he nudged her lightly. "There's nothing about it that's a fairy tale?"

"You mean besides the small woodland creatures that help me get dressed in the morning?" Maddie countered with raised eyebrows.

"Yes," Kyle laughed louder. "Besides that."

Maddie took a big, heavy breath and looked around her home. "I mean...I live in Kensington Palace Kyle. Diana...." Her voice grew low. "If you step back for a minute and forget that it's Harry, that you know him...Diana, The Princess of Wales lived here. In these walls. I...I go to events with The Queen. I'm in parades and I wear jewelry that has been around for longer than the United States has been a country..." She shrugged. "Sometimes it has fairy tale qualities to it."

"And..." He waited.

"And if you remember the fairy tales correctly..." She sighed. "You would remember that sometimes they are very dark, very tragic and not at all 'happily ever after'..."

"Wow..." Kyle blinked at the darkness in her words. "That was pretty heavy."

"I know," she nodded, her lips pulling into a smile. "What can I say? I've had a rough week. I'm a little twisted."

"Yeah well, let me know when you're untwisted," he nudged her again with a grin.

"Don't get your hopes up."

Day 63

As much as Maddie had tried to avoid any media coverage of her visit to Captain Mark Dennon, it was nearly impossible. The paparazzi were following her every move. The pendulum had swung in her favor and they were out in droves. People wanted to see photos of her—that wasn't entirely true. People wanted photos of Harry; they wanted to see that he was alive and breathing and ok. But since they couldn't have those, they would settle for photos of her. As a result, there were photos snapped as she entered the hospital and there were photos snapped on her way out but none of them caught the conversations that happened inside.

Maddie knew instantly that this man must be one of Harry's favorites. He was bright and chipper and full of energy, even with a broken clavicle, several sutures and a few burns. He was tall and slim and had a smile that reached his eyes.

"Captain Dennon?" Maddie knocked lightly as she pushed open the door.

"Your Royal Highness," he grinned and waved her in. "I'd stand and bow but..."
"No, no," Maddie shook her head, holding up her hand as she stepped further inside. "Can I come in?"

"Please," he smiled from Maddie to Arthur and relaxed in his bed, his eyes watching her as she moved easily into the room, Arthur shutting the door behind them.

"Thank you so much for allowing me to stop by," Maddie made her way around to the other side of his bed.

"It was incredibly thoughtful of you to ask," he watched her as she moved.

"Do you mind?" She nodded to the chair next to him.

"Of course not," his smile tugged higher as she took a seat.

"Tell me, how are you doing?" Maddie looked him over.

"Well, I've had better days Ma'am," he laughed lightly.

"I would imagine," Maddie laughed along with him.

"I've had worse days too," he countered almost reflexively, as though to himself.

"I would imagine that too," Maddie sobered up slightly; both of their minds drifting to that night.

"You know," he cleared his throat. "I heard that you went to visit Peters' family."

"I did," her voice was soft as she nodded.

"That was a very nice thing for you to do," he tried to meet her eyes. "I know it must have been hard. But it was good of you."

"Well..." She took a deep breath. "It was the very least I could do."

"That's not entirely true," he smiled slightly. "But okay." He watched her for a moment and took a chance. "Ma'am, if I may..."

"Sure," Maddie smiled.

"I've known your husband for a while now," his words drew her entire focus back. "And excuse my choice of words but he is a hell of a pilot. He's a good man, a great friend, and a hell of a pilot."

"Well now, exactly how much is he paying you to say that?" She tried for a joke but couldn't control the way her eyes teared up.

Though he chuckled along with her, his eyes held hers and his voice softened. "Ma'am...the night we went down...I couldn't swim. I had a broken clavicle and I couldn't move my arm. He...he held onto me. He held onto me and he swam us both to land. Walters, the soldier who was still alive in the water was a mess. He had lost Peters in the gunfire and he was a mess. Captain Wales he...your husband...he talked to Walters, helped him calm down, helped him get Peters together and then he...he swam me to land." Maddie didn't even notice when the tears fell from her eyes. "He's a hero. He...he would hate the story that's out there right now, hate even more that I'm
backing it up but you should know. I know he's decided to stay and I'm sure that can't make you very happy but...he's a hero. You should know that."

"I..." Maddie sniffed, she wiped at her eyes; she tried to get it back together. But it was nearly impossible. She had spoken to Harry just that morning, just before he was going back out to active duty and hearing this...it made her heart ache. "I'm sorry," she turned her wet eyes up to him, waving her hand at her face. "I just..." She reached for a tissue from the box he held out.

"It's okay," he was being so kind, so sweet with her.

"It's not," she shook her head as she dabbed at her eyes; laughing at herself. "This isn't why I came to see you...so that you would have to comfort me."

"Ha!" His laughter was warm and loud in the room.

"Don't laugh! I actually came here to be of service to you, not the other way around!"

"Well maybe you could allow me one favor?"

"Of course," Maddie nodded as she grew closer to calm; his shift in conversation finding her intrigued. "What is it?"

"Well, I have this male nurse..."

"Oh-kay," Maddie's interest peaked, her lips curling up in a smile.

"And when I told him you were coming, he nearly lost it," he smirked as he remembered. "It turns out he has a bit of a crush on you."

"Well there's no accounting for taste," Maddie laughed.

"I was wondering how you would feel about meeting him," he smiled, happy to see he had been successful in pulling her away from the tears.

"Of course," she nodded emphatically. "Let's do this."

As she straightened her skirt and wiped one last time at her eyes, she took a deep breath and Mark Dennon pressed the call button; ready to enjoy the surprise on his nurse's face.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

When Maddie finally returned to Kensington, she had a smile on her face. A warm, genuine, guilt free smile. Going to see Captain Dennon had been good for her in so many ways. She giggled to herself as she remembered meeting the nurse and sighed when she remembered the throngs of people who had gathered outside to try to snap her photo. When her car came to a stop outside her home, she glanced out the window and was surprised at what she found.

There, sitting on her front steps, was the future King of England.

Thanking the driver and her detail, she stepped from the car and made her way up to him, her head tilting to the side as she looked down at him.

"Good afternoon William."
"Good Afternoon Madeline."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes," he was quick with the reassurances. "Everything is fine."

"Then..." Her eyes narrowed. "What can I do for you?"

"My wife told me I should wait a few days..." He looked off in the distance for a moment. "She told me to give you more time but as we are both well aware, I have the same stubborn-minded streak as my brother."

Maddie offered a small smile as she moved to sit next to him on the front step. "You know you could have gone inside." She nodded her head back towards the door.

"It's not my home," he smiled back. "And this seems to fit the moment a little more, don't you think?"

"What moment is that?" She folded her hands in her lap.

"I came to apologize."

"Oh Will, you know that you don't have to..."

"I do," he cut her off. "I really, truly do. I should never have spoken to you like that. We both know that's true. Regardless of how much I think of you as a solid member of the family, you haven't been around very long and I shouldn't expect you to understand all of my nuances and craziness. You're barely beginning to understand Harry's." They both chuckled at that.

"You're protective," she took a breath. "You're head-strong and loyal and maybe just a tad quick to the defense..." She held her fingers apart an inch as she smiled at him. "It was a rough night for me Will. It's been..." She swallowed at the unexpected lump in her throat. "It's been difficult to not have him here." She looked down at her hands. "I may have become a little bit thin-skinned while he's been away but...I'm hoping that will come back together just as quickly as it fell apart."

"It will," he nodded with absolute confidence. "You're a very strong woman, Madeline. I bared witness to it that night."

"Thank you," she smiled and they shared a comfortable moment of silence before he spoke again.

"Madeline, would you please accept my apology?" He raised his eyebrows with wide, innocent eyes, his hands held out in surrender.

"Of course I will," she nodded and then as an afterthought, she added, "on one condition."

"What's that?" His hands were poised on his knees as though he were ready to stand. But he held tight.

"You have to give me your first born child."

"Sorry?" He laughed.
"For a night," she grinned, her hands clasping together in front of her. "Please. I need somebody to cuddle with and he's the only one that won't cause a giant uproar."

"Ha!" Will laughed loudly as he nodded his head; she was absolutely right about that. "I suppose that can be arranged."

"Perfect!" Maddie clapped her hands together. "My cousin leaves in about a week. Maybe I can take him for a night after that and you can have a date with your wife."

"That would be lovely," Will smiled and rose to his feet, offering his hand to help her up.

Maddie shook her head and leaned back. "I think I'll sit for a minute."

"Suit yourself," he nodded. "I'm going to head home. Are we okay?" He pointed to her and back to himself.

"Of course we are. Of course we are." She meant it; no conditions, no issues. They were fine. They were family.

"Good." He held his hand over his heart and held her eyes for a moment before he turned to head back to his little family.

"Will?"

"Yes?" He spun back around.

"Thank you. For calling Kyle. I know Harry told you to do it if you thought I might need somebody...and I did." She swallowed and smiled wider. "Thank you for knowing that."

"You're welcome," he smiled down at her with a slow shrug. "We take care of family, you know?"

"I do."

Day 67

"Okay...enough..." Kyle sighed dramatically as he returned from the kitchen. "This is getting...crazy."

"This?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, amused by what seemed to be an impending breakdown. "Are you talking about the pizza or the way I'm whooping your ass at Scrabble. Again."

"I'm talking about the fact that we're playing Scrabble." His smile flattened. "Again."

"So you're done with the board games?" She chuckled as she sat up on the couch, watching him move around in the room.

"I'm done with the board games..." He sucked in a deep breath. "Come on Maddie. We've been holed up in this house for days. I'm getting antsy. Let's get out of here. Let's go somewhere."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Somewhere. I want to put on real pants, I want to have a drink and
I want to...I want to get out. I need to.”

Maddie snickered. "Real pants."

"Come on!" He tossed a throw pillow her way. "Come on Madeline. You know it would be good for you. The initial hit from Harry's story has settled...they aren't following as much as they were before. Isn't there some place you go to cut loose? Some place you can have a drink and relax with friends?"

"Actually..." She smiled as she thought of it. "There is."

"Can we go there? Now."

She laughed as she watched him, as his eyebrows rose tensely, as he waited for her answer. With a sigh, she gave in. Maybe he was right. It wouldn't hurt to go out.

"Yes," she inhaled with a small, slow smile; already thinking about the people she should call. "Yes we can."

It was time. She needed to get out and breathe. She needed to see Leo and Sean and Kiki and hopefully Bishop and Ella. She needed to have expensive drinks and fatty appetizers and she needed to laugh. As she watched Kyle hurry from the room to change, calling to her as he mounted the stairs, she felt her breath catch.

Harry had been so right to have Kyle promise to come. He had been exactly what she needed.

Day 71

Maddie was a little perturbed and more than a little surprised when she was nudged and poked awake in the wee, dark hours of Day 71.

"Maddie..." Kyle's voice was loud and intrusive in her deep sleep.

"Mmmmmph," she groaned and rolled over in bed, rubbing at her eyes as her mind tugged her body from sleep. "What is it?"

"I leave in two days." He was way too matter-of-fact for that hour and her irritation grew.

"Yeah?! You needed to wake me up in the middle of the night to tell me this?"

"No. I needed to wake you up in the middle of the night so that we can make it to the summit before the weather rolls in."

"Excuse me? The weather? The summit?" Her eyes were wide with confusion.

"That's right..." He jostled her again with a menacing chuckle. "Get your Royal Ass out of bed Your Highness, we're going hiking."

"It's winter. In England."

"It's true. It's true," he agreed and leaned closer; that competitive gleam in his eye bright and dancing. "Please tell me that being a Duchess hasn't made you weak. Please tell me that you, who is about to ski to the North Pole, isn't afraid of a little winter hiking."
"I'm not," she glared at him.

"Good," he smirked at the look on her face. "We may just have to revoke your native card."

"Please," she rolled her eyes and took a deep breath. "Exactly where is it you think we're going hiking?"

"A place called Bochlwyd Horseshoe in Snowdonia," Kyle answered. "And don't ask how many times it took me before I could pronounce that correctly."

"That's nearly five hours away!"

"I know!" Kyle laughed. "That's why I'm waking you up early. Come on. Get your ass out of bed. Get showered, get dressed. We're hiking. I can't leave until I take you hiking." He nudged at her body lumped underneath the covers and walked towards the door.

"I hate you!" She groaned as she pulled the blankets off.

"I know!" He laughed in return.

"Hey Kyle..." She called out to him as she rose to her feet.

"Hmm?" He turned back as he reached the door.

"How many times did it take you?" She grinned.

"Six," his voice was flat. "And that was only after I stepped outside and asked one of your officers. I swear. This language."

"You mean English?" Maddie laughed.

"Ha. Ha." He rolled his eyes and stepped through the door. "Hurry up!"

Day 73

"Kyle..." Maddie's voice was soft as she crept into his room down the hall from hers. Though he was still sleeping, it was morning and the sun was up. "Kyle..." She reached the side of his bed and knocked it with her knee. Giving him a minute, she took a breath. "Kyle!"

"What?!" He sat straight up; his head whipping to look at her. "Jesus Christ, Maddie. What are you doing screaming like that?"

"At least it's not two in the morning and at least I'm not dragging you on a four mile hike in the winter."

"A hike that you loved," he pointed out with narrowed eyes.

"Fair enough," she nodded and sat down on the end of his bed.

"What's going on?" He looked her over, catching the look in her eyes; sad and a little distant.

"It's your last day," she looked down at her hands in her lap.
"Yeah..." He agreed, easing up just a bit. "I mean...if you want me to stay longer..."

"No," she shook her head, her eyes rising to meet his. "I know you need to go. I need to be alone for a while; get back to work, that sort of thing. It's just been...it's been nice being around you again." Her smile was genuine. "We haven't really done this in a long, long time."

"I know," he reached out to rub her knee. "It's been nice for me too."

"Yeah?"

"Well except for that night we went out with your friends and somebody took our picture and I was all over the internet for like five minutes," Maddie laughed as she remembered. "But other than that, it's been a lot of fun."

"Thanks," she grinned. "I mean it. Thank you for coming; for dropping everything and just...coming."


"I do," she nodded and patted his hand. "Now...since it's your last day, I have a little something planned for us."

"Oh?" His eyebrows peaked in interest. "Not another hike."

"No," Maddie shook her head with a laugh. "Durham Cathedral."

"Durham Cathedral?" He was absolutely interested.

"It was founded in 1093. It has one of the most complete sets of early printed books. It has three copies of the Magna Carta and..."

"Are you reading from a brochure?" He joked.

"A little bit," she laughed. "And it's regarded as one of the finest examples of Norman architecture..." She shrugged. "It was chosen as one of the best buildings in Britain. I arranged for a guided tour and some time to take a look at the impressive details. I thought you might like it."

"You had me at three copies of the Magna Carta," he winked and she smacked him on the shoulder. "I'm joking. Of course I would love that. When do we leave?"

"Can you be ready in an hour?"

"I absolutely can."

Day 74

Kyle's last day came so much faster than Maddie imagined it would. It seemed like he had just knocked on her door and pulled her from her solace on that step in the dark. And now he was leaving. She could barely believe it.

He was packed; his bags waiting next to the door. Though Maddie had offered to go with him, he had politely declined. He had seen how people flocked around her, how they swarmed and took
photos and he knew that there would be tears and that maybe it would be best for both of them if they happened at home rather than the airport.

"Okay..." He stepped into the living room where Maddie stood facing the mantle, looking at the vases in front of her.

"You're ready?" She glanced back at him.

"Yeah," he nodded, moving over to where she was. They stood in silence for a moment before he spoke again. "You know I love what you've done with the marbles."

"Yeah?" She smiled softly.

"Yeah. I like the visual. And look..." He pointed to the two vases right in front of them. "There are more days passed than days ahead."

"Yes," Maddie's grin pulled higher. "Yes there are."

"How many are left?"

"Forty-six," she answered without thinking, without blinking. As his smile grew, his heart ached and Kyle watched her look over the vases for a moment longer before she turned to him. "I don't even know how to thank you for coming to London."

"You don't have to," he shook his head.

"Remember that first night, when you said Harry should have asked Derek?" Kyle nodded and she continued. "Harry was absolutely right in asking you. Nobody else would have gotten me out of bed, out of the house. Nobody else would have thought of the hike or...any of it." She smiled at him as she faded into a softness that was a rarity for these two. "It means so much to me that you came, that you helped me bounce back. I will never be able to repay you for it...and I just..." She shrugged. "I love you for it."

"Come here," he pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight. "I love you too."

They stood there, just like that—each of them hugging the other tightly—for a long while before Maddie sniffed at her tears and stepped back. Only then did Kyle release his hold on her.

"You'll give everyone my love?"

"I will," he nodded. "And you'll call the second you hear about Harry?"

"Yes," she smiled.

"And you'll be extra careful at the North Pole?"

"I will," she laughed. "And you'll stop being pissed because you don't get to go?"

"Eh," he shrugged as he reached for his bag. "Maybe someday."

"Fair enough," Maddie sighed. "We'll see you in July for the wedding."

"Yes," he grinned, his entire face lighting up as the thought of marrying Amy popped back into
his mind. "I can't wait."

"Me neither," Maddie agreed wholeheartedly.

"Okay Maddie..." He had his bags; his passport, his ticket. "It's time for me to go."

"I know," she bit at her bottom lip. "Call me when you get home."

"Absolutely," he moved back to her then, leaning in to kiss her cheek, to hug her once more. "I love you."

"I love you too. And thank you. Again."

"You're welcome. Again." With one last smile, he turned away from her and moved to the door. "Take care of yourself Maddie."

"You too Kyle."

And then with one final wave, one last shared look, Kyle stepped out the door to go to the waiting car.

And Maddie was all alone. In her enormous home at Kensington Palace, she was alone. Moving to the door, she turned the lock and with a long, deep sigh, she turned to look around her. With her back pressed to the door and her eyes wide as she let it all process, a small smile pulled at her lips.

She still had forty-six days.

She still had a bit of anger left over from Harry's unilateral decision.

She still had a lot of worry coursing through her veins.

But she felt better. Her family had done that for her. Kyle. Will. Kate. Even Bishop and Ella and Sean and Kiki and Leo.

She was so thankful to have them; all of them.

She pushed away from the door and walked back into the living room, her eyes falling on a picture of Harry. "Forty-six days, Captain. Don't make me regret not coming over there and dragging you home by your ear." A muffled bit of laughter pushed through her lips and she sank onto the couch.

And for the first time in weeks, she was alone. And she could still breathe.

Forty-Six days left. A busy Forty-Six days.

"You can do this Maddie. You can do this." She mumbled to herself and reached for the remote control. She could do this—she had to.
"Madeline..." His voice was like gold over the phone, drawing warmth to her heart and a smile to her face even in the wee hours of the morning, even when he interrupted her deep sleep.

"Captain," she mumbled as she rolled over in their bed, her eyes closing as she nuzzled into her pillow, the phone pressed tight to her ear.

"How are you love? You doing okay?"

"I am," she nodded. "Are you? Still have all ten fingers? All ten toes?"

"Of course," he chuckled at the casualness of their conversation. "Hot day today."

"Boo..." She groaned, pulling the blankets tighter. "It's freezing here; been raining for days."

"Merry ol' London," she could almost see the smirk on his face as he joked. "Tell me about home. Tell me what you've been up to."

"Mmmm..." She rolled over again, her eyes opening as she looked up to the ceiling. "I had dinner with your father and Camilla last week."

"Where did you go?"

"Clarence," she smiled as she remembered. "They had just returned from their four day tour in Germany and had some great stories to tell."

"I would imagine."

"I went to lunch and shopping with Kate this weekend..." She yawned. "It was exactly what I needed. And I bought you a shirt."

"Very thoughtful," he laughed lightly.

"And then..." She smiled wide. "Then I spent the night cuddled up with another man."

"Is that so?" He cleared his throat. "Tell me about this new man in your life. Do I know him? Should I be threatened?"

"You do and you should," she giggled. "He's short and chubby and he drools more than most but his laugh is the absolute best and he is most assuredly my favorite member of the Royal Family."

"You spent the night with Arthur."

"I did," she sighed, the joy abundantly clear to even Harry who was miles and worlds away.

"Was it amazing?" He was jealous; of so many things about that moment.

"It was," she groaned happily. "He was up a bit throughout the night but he's so happy and so
adorable and he just let me hold him and cuddle him and kiss those chubby cheeks whenever I wanted..." She sucked in a breath. "It was magnificent."

"It sounds like it..." His voice was wistful as though his mind were far off. And it was; far off in the future in a time and place where they had one of their own; when Maddie was talking about the chubby cheeks of their child. He had to take a breath and clear his throat, had to move his mind away. "Speaking of chubby little babies...has Baby Bishop made an appearance yet?"

"No!" Maddie shook her head, biting back the grin that tried to move onto her face. "Jesus. Ella's due date was two days ago and she's just..."

"Miserable?" Harry offered.

"Yes!" Maddie chuckled. "Poor thing. They are trying everything to get that baby out but he's stubborn."

"Just like his mother," Harry laughed.

"Exactly." Maddie echoed his amusement. "If she doesn't have him within the next few days I would imagine they will induce her. She wants to avoid that but really...how big can they let a baby get?"

"I don't know."

"Me neither..." She sighed as her laughter died down and she sat in their quiet, peaceful room for a moment before she continued. "I miss you Harry. I hate sleeping in this bed alone."

Harry had to swallow before he could speak. "I hate you sleeping in that bed alone too. And I swear to you, there's nothing I'm looking forward to more than correcting that. Just as soon as I can."

Day 93

"So wait..." Maddie stopped on the paved path through the park and turned to her best friend. "The doctor thinks they got the due date wrong?"

"Ugh," Ella groaned, her hands rubbing mindlessly at her belly. "I want you to know that the only reason I'm not calling him all sorts of names is because I am pretty sure this baby hears every word I say and I cannot have him coming out with a mouth like mine."

Maddie's lips turned up in a laugh that faded just as soon as Ella's eyes narrowed. She was now four days passed her original due date with zero movement. She had gone to the doctor that morning and when she had called Maddie ready to burst, Maddie had suggested they walk through the park. Maybe it would help the baby along and even if it didn't, it would surely help with the stress and steam that was coming from Ella's ears.

Maddie cleared her throat and continued walking. "So. If they were wrong, then when do they think the due date is?"

"They don't fucking know!" Ella threw her hands up in the air as Maddie's eyes flashed wide.

"Shhh!!" Maddie giggled as she moved her hands over Ella's stomach. "The baby can hear you!"
"Well if that's the case..." Ella looked down at her stomach and spoke in a stern tone. "Ian James Bishop the Fourth, this is your mother. Your enormous, tired, grouchy mother. If you know what's best for you then you will come on out of there as soon as possible. Now would be good, actually."

Maddie waited with baited breath for a beat before she arched an eyebrow and smirked. "Did it work? Is he coming?"

Ella groaned and pushed at Maddie's shoulder. "No. Turns out Ian James Bishop the Fourth listens to me just about as well as Ian James Bishop the Third."

Day 94

"Okay Thomas," Maddie took in a deep breath as she sat down in her office for the first time in a while, across from the smiling older gentleman. "What do we have?"

Sitting tall in his chair, he slid her leather folio across the table to her. "In nine days you leave for the North Pole."

"Nine days," Maddie's eyes went wide as she looked up to him, her fingers falling still on the portfolio. "Wow...that came fast."

"Yes Ma'am," he smiled with a small nod. "All of the logistics are worked out for your departure and your return; security, travel, lodging at the base before you leave and then for a few nights when you all return from the pole."

"Thank you," she smiled, her mind racing as she thought of all she still had to do before she left, as she tried to wrap her mind around the fact that she was finally leaving for this trip that had occupied so much of her time, so much of her energy. "Do I have anything between now and then?"

"No ma'am," he shook his head. "Just that morning. There will be crowds and press there to see you all off. There will be a few photo calls but no speeches for you."

"I can do that," she smiled sweetly. "Any notes for when I return?"

"No," he shook his head. "We've cleared your schedule for a few weeks after the Dukes' return."

"Well now look at that," Maddie grinned as she met his eyes. "That's incredibly sweet of you."

"Yes well," he shook his head, trying to shake it off. "Oh. One more thing. The Well Child Awards."

"Yes?" Maddie's mind slipped back to business mode.

"As usual I have sent in yours and the Duke's commitment to attending."

"Of course," she nodded, knowing it was one of Harry's absolute favorite events.

"They contacted my office yesterday to let me know they had to move up the event to the first weekend in June. The seventh to be exact."

"Our anniversary!" Maddie smiled excitedly, stunned to realize just how close a year was
approaching them. "Can you tell me why they made the change?" Maddie didn't care; they were going regardless but she was curious.

"One of this years' recipients has to begin treatments in July and they don't know that she'll be well enough for the event in September. Is the change in date okay?"

"Of course," Maddie shook her head quickly. "Of course it is. We wouldn't miss it. Would you get the girl's name though and remind me to have flowers sent when her treatments begin?"

"Yes Ma'am," he made a quick note and closed his notebook, looking back up to her with a smile. "That's all we have Ma'am."

"Well good then," Maddie returned his smile and sat back in her chair. "Nine days?" Her stomach was starting to feel fluttery with anticipation.

"Nine days."

"Wow..."

**Day 97**

"I cannot believe that in a week you're going to the North Pole." Maddie could hear Collins' laughter from Paris over the phone lines. It had been a few weeks since they had spoken and she was enjoying the levity in his voice tonight.

"Believe it," Maddie laughed. "Well believe that in a week I'll be on my way."

"Fair enough." Collins acquiesced. "Are you excited?"

"Nervous," she admitted with a small shrug. "And excited. A lot of things are coming to a head right now. The trek, Harry's deployment is almost over, Ella's going to have a baby..."

"Are we sure about that?" His laughter resounded over the phone and there was a tug at Maddie's heart again—so happy to hear him laughing.

"Ha!" She laughed with him. "Don't let her hear you say that, poor thing. She is so tired of being pregnant."

"Women are warriors, Doc. Each and every one of you."

"Awww," her head tipped to the side. "Always a way with the words Collins."

"Always," he chuckled. "I should call her, check in...see if she wants be to try to work some Native Bendal magic."

"She would love to hear from you," Maddie agreed quickly. "And I bet she'd give anything you asked if you could bring that little boy out of there."

"Lovely," Collins snickered. "Speaking of little boys...I told the one on this end that you and Harry were coming in the summer and he nearly fell over himself dancing with joy."

"Oh God," Maddie groaned happily. "I love him so much."
"He loves you too," Collins' laughter faded a bit. "I do too, you know."

"I do know," Maddie nodded, her emotions welling in her throat.

"Please be careful on the ice, Doc." She could hear the concern, the worry.

"I swear to you Collins, I swear to you...not one wrong step," she promised him just as she had promised many others.

"Good," his voice was hoarse as his mind flashed over all the loss and near loss that had happened to the lot of them. "Good."

Day 98

When the phone rang out into her dark bedroom in the early hours of Day 98, Maddie smiled to herself as she reached for the phone. She had hoped Harry would call that night. She was getting so close to leaving and she wouldn't be able to speak to him while in the Arctic and she needed to hear his voice.

"Mmm..." She moaned into the phone. "Good Morning Captain."

"Nope," Bishop's voice answered, a chuckle falling from his mouth in the next breath. "Though it's good to know you two keep it going even when he's at war."

"Lovely," Maddie groaned, sitting up in bed. "Why in the hell are you calling me in the middle of the night?"

"Well...Aunt Maddie..."

"Aunt Maddie!" She interrupted with a gasp; her hand flying to her mouth. "Oh my GOD! Bishop! She's in labor?!"

"She is," his laughter faded into softness. "We just checked into the hospital, the contractions are coming every five minutes or so and from all reports...I'm going to be a father before the end of the day."

When Bishop choked on his words, Maddie felt tears spring to her eyes.

"I'm on my way."

"You know it will be a while and..."

"Does she want me there?" Maddie cut in.

"Of course she does."

"And you? You want me to stay away?"

"Don't be ridiculous." He was quick and firm with his rebuttal.

"Then I'm on my way."

In one second she had ended the call and in two she was pulling back the covers and hurrying
from her bed, gathering clothes as she went.

It was a big night; a very big night.

Maddie would never fail to find it amusing how that night, after Ella had waited and waited; past the original due date, past the second due date...she would never fail to find it amusing at just how quickly Ian James Bishop the Fourth made his appearance.

After all of that waiting, after all of the stubbornness, from the first contraction to the screaming baby boy, it was no more than four hours. It was amazing, hilarious, and nearly unheard of but Maddie couldn't imagine that the unplanned child of Bishop and Ella would make his debut in any other way. She had spent nearly no time at all in the waiting room before Bishop came to tell her the news in that loud exuberant voice of his, before she was pulled into the hospital room to hug her best friend with tear-filled eyes, before she could gaze at the sweet little face of the newest member of their circle.

"Ian James Bishop the Fourth..." Maddie's voice was low and soft and slow as she stared down at the quiet, beautiful little baby in her hands. "Are you going to call him Ian?" Her eyes lifted to look at the new parents; blissful and exhausted.

"Naw," Bishop shook his head, his hands never leaving Ella; his heart now forever and prominently worn on his sleeve. "My father is Ian."

"I think we're going to call him Buckie," Ella smiled down at her son.

"Buckie?" Maddie looked from her best friend to the baby and back again. "Why Buckie?"

"Because..." Ella took a breath. "We made him at Buckingham Palace."

Maddie's eyes blinked and it took everything in her not to fall over laughing. Her teeth bit at her bottom lip, her eyes welling up. "Oh my God..." She looked to Bishop who shared a similar expression. "I can't. I just...Oh wow..." She took in a deep breath, her eyes turning down to the baby. "It's really too bad your Uncle Harry isn't here to hear that little man."

And then it happened, she thought of him. The one who wasn't there, the one whose presence would complete their foursome. With teary eyes and swelling heart, she took a breath and remembered what Harry had asked her to do. "Can I..." Maddie swallowed against the emotions that were so strong, so heavy as she looked down at the sleeping little newborn. She tore her eyes away from his chubby little cheeks and looked up to the two new parents. "Can I borrow Bishop for just a moment?"

"Me?" He looked up with surprise.

"I..." Her smile was warm as she looked from dad to mom. "Yes. Harry..." Her words tripped over her tongue but she swallowed and blinked. "Harry asked me to do something...with you..." She nodded her head to him. "On the day you became a father."

Maddie wasn't sure who had more tears in their eyes; herself or Bishop or Ella who was emotionally spent and deliriously happy.

"Go..." Ella nudged her husband. "Do what you should be doing with Harry..." Her hand slid
down his arm to squeeze his fingers and then she turned a soft smile to Maddie. "Go ahead."

"I love you Momma," Maddie leaned to kiss Ella's cheek.

"I love you too," Ella was so much more relaxed, so much more at ease than she had been for months, so relieved that he was finally there with them.

"What do you say Bishop?" Maddie smiled up at him. "Join me in a little brotherly bonding?"

"Of course," he nodded. Leaning to kiss Ella, he lingered for a moment before turning the same love and attention to his new son and then he followed Maddie through the door. It had been mere hours since he had become a father and he already felt as though he were leaving half of himself behind.

But he followed the Duchess; through the corridor, out into the stairwell and straight up to the rooftop.

"We can be up here?" He looked around at the night sky, at the buildings around them and Maddie chuckled softly.

"Let me tell you a little secret Bishop..." She took a deep breath as they walked further out onto the roof. "Sometimes people just...let me do what I want."

"Ha!" He laughed out into the night. "Fair enough. So tell me...Duchess..." He spun around to face her. "What is this task my dear friend has sent you to complete in his place?"

Maddie held onto the smile, held onto the tears that pricked at her eyes and she reached into her handbag and pulled out the two cigars Harry had shown her the night they had made all of the plans for his deployment. "These."

"Are those cigars?" Bishop moved closer, his eyes narrowing as he reached out and took one from her fingers.

"They are," she nodded.

"They're amazing cigars..." Bishop's voice was nearly reverent as he inhaled the scent.

"They are," Maddie agreed; reaching into her bag to pull out the necessary tools; a cutter, a lighter. Handing them over to Bishop, he prepared first hers and then his and before long they were puffing away at their cigars there on the roof of the hospital. After a few, slow drags, Maddie nudged him with her shoulder. "He's a beautiful baby boy."

The grin on Bishop's face rivaled the brightness of any of the stars in the sky as he nodded his head. "I know," he chuckled as he looked to her. "But look at his parents, that's no surprise."

Maddie laughed as she puffed out a cloud of smoke. "Fair enough." She took another drag and smiled at him. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," he nodded and looked down to the cigar in his fingers. "And thank you for this."

"You're welcome." Her smile was soft. "He said it was important that we do it tonight."

"It is," Bishop agreed; his eyes glossing over as he thought of his best friend, of all the pacts they
had made, all of the deals and agreements.

"And I know he feels terrible for missing it himself."

"Me too," Bishop agreed.

"I'm sorry that it has to be me," she turned apologetic eyes to him. "I mean...clearly I'm not an adequate substitute for Harry but..."

"Stop," Bishop shook his head, swallowing back the emotion that bubbled up. "You're an amazing substitute for Harry and this is how it was supposed to be."

"Yeah?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Well...maybe this and some Scotch."

"Oh!" Maddie exclaimed as she opened her bag again, pulling out her flask. "I brought a little something."

"See! Look at that!" Bishop's eye danced as he took the flask she offered. Unscrewing the lid, he tipped his head back for a drink. And tipped it immediately back up. "What the hell is this?"

"Champagne," Maddie laughed at the look on his face. "It's not Scotch but it's good stuff."

"I cannot believe you're running around with a flask of champagne in your bag," he shook his head but took another drink before he handed it back to her. "Who does that?"

Maddie took the flask, took a drink, and smirked as she answered. "The Duchess of Sussex."

Bishop's laughter was loud and wonderful as he barked out into the night, bringing them both to smiles and chuckles. And as it died down he took a puff and looked more seriously to her.

"Tell me this...Your Royal Highness..." His voice tipped with teasing. "When exactly are you going to make the Duke a father?"

"Wow..." Maddie breathed; a mixture of excitement and sadness as she remembered how much they wanted a baby, how hard they had tried before he left. And her eyes locked with Bishop’s. "Just as soon as he gets home Bishop. Just as soon as he gets home."

Day 103

Departure Day. So much work, so much preparation had gone into this day for Maddie; the workouts, the running, the packing, the paperwork, the security negotiations, the anxiety and excitement. So much work and here it was—time to go.

She had spoken to her mother the day before. She had spoken to Kyle. She had gone to kiss and cuddle Arthur, to kiss and cuddle Buckie.

And she had spoken to Harry the night before, or more accurately she had listened to him tell her about his day, about the men he was serving with—anything to get her mind off of the bundle of nerves that swirled around in her belly. He hadn't much time to speak to her, he never did, but he had done what he could to provide her a reprieve and then he had told her how proud he was, how excited he was and how great she was going to do.
And then he had hung up and she had laid in their bed for at least another hour before her body took over in exhaustion and forced her mind to slumber.

When she had woken on the morning of Day 103, she had showered and dressed and had a normal breakfast and then she heard the knock on the door—the call to the car. And she had sucked in her breath and gathered her travel bag and stepped out into the cool London morning.

She had snickered as she made her way to the waiting car, people rushing around her as they loaded her items. It was chilly in London; cold and dreary yet she was on her way to a place that made this look like the height of summer. With a quick glance back at her home, she nodded a thank you to the driver who held her door and she slipped into the backseat.

"Good morning Madeline." Her father-in-law was there with an endearing smile and a calm voice. He had asked if he could escort her to the airport, asked if he could ride with her and stay in the car as she exited—not wanting to take away from the moment with his presence. And she had agreed-easily and immediately.

"Good morning Charles," she smiled wide and leaned to kiss his cheek.

"How are you doing this morning?" He asked as they settled into their seats.

"Really well thank you," she took a deep breath as the car pulled out of the gates and into traffic. "Are you sure you haven't changed your mind? You sure you don't want to come along? Think of the stories we could tell." She offered a small wink and he offered a big laugh.

"As tempting as that seems," his eyes flickered with humor. "I think I'll stay behind and hold things together."

"Fair enough," Maddie laughed.

"May I say something?" Charles' voice was deep and low and would always hold Maddie's attention when he spoke to her like this.

"Of course," Maddie nodded, turning a smile to him.

"You've done remarkably well, Madeline. The first year of this is incredibly difficult and to add on Harry's deployment...you've done so well and you've been so strong." Maddie's eyes welled up but she held his gaze, held the moment. "We're so close to having our family whole again, so close to Harry returning to us," he reached for her hands then and his eyes grew serious. "Please be careful out there darling. Please listen closely to the guide, please be mindful of your footing. Please...please don't make me tell my son that something's happened to you. I've broken his heart once before. Please don't make me do it again."

She couldn't speak. For three entire minutes, she couldn't speak; so she nodded and squeezed his hand and held his eyes—promising all that he asked.

And then they were there. So quick, so soon. The car rolled to a stop and Charles pulled Maddie into a hug.

"Be careful," he repeated himself on behalf of his son, of the family, of her father. "Be careful and come back to us. And when you do...he'll be here."
"Thank you," she whispered, her eyes squeezing shut as she hugged him back, as she tried to gain the will to pull back from him and step out of the car, the will to step into this amazing new leg of her journey.

"Okay darling. You should go," he released his hold on her and nodded towards her door.

"Okay," she sniffed and took a deep breath. "I'll go." She reached for the door handle and paused for just a second, turning a bright smile back to him. "I love you."

Charles' entire face lit up. "I love you too darling."

And then she opened the door and stepped out of the car.

The terminal at Heathrow was buzzing with excitement as the team gathered for a few official photos. Though Maddie hadn't seen the women for a while, they were instantly welcoming; putting her at ease and making her feel at home with them. And she was so thankful; for the laughter and the smiles and the greetings that were for Maddie and not Her Royal Highness.

And even though this trek was about these four soldiers and the message they were sending, it was impossible for her not to recognize how big this was for her. This trek, this moment, this time without Harry, without the Palace, without the paparazzi and the stories and the pictures and the crazy new life that had only been hers for less than a year.

And suddenly she got it. She understood.

This was what Harry must have felt when he went on the Trek.

This was what Harry must have felt when he was serving in uniform, when he was on a base, when he was in Afghanistan and Khundu.

This feeling of normalcy in what most people would feel was the complete lack of it.

She felt the lump in her throat expand and she thought for a split second she just might cry right there in the middle of this organized chaos of their departure.

This trip was going to be about so much more to her personally than skiing to the North Pole. It was going to be so much bigger than that—she already knew it.

And while most people might panic, might want to turn and run from the emotional work this was about to be, she wasn't most people. She was going to open her arms wide and embrace whatever this trek threw at her.

It was really the only way she knew how to do this anymore.

Take a deep breath, stand tall and jump.

Upon direction from the expedition leader, they all moved towards the gate and turned to pose for one last photo; all of them lined up with wide smiles and excitement brimming eyes.

And then they turned and walked down the jetway; their first steps on this amazing journey.
"Video Diary, Maddie Sussex..." She smiled at the camera as she rested back against her pillows. "We've arrived in Svalbard and we are at the hotel. We had quite a bumpy flight on the way in. We're doing twenty miles on the skis in the morning and should be leaving for Barneo the day after. I'm excited to get out on the snow with the team, to see what all this training has done for us. We had dinner together tonight and everyone seems to be excited and...ready. There are some amazing people on this trip. The women are so..." She looked off in the distance and took a breath before she looked back. "Already I'm impressed and...humbled that they've allowed me to tag along." She laughed softly. "I suppose after tomorrow we'll see if I'm still allowed. Okay. I'm going to sign off and get a nice, warm night of sleep. More tomorrow. Goodnight."

It had been a long day full of travel and introductions. Though she already knew the team, already felt welcome among them—she had only just that day met the Documentary Crew who would be going along with them on the Trek; filming nearly every moment. They had talked for a bit about logistics, about how filming would start the next day, about how the Video Diaries would be used by all of the teammates, about how they would be conducting interviews with all of the teammates. And though Maddie had been a little leery about any type of media being around, she had known this was part of the deal and she fully supported what they were all trying to do. So she relaxed and decided to let her beef with the press sit aside for a moment and to give these guys the benefit of the doubt. They were documentarians after all—and they seemed very nice.

Moving the camera off to the nightstand, she climbed out of bed and looked for her bag; wanting to pull out a sweatshirt of Harry's she had brought with her—for warmth and for comfort. As she pulled the soft, gray hoodie from her bag, something fell from the pocket landing on the floor at her feet.

"What in the..." She pulled the sweatshirt over her head and bent over to find a small gift wrapped box. She felt silly as her heart pumped wildly in her chest, her lips turning up in a smile as her fingers tore at the wrapping. She moved to sit in the middle of the bed as she lifted the lid off the box and there on top of some folded tissue paper was an envelope addressed to her.

In Harry's handwriting.

Her eyes welled up at the sight, her fingers stroking over the paper before she lifted it up and pulled out the heavy cardstock stationary with his monogram on the top. With a lump resting in her throat she read from the card.

"My best guess is that you found this in Svalbard, probably on your first night. I had to work a little magic and enlist a little help but I simply could not let you begin this trek without something from me. In this box you will find two items that I thought might be important to have along. Keep digging. H."

With a giddiness that should have embarrassed her, she did just as his note said. She pulled back the tissue paper and found a small-ish, lumpy package wrapped in the same paper. This one had a note attached to it.

"I know this is going to be as hard as a rock by the time you get to your goal but I thought the image of you enjoying your Christmas Candy at the North Pole was just too sweet to pass up.
And there, underneath the beautiful gift wrap was a small bag of her favorite candy; more than enough to go around. As she held the bag in her hands she felt warm and happy and loved. When had he planned this? How had he planned this? And who in the world had been brave and bold enough to sneak a package into her luggage? Though she was curious to the answers to those questions, she was more curious about the second of the two packages he told her of.

Pulling back the tissue paper even further, she found a small wrapped box. With no thought to the paper this time, she quickly tore it away, quickly discarded it and she pulled off the lid.

Inside was a small ipod shuffle with earbuds. It wasn't hers and it wasn't his; it was entirely new to her. Just as she was about to ask nobody in particular just what exactly was going on, she pulled the shuffle from the box and saw a small note with simple directions.

"Put in the buds. Press Play.

I love you. I'll see you soon-H"

With a cautious look in her eyes, she did as the note instructed; she put the buds into her ears and she turned on the ipod and pressed play.

And she gasped when she heard his voice in her ears.

"Madeline..." It was so rich and so warm and so close, "Sorry...hold on..." There was a bit of background noise, maybe movement and then he laughed—the sound making her eyes well over as her fingers flew to her lips, trying to hold in the sobs that felt inevitable at this point. She had no idea what this was but so far he had said only four words and she was nearly a mess. "Sorry love. So. If you're listening to this then that must mean you're in the Arctic gearing up for the trek. I hope you found this on your first night. I hope you get this before any of the horrific skiing takes place," he chuckled and took a breath. "Alright. So. Get on with it Sussex...is that what you're thinking?"

Maddie shook her head. No that wasn't what she was thinking; nowhere close, in fact.

"What's happened is this...I've put together a...playlist of sorts. I've collected some songs; some of your favorites, some of mine...some I took with me on the very same trek you're about to embark upon. It's pretty good if I say so myself. I think you'll find the selection to be fulfilling and diverse and...Oh!" She could see the excitement on his face as he exclaimed. "I had a little help from Collins in securing some of the native music of Bendal and...it's on here too." That was it. She was done fighting as tears slid from the corners of her eyes. "I thought...I don't know what I thought..." His voice dipped low. "I thought you might want to take a little of the desert with you to the Arctic. I thought you might want to take a little bit of me with you..." He took a moment, a pause in which Maddie sniffed and sucked in a breath. "I'm terribly proud of you Maddie. Terribly proud. I love you...Harry."

Day 104

"Video Diary...Maddie Sussex..." The great big smile on her face, the wide excited eyes—nobody would ever be able to tell just how tired she was. "We went on our first ski today. Twenty-one miles and...wow..." She laughed, leaning back in her chair and pulling off her stocking cap. Her hair was mussed and her cheeks were pink but she didn't care. "You want to know what's utterly amazing? Michelle—without her right arm. Sheryl—with a prosthetic left leg. Wendy—who
suffered from Post-Traumatic stress disorder after a harrowing experience I'm sure she'll detail for you. And Louise—who still has shrapnel embedded in nearly her entire right side." Maddie shook her head in awe, in disbelief. "These women were out there in the snow, on the skis looking better than...frankly, looking better than my cousin Kyle who's been skiing since we were two." She chuckled and took a beat. "This is going to be an amazing experience. The team is so incredibly impressive, so ready to go and we're already..." Her smile pulled higher as remembered the day, the conversations, the already strong bonds that were being formed. "We're already having a great time. Tonight we're having a big dinner and most likely heading to bed early. We take a helicopter to Barneo first thing—weather permitting. And it starts. Okay...that's it for tonight. See you tomorrow!"

After a quick shower and a change of clothes, Maddie had made her way back to the main room for dinner and some conversation. They had enjoyed their last warm, cooked meal for a few weeks and afterward they lazed about; chatting and relaxing. A few brave souls who had no fear of a hangover were sharing a flask of whiskey. It was a big lump of people; the soldiers, the guides, the documentary crew; everyone gathered in a big warm, comfortable room.

When the flask of whiskey was offered to Maddie she shook her head and laughed out loud. No way was she taking that kind of chance. She knew what awaited her in the morning and she knew she was going to have a hard enough time without throwing her system off.

So she sat off to the side, listening and laughing at the tales they told of home, of service. And she felt, strangely, at home. She felt safe and comfortable and at ease among this group of people. And then the man whose job it was to report on all of it sat down across from her, warm mug of coffee in his hand and a welcoming smile on his face. They had met before, spent a little time together on the first day and then again that morning when he was filming their practice ski. But this was the first real conversation they would have.

"Your Royal Highness," he nodded as he sank into his chair.

Maddie finished a sip of her hot tea and shook her head as her eyes turned up to him. "Is there any chance I can persuade you to call me Maddie for the rest of the trip?"

"Yikes..." He sucked in a breath as he smiled at her. "I don't know. I'm sure I could get into trouble for breaking royal protocol."

"You really wouldn't," she laughed and leaned back in her chair. "Maybe we could negotiate? The title when there are cameras, my actual name when there are not?"

"Maybe..." He teased, leaning forward on the table. "But what do I get out of the negotiation? What do you have in trade?"

"Nothing," she held her hands up. "I have nothing...oh wait!" She exclaimed, stuffing her hand into the pocket of her fleece jacket. "I have these." She held out a small fun-sized bag of M&Ms. "What will these get me?"

"Ooooohhh..." His eyes widened as he grinned. "Those will get you a first name or two."

"Excellent," she laughed and passed them across the table.

"Tell me," he leaned back in his chair, taking the treats with him. "What do you prefer? Madeline or Maddie?"
"Maddie," she shrugged and extended her hand. "Maddie Sussex."

"Andrew," he reached out to shake her hand. "Andrew Bradley."

"Nice to meet you," she smiled. "Unofficially anyway."

"You too."

Maddie watched him for a minute as he tore open the M&Ms and popped a few into his mouth. She had a good feeling about him, had watched him interact with the team, watched as he worked. "Andrew Bradley. That's a great name for a reporter. Have you always had it or did you change something to make it sound more journalist-ish?"

"I've always had it," he chuckled.

"Good," she nodded and thought for a moment; curious about the ease with which they were conversing. "Can I ask you a question?"

"I don't know," he narrowed his eyes playfully. "Is it on the record or off?"

"Ha!" Maddie clapped her hands together. "Off."

"Okay..." He tossed it around. "One question. Go ahead." He knew that developing a rapport, a relationship with Maddie, with the entire team, was paramount to the great footage he was hoping to get. And it was only fair that she had a chance to ask him questions for all that he was going to ask as the days went on.

"How did you get this assignment?" She waved her hand around. "I mean...did you ask for it or was it a short straw situation?"

"An all-expenses paid trip to the North Pole?" His eyebrows lifted. "Are you kidding? I asked for this one."

Maddie smiled, appreciating his answer. "Good. Now, did you..."

"Oh!" He held up a finger. "You said one question. You had your one."

"Aw come on," Maddie rolled her eyes. "I've never had a chance to sit down with a reporter in a casual atmosphere and ask my own questions. One more."

"This one will cost you."

"You have all my M&Ms!"

"Okay..." He thought about it. "How about I'll trade you a question for a question? You ask one, I'll ask one."

"Hmmm..." Maddie pulled back, caution wrapping up her mind. "I don't know."

"Come on," he joked. "I've never had a chance to sit down with a royal in a casual atmosphere and ask my own questions."

He paused and took a breath. "You can always pass...And I'll keep it off the record."
"Okay," she was leery as she took a breath in through her nose. "We'll see how it goes. How about that?"

"Okay," he laughed and leaned in; lowering his voice. "Now. What was your question?"

"The reason you're following this trip, this story...is it about them?" She nodded to the women she had the upmost respect for. "Or is it about me?" Her eyes slid back to him.

"Honestly?" He raised his eyebrows and she nodded. "I'm here for them. But my organization...they let me be here because of you."

She instantly appreciated his honesty, his bluntness with her. "Fair enough," she smiled; her eyes tightening up as she looked to him. "Okay Andrew Bradley. What's your question?"

"Hmmm..." His finger tapped at his chin as he thought it over, never really having been presented with this opportunity. "Can I ask you about your husband?"

He could see her defenses fly up, her posture changing enough that he caught it. She was much more guarded about Harry than she was about herself. But she held his eyes and nodded. "You can ask."

"Okay," he grew a bit more serious, his smile fading from his lips. "I know he's deployed in Khundu right now."

"Yes," she nodded.

"And I know that not long ago there was an accident; soldiers were hurt, one died. I know he was there and I've heard the rumors of...heroic actions..." He watched as Maddie's eyes glazed over just a bit. "I heard that they wanted to pull him from duty and that he convinced them to let him stay on, next to his men."

"You've heard a lot of things Mr. Bradley," she reached for her mug and took a sip.

"I thought we were on a first name basis?" He smiled softly.

"What's your question," she sat her mug back down. "Andrew."

"Are those things true?"

Maddie took a breath and watched him for a moment; he didn't look away from her, didn't break her gaze. He sat tall and steady and she decided to take him at his word. With half a shrug and half a nod, she sighed. "I don't know."

"Aw come on," his eyes narrowed.

"I don't," she smiled. "Not all of, it at least. I...I wasn't there. I don't know if there were heroic actions on his part and he would never tell me if there were. I wouldn't be surprised but...I don't know."

She sighed. "As for him staying..." She looked down at her fingers tapping on the handle to her cup and then smiled. "That's true. He wanted to stay."

Andrew's smile tugged higher as he nodded. "I knew it."

"Yeah?" She squinted.
"I've been assigned to him on and off throughout the years. Hell of a soldier."

"So I've been told," she smiled.

"Yeah," he nodded. "I'm sure you have."

"Okay," Maddie leaned in. "My turn."

"Shoot."

"Do you like being assigned to follow royalty around? Or is it something you put up with?"

"Ha!" His head tipped back. "I'm not sure there's a right way to answer that."

"What?" She laughed lightly. "Why do you say that?"

"With all due respect ma'am," he offered a small mock salute. "You are a member of the Royal Family. If I say I like it..." He shrugged. "If I say I don't..." He waved his hand. "You know."

"Chicken," Maddie snickered.

"Wow..." He shook his head, surprised. "I had no idea you were so feisty."

"Most people don't," she shrugged and laughed. "Come on."

"Okay," he took a breath and leaned in. "When it's stuff like this; stuff like the gardens you're building in the city through The Prince's Trust. When it's your husband's deployment or work with Walking With The Wounded or William's work with Tusk...I like it. I like it a lot. I think that the work you're doing is really great stuff."

"Thank you," she smiled. "But I sense there is a but."

"But..." He chuckled. "When it's movie premieres or parades...not so much."

"See," Maddie nodded at him. "I knew you could do it."

"Okay," he sat back. "Your turn. Same question."

"Do I like being assigned to follow royalty around?" Her face twisted up in question. "Yes. I have a particular fondness for the red-headed one."

"No!" He shook his head with a laugh. "I meant...do you like it? Being a 'royal'?"

Maddie smiled; sweet and innocent and she nodded. "I love being married to my husband," she shrugged. "And whatever comes with that...I'm happy to take on."

"All the duties?"

"I mean..." She looked around the room for a moment. "Yes. This? I love this. I love the gardens, like you said. I love nearly everything I do. And I like the rest. Are there things that are strange? Sure. But that's pretty much true for everyone, don't you think?"
"I suppose," he agreed and held out the small package in his hands. "M&M?"

"Oh!" Maddie nodded, leaning in to take one. "Thank you. Now...I know that aside from this fun part of your job, you're also the managing editor for your division."

"Yes," he chuckled. "You've been reading up on me?"

"Yes," she nodded as she chewed and swallowed the M&M; there were people that made sure she was incredibly informed before she had set out on this trek. "And I couldn't help but notice that you didn't print one single article about me having an affair with Will."

Andrew's eyes flew up, his breath catching for just a second. He had never imagined that the Duchess would be so forward with him; so blunt. It shocked him for a moment. But he recovered, shaking his head and sipping his coffee. "No. We didn't."

"Why?" She studied him from across the table. "Nearly everyone else did, even the more reputable of the group alluded to something," she raised her eyebrows. "But not you. You and a few select others. I'm just...incredibly curious as to why."

"Easy," he shrugged, finishing off the last of the candy and putting the wrapper on the table in front of him. "I'm not a gossip columnist. I'm not a teenager with a blog." He sucked in a breath. "I have a Graduate degree from Oxford. I've studied with award winning journalists. I follow royalty because it's this amazing historical institution that walks the streets of London, that has beers at the same pubs as I do...I follow because I want to document history. You think I want to write something catty and crass? While your husband is at war?" He shook his head; his jaw tight and set. "No. I'm above that. I work at an organization that holds integrity at a priority and if they didn't...I wouldn't work there." He laughed at himself then, noticing how serious he had become. "Sorry. I'm not a gossip columnist. That's my answer."

"One follow up?" She pushed her luck just a bit.

"Sure," he nodded; happy to appease her.

"Do you ever...I don't know. Do you ever have something in your possession; a photo or a story and decide not to go with it...even if it would sell like crazy? Do you ever decide not to do it because you just...can't?"

He grew quiet and smiled across the table at her. "Of course. I'm a son and a brother and a husband and a former soldier and a friend and...I have a conscience. I try to exercise it occasionally."

"You want to give me an example?" She arched an eyebrow, curious if he would give in and tell her.

"No ma'am," he shook his head.

"Okay," Maddie smiled as she realized she was starting to respect this guy. "Okay. Your turn."

"Do you miss it?"

"It?" She was wide eyed and confused.

"Normal life?" He shrugged. "You have a PhD in Child Psychology. You're licensed to practice
and you had quite the start to a career...

"You've been reading up on me," Maddie cut in.

"Guilty," he laughed. "I'm just wondering...you worked hard to get where you were when you met a Prince. Do you miss it?"

Maddie smiled as her mind pulled forth Bendal, as her memories played through meeting Harry. She bit at her lip as her smile pulled even higher; loving those first flirty days. Then with total conviction, she turned back to him and shook her head. "No." She laughed at herself then, feeling a sort of ease lifting her shoulders, feeling any perceived weight of her decisions floating away. "I loved my normal life, don't get me wrong. But I love this more. Much more."

"Good," he took one long last sip of his drink and put his cup down. "Can I ask one more?"

"Sure," Maddie shrugged.

"The story is that when you met your husband in Bendal...you didn't know who he was and you ordered him to unload a truck full of food."

"Yes," she giggled at the image.

"True?"

"One hundred percent true," Maddie nodded happily. "I know it sounds crazy but there are just some places you don't expect to see certain people. That was one of them."

"Fair enough," he laughed with her. "And a final follow up..." He lifted his eyebrows and Maddie rolled her eyes. "Did he?"

"Did he what?"

"Unload the truck?"

Maddie felt her heart warm in her chest, felt her eyes dance as she remembered. "Yes. Yes. He absolutely did."

Day 106

"Maddie Sussex, Video Diary. We're finally leaving for Barneo in about thirty minutes. We were delayed for a few days for weather but things have cleared up and we're packing it up and heading out," she turned her camera to look around the now empty bedroom before turning back to herself. "To be quite honest, the team is getting restless...nothing like a little hurry to wait to bring out the spring fever," she chuckled and heard a knock at her door. "Okay. Time to go. Next time I see you, we'll be on the Polar Ice Cap! See you then!"

Day 108

There was this point, on the second day of solid skiing where the mood shifted; where everything around them settled and quieted. The team had begun the trek in jovial spirits with an abundance of laughter, jokes and even a few sing-a-longs as they pushed through those first miles, those first days.
But somewhere along the way, the frivolity settled and the focus turned inward for a while. It wasn’t in a melancholy nature, nor was it mean to exclude or isolate. It was simply something that happened when five miles became ten, became twenty, became forty.

It was something that came with ease and welcome. As the laughter died down, they each slipped slowly and quietly into their own minds, into their own thoughts—drawing from inner strength and perseverance to keep going.

It was a little bit comical and quite a bit touching just how quickly something like this became personal. Though the team was there for each other; for support and guidance and a moment of comic relief, it became quite clear that an enormous part of this trek was going to be about their own individual battles.

And Maddie had them; her own individual battles.

With Harry and his choices.

With the impact of those choices.

With the press and their permanent place in her life.

With herself...more than anything.

And there were times, more often than not, when the stretch of miles grew longer and more difficult...there were times when all she could do was breathe in the cold crisp air and let her mind settle into solitude as she worked it out—mentally and physically.

**Day 110**

"So..." Wendy smiled at Maddie as they ate. The team had stopped for a break, taking a moment to rest, to re-energize before finishing up another long stretch. "Is it true that you're a Psychologist?"

"Mmm..." Maddie nodded as she swallowed a sip of her water. "Yes. Sorry..." She laughed lightly and sat her bottle to the side. "I have a PhD in Clinical Psychology...I'm licensed...I've spent time in a clinic but..." She shrugged and felt her cheeks grow a little pink; more from embarrassment than from the cold. "But when I got married, I couldn't really keep doing that so..."

"Ah sure," Wendy smiled with a knowing look in her eye. "I bet you were pretty good at it."

"Oh?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted. "What makes you say that?"

"You're a good listener," Wendy shrugged. "When I first came back from Afghanistan, I was assigned this therapist who was just...awful."

"Oh no," Maddie's forehead knotted as she shook her head.

"Yeah," Wendy laughed, thankful she could laugh about it at this point. "She wasn't a terrible person just...a terrible listener. I don't think she got it...or maybe she didn't want to. I don't know."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Maddie's voice dropped.
"It's okay," Wendy smiled. "I mean. It wasn't but it is now. The guy I see now is amazing. He's been in combat too, so I think that helps."

"Sure," Maddie nodded. "Truly, the relationship in the room is so important. If you find somebody you don't mesh with, you really should find somebody you do. The work is so much better."

"Absolutely," Wendy agreed and thought for a moment. "Is it true...Sorry...I was just wondering..." She stopped for a minute, trying to gauge for herself just where the line might be for Maddie, for the Duchess.

"You were wondering..." Maddie chuckled, letting off with a wave of her hand.

"I read an article about you a long time ago, probably after your engagement was announced."

"Sure," Maddie nodded.

"And I'm almost positive it said that you had been shot," her voice lowered and she looked up at Maddie almost tentatively. "Is that right? Am I remembering that wrong?"

"No," Maddie smiled with a small shake of her head. "You're not remembering that wrong. I...yes. I was."

"Wow..." Wendy wasn't sure why she was surprised; she had read it before. "When? How? I'm sorry. You don't have to answer that, I'm just incredibly curious. You weren't in the service were you?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "And it's fine, really. You can ask about it." She waved her hand and sat back a bit as a few of the others looked up from their food, paying attention. "I was in Bendal working with Doctor's Without Borders. I was close to finishing up my contract, deciding what I was going to do next; extend another contract or...date a Prince," she rolled her eyes and a bit of laughter rounded the group. "And while the area was volatile at times, this particular night had erupted into fire and violence and I was at the hospital helping out and somebody came in with a vendetta and a gun and...I was in the wrong place..." She shrugged, her heart tugging as she thought over all of the other details that went with this story. "It was one shot and then...the shooter was taken down."

"Where were you...sorry..." Michelle smiled sheepishly. Maddie smiled and nodded to her to go ahead. They had all shared so much of them with her, so many personal stories. It was only fair for her to share too. "Where were you shot?"

"My shoulder," Maddie pointed. "There was a lot of blood and I went out pretty quick," she snapped her puffy, gloved fingers. "They had to operate and I had to wear this ridiculous sling for quite some time but all things considered...it wasn't that bad."

"Do you still have pain there?" Sheryl asked. "Any lingering issues?"

"Sometimes," Maddie nodded. "You know...when it's cold..." She snickered and they laughed. "But for the most part...no." A small moment of silence settled over them as the other teammates took it in; this thing that she shared with them. An injury inflicted, a permanent scar and reminder. Though Maddie didn't know it at the time, the group had already accepted her among them, had already taken her in. But this, knowing this about her, it deepened a bond that was already solid.

"So what did you decide?" Louise called out, breaking the silence.
"Sorry?" Maddie smiled across the group to her. "What did I decide?"

"Yeah. Did you extend the contract or date the prince?"

And the laughter drew them all back to center.

Day 113

"Maddie Sussex, Video Diary. We've been on the Polar Ice Cap for eight days. Today was..." She shook her head and looked down at her gloved hands. "Today was a hard day. Balancing has been a struggle for Michelle since the beginning but our terrain seemed to be more difficult today. Sheryl has more issues when it's cold and...Wendy, the spots where she has shrapnel aches in high and low temperatures. It was incredibly cold here today with winds whipping us around...off our feet at some point. We had to stop and set up camp and get in from the wind. It's been...an exhausting day by all accounts." Maddie took a deep breath and smiled. "But spirits are high and not once has anyone talked of giving up. So...things are good. Here on the Polar Ice Cap, further North than really anyone in the world...things are good."

Maddie clicked off her camera and laid back on her pillow. The wind howled outside the tent as she looked up at the bright red fabric bending and rising and fluttering. They had had a long, hard, rough day of it. The wind had been pushing against them since they set out in it that morning. It had been a battle the entire sixteen miles they had pushed before the guides had ultimately decided to set up and hunker down. There had actually been a few relatively big scares when the wind pushed Sheryl from her feet, when Michelle nearly went into the water. The guides called it a day and told everyone to go to their tents, to stay put and stay warm and get some rest.

While the guides and the crew tended to Sheryl and Michelle, their focus on making them more comfortable and getting everyone settled, Maddie, like the others, had done as instructed. She had done all that she could do before she was asked to step aside. So she did; allowing the professionals to do what they needed to do.

Though it was still bright outside, it was later in the night and she was beginning to feel the exhaustive work they had been doing catch up with her. Shaking her head, she slipped into her sleeping bag and reached for her ipod. Putting the buds into her ear, she laid back and closed her eyes and as Harry's warm, deep voice lulled her to sleep, she realized that she was quite possibly the luckiest woman on the face of the earth.

Day 115

As cheesy as it sounded, even in her own head, the day after their lowest point, each and every one of them woke up rested, refreshed and ready to hit it again.

It was nothing but wide smiles, good mornings, words of encouragement and a few well timed and well humored pats on the ass.

That was the beginning and end of it all really—the entire point—the unshakable and impenetrable resiliency of these amazing women; Michelle, Sheryl, Wendy, Louise.

They pulled it together. And had their most productive day of the entire trip.

Day 117
The interview with Andrew Bradley had gone remarkably well. Maddie had known it was coming. Though she had been answering random questions on camera for him throughout the entire trek, she had known there would come a point where he would corner off time to speak with her—just as he had the others.

Day 117 was her turn.

He had asked her all the right questions; her interest in wounded soldiers, her past work with military families, her service in Bendal. He had asked about her husband but all in the context of the trek, of his military work, of his own journey with Walking With The Wounded.

He had hit all of the main points and Maddie had answered very well; she was prepared for this and incredibly passionate about it. And it showed.

But it was at the very end of the interview, just after she finished telling him how amazing these women were; how strong and resilient and stubborn and funny and brave they all were. It was at the very end that he managed to make her teary, that he managed to choke her up.

"Now Your Royal Highness, you've said some really wonderful things about your teammates," Andrew smiled at her from his spot behind the camera. "Which is an easy thing to do since they are some really wonderful women."

"Yes they are," Maddie agreed, smiling as she watched him; wondering where he was headed.

"And I thought you might like to know some of the things they've had to say about you," he watched as her eyes flickered, as her smiled pulsed as though there was a small part of her that wanted to shake her head and tell him no. But he was quick to the point and ready with words. "They've said to me, throughout the trip...She's absolutely one of us. Even though she hasn't worn a uniform, she's served, she's persevered, she's recovered. Just like us." He paused for only a beat before he continued. "She's incredibly down to Earth, amazingly sweet, and somebody who I think we all feel we could talk to...about anything really." He watched as Maddie blinked, as she swallowed at the lump in her throat. "When she first signed on as Patron and agreed to do the trek, I didn't know what to think but now that she's here, now that I've met her and spent time with her, I have nothing but respect and friendship for her." He smiled as Maddie's eyes flashed to his. "In all of my conversations with the team; with the soldiers, with the guides, they have nothing but glowing things to say about you. They've used words like integrity, personable, sweet, caring, genuine, real, hilarious, easy-going..." He shook his head. "I could go on."

"No, no," Maddie shook her head softly, her lips curling into a smile, her voice small under the emotions she was feeling. "I don't know what to say to that. I'm...humbled and honored to be amongst these women. I..." She looked down at her hands for a moment and then back up at the camera. "I have so much respect and admiration for what they do, what they've done and to have such phenomenal women welcome me into their group like they've done...” She shook her head and smiled. "It's meant more to me than they'll ever know. Being a part of this...it's meant the world to me."

Day 118

As they grew closer and closer to their goal, to the North Pole, the draw to pull inward grew larger; each of them reflecting on the days that had passed, the miles they had logged, the events that had lead them there.

Maddie was no exception. It couldn't be helped. The emotions were high, the times of silence
great and it was so easy to get lost in thought.

And she did.

As they skied through the mild weather that Day 118 had given them, Maddie found this to be her most introspective day so far.

She was struck by so many things; by how her body had adjusted to the temperature, how zero degrees now seemed warm to her new relative understanding of cold. She was struck by the group dynamics; how they had formed, how they had adjusted, how they now seemed to communicate so easily—at times without any words.

She was struck by how quiet it was; how peaceful.

And she was struck by how spiritual this trek had become for her; how cathartic it was proving to be; for her mind, for her soul.

As she continued on; one ski in front of the other, she turned off her ipod and she listened to the quiet around her. The swoosh of the snow, the slide of her skis, the rustle of her coat, the pants of her breath.

She listened and she watched.

Her eyes squinted beneath her sunglasses, looking past the red coat in front of her, past the skis below her. She looked out over the stark white snow, looked up at the crystal blue sky and she took in a long, steady, deep breath.

It was beautiful.

Serene and peaceful and...beautiful.

Here she was at the top of the world experiencing something that very few had the opportunity and luxury to experience with people she liked and respected.

She took another breath and felt her lungs catch; on the moment, on the weight of it all—on the fact that still, nearly one hundred miles in, she still felt like she hadn’t fully committed; like she was holding something back from the experience.

Her eyes shifted, tilting up to the sky as she took another breath, as her eyes began to well up and her thoughts took her over.

Thoughts of Harry, of how close she had come to losing him, how close she was to seeing him again; how much she needed him next to her.

Thoughts of her future, of what happened next for her; personally and professionally. What was her next major venture? When would their family begin to grow?

Thoughts of her father; of how proud he would be at what she was doing, how impressed he would be by her physical fete, by her emotional growth, by what she was doing with her life, with the privilege she had been given.

Thoughts of these women who owed her nothing and had given her so much.
Day 118 had been easy and smooth and from a physical standpoint, a flawlessly executed day.

On the emotional side of things, Day 118 had brought her face to face with everything that had been buzzing around her mind, it had brought her right to the edge of it all.

Now all she needed was a slight nudge.

Day 120

"Your Royal Highness," Maddie turned towards the voice of one of the guides, her eyebrows lifting as she smiled at him.

"Yes?"

"Edwards asked me to have you go over into his tent," his voice was low, his eyes fixed on her. "He said it was important."

"Sure," Maddie nodded, tucking her hat back onto her head and turning towards the tent. They had set up camp for the night and as long as the weather held out and the terrain remained calm, they could be reaching the North Pole the next day. This fact, this light at the end of the tunnel had the group both excited and apprehensive. Maddie could feel the flutter in her stomach as she unzipped the tent and stepped inside, smiling to Edwards as she zipped it closed. "Mitchell sent me over..." She trailed off as she watched him rise to his feet, as she watched him hold his hand out to her.

As she looked down at the satellite phone in his hand.

"It's for you...Maddie..." His voice was low and soft and carried with it a sweetness that wasn't completely out of character for him, though a bit of a rarity. And she knew, she knew it in her bones. This was a very important phone call.

"For me?" She whispered, her heart thudding in her chest as he nodded and lifted it closer to her. With a deep breath and a pounding heart, Maddie took the phone from his hand and pressed the cold plastic to her ear. Her eyes squeezed shut as she exhaled. "This is Maddie."

When Maddie emerged from the tent, she had to stop for a moment; had to collect her footing, her balance, her mind. As she struggled with the thump of her pulse and the tears in her eyes, Andrew Bradley stepped up to her from what appeared to out of nowhere.

"I know what's going on," his voice dropped low as he stood next to her.

"Is that so?" With a blink of her eyes she tried to school her expression.

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded, folding his arms over his chest.

"Well, do tell," Maddie waved her hand encouragingly, her lips twitching into a small smile.

"First," he held up a finger. "I know we just received a satellite phone call." Maddie shrugged and began to walk. He followed along and continued. "In and of itself it's not a huge deal, right? I mean...we're close to the pole. The call could have been about weather or timing or our return flights..." He shrugged and let it sit for a minute and then he held up a second finger. "Except the
phone call was for you." Her eyes flashed wide for a fraction of a second but it was just enough that he caught it. "And as smart as you are, as important as you are..." Maddie rolled her eyes. "Any of those types of phone calls don't go to you. So...it had to be personal."

"Listen..." Maddie stopped walking, her voice lowering but he kept going.

"And you would only get a personal phone call at the North Pole if something either really bad or really good happened," he held up a third finger and lowered his voice. "And the smile on your face..." He shook his head and held up a fourth. "Maddie...Is your husband back in London?"

Maddie blinked at the tears that rushed to her eyes, sucked in a breath and shook her head. "No. He's not."

"Is he..." Andrew couldn't say the words, could barely think it.

"No," she whispered.

"Then what is it?" His eyes were wide as he watched her debate in her mind what she was going to tell him, if anything.

"It's..." Maddie tried very hard to control the way her heart was pounding in her chest, tried to keep the smile from taking over her face. With a deep, steady breath, she leaned in and narrowed her eyes. "Between you and I?"

"Completely off the record," he held his hands up in the air.

"The call was..." She swallowed at the lump in her throat. "It was my father-in-law...telling me that Harry and his men have left active deployment in Khundu," she felt tears in her eyes as she spoke the words for the first time, her heart swelling in her chest as they continued to sink in as she realized that it was finally, finally over.

"But you just said..."

"They are in Greece," she whispered, her nerves trembling as she spoke. "They have a few days of decompression and then they go back to London. I'll probably beat him home but..." She let a shudder of excitement wash over her. "But he's out of the fire."

"He's out of the fire," Andrew repeated her words and mirrored her smile and it took everything Maddie had not to burst into happy tears and scream out into the arctic air just how unbelievably joyful she was.

He was home. One hundred and twenty days and Harry was home.

Day 121

In the end the emotions came full circle. As quiet as they had become, as much as they had retreated into themselves as they drew closer and closer to the Pole, when they finally spotted it; when they finally found it within their sites, they were pulled to each other.

At half a mile left, they dropped their heavy gear.

At a quarter mile left, the camera crew drew back, the guides began to slow and Maddie felt all of the restraints she had placed on herself, anything she had been holding back washed forward.
And she stopped and took it all in.

Standing off to the side, Maddie watched with frozen tears in her eyes. She watched the four soldiers draw together and in their own loud, proud voices, they counted down the feet until finally, finally they were there.

And the quiet, peaceful world around them erupted into celebration.

They were embracing and laughing and crying and when they turned to her, tugging her arm, bringing her into the celebration, she felt elated. She felt so deliriously happy and overwhelmed and better.

There were an abundance of photos snapped that day; the four veterans at the pole, the entire team at the pole, the Union Jack held up between them, the Christmas Candy that was cold and hard and shared amongst friends.

They snapped so many photos that day, one of which Harry would frame and keep on his desk until the day he died.

He was so fucking proud of her. And she was so fucking proud of what they had done; Michelle, Wendy, Sheryl, Louise.

When the plane finally touched down in Russia, there was an audible sigh of relief and a wild round of applause. They had spent some time at the North Pole; celebrating, taking it in, reflecting. Laughing. Crying. Taking pictures; actual and mental. And then the helicopters had come in and they were whisked away.

After such a successful trek, after all of the hard work, the entire crew was ready to get to warmth; to beds and hot water and food that they didn't have to re-hydrate. And wine. Maddie imagined there would be plenty of wine passed around the hotel that looked to be their oasis for the night.

As the pilot welcomed them back to Svalbard, congratulated them on their feat, Maddie could tell he was smiling. She knew that on the other side of the short walkway from the plane to the airport was a whole host of loved ones for the other trekkers. She knew there would be signs and balloons and lots of love and hugs. And she had to admit, though only to herself, that there was a part of her—a bigger part than she would have thought—that wished she had agreed to let Kate come and meet her. But when she had asked, Maddie had refused and Kate had given in.

She took a deep breath and sat back in her seat, watching as people around her rose and filed out of the plane. She would just have to be content knowing that on the day she finally returned to London, Harry would most likely be there—having just returned from decompressing on the sands of Greece.

Maybe he would be right where she left him—on that bottom step in their entryway.

She smiled wide as she thought of him, an enormous amount of comfort settling over her knowing that he was at least out of the war zone—that he was simply sunning and drinking and smiling. She could wait two days to see him, as long as he was okay.

"Your Royal Highness..." Her eyes turned up to the voice calling to her and she smiled, snapping
back from her moment.

"Andrew Bradley," she looked to see that it was her turn and with a groan she pulled herself from her seat, stepping into the aisle in front of the friend she had made out of the reporter. As they both moved forward on the plane, she chuckled. "Is it strange that I feel...a little hot right now?"

"Ha!" He laughed loudly behind her. "I think when you come from a place so rigidly cold, it's normal to find anything warmer."

"I suppose," Maddie nodded, unzipping her coat and pulling off her stocking cap; her hair only slightly mussed underneath.

"So...I know you said your husband is in Greece right now..." His voice grew softer when he slipped from journalist to friend for a moment. "Is there anyone coming to hold up a sign for you?"

"Nah," Maddie shook her head with a grin. "I wanted this to stay about them, not about me. And if somebody shows up for me..." She threw a look over her shoulder to him. "You guys shift your focus."

"Ouch..." His hand moved to his chest as they smiled their thanks to the air staff and stepped from the plane to the walkway.

"Anyway," she rolled her eyes. "I'll have my signs and my hugs at home."

"Fair enough," he stepped in line next to her.

"How about you?"

"Nah," he shook his head. "I'm at work. I'll have my signs when I get home too."

"Good," Maddie nodded and took a deep breath, the weight of the last two weeks catching up with her in the form of elation and exhaustion.

As they rounded the corner, she could see the airport. She could see the bright lights and she could see the balloons and she could hear the celebratory screams and squeals and laughter. With slightly teary eyes, she turned a wide smile to the man with the camera.

"This really is the best part, isn't it." Maddie whispered as she watched the women from the trek walk right into the arms of their loved ones; tears peaking at her own eyes.

"It really is," Andrew chuckled softly and scanned the crowd, taking it all in. And just as they stepped into the airport, his hand reached out on its own and stalled her. "Ma'am..."

"Yes?" She turned confused eyes to him. He hadn't called her that in quite some time.

With a soft expression, his smile pulled high. "Remember when you asked if I ever had something; a photo or a moment that I knew would sell like crazy but I didn't..."

"Yeah?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Well," he shrugged. "This is one of those moments."
"What do you mean?" Maddie shook her head in confusion.

"Over there." He pointed over her right shoulder with a nod. "I think maybe you know that man."

"What?" Maddie laughed as she spun around to look, to follow to where he was pointing and then she saw him.

Harry. Her Harry.

Her eyes instantly welled up and she had to wipe at them to clear her vision, so she could be sure she wasn't seeing things, so she could be sure her mind wasn't creating an image of him; playing games with her heart.

But it wasn't. It wasn't an image, it wasn't a figment of her imagination. It was him; her tall, red-headed, very real husband standing off to the side, towards the back of the room watching her as if he had been searching for water for weeks and she was the eternal spring.

The lump that rose to her throat threatened to take her down but she was having none of it. It had been too long, there had been too much that had happened in the four months since he had left her.

Nothing was going to stop her from being with him. Not the terminal full of people, not the cameras, not the reporters, and sure as hell not her own emotions.

It took her seconds, less than seconds, to cross the space between them and hurl herself into his arms and when he caught her in a hug, when he pulled her as tightly to him as he could possible get her, it was as if the air, the light, the life, rushed back into her.

"Oh my God..." Her voice was only a whisper as her tears began to fall, as her emotions rose to the surface. "Oh my God it's really you."

Harry, too choked up to speak, nodded into her neck, his eyes squeezed shut as he held her to him. He couldn't get her close enough. He had her wrapped up in him, he had her feet lifted off of the floor, he had her body pressed tight against his.

But he couldn't get her close enough.

"I thought you were in Greece," she sniffed as she pulled back to look at him, her hands sliding to the sides of his face. "I thought I wouldn't see you for days. I thought..." She shook her head as new tears tumbled from her eyes, as her whole body warmed as she looked at him. "Harry..." She croaked. "What are you doing here?"

He had to swallow twice before he could speak, he had to pull in a deep breath and call upon all of his wits but finally he blinked away his own emotions and in a voice that spoke of more steadiness than he felt in that exact moment, he smiled. "I'm putting myself in your arms."
Chapter 149

A small burst of laughter pushed through Maddie's lips and her eyes welled up even further and then without much thought to anything else, she let him gather her closer, she let him bring her in and she let him kiss her.

Right there in that terminal; with all of the people, with all of the cameras, with all of the reporters.

Harry tilted his mouth over hers and he kissed her; warm and soft and full on the lips.

And it was the most amazing thing she had felt in so long that she couldn't help but twist her fingers into his hair and hold him to her just a moment longer than would be publicly acceptable. And when he finally pulled back, just enough to smile down at her, just enough to press his forehead to hers, she grinned and nudged his nose with hers.

"I've missed you so much Captain."

"I've missed you too Maddie..." He kissed her once more before pulling further away. With a deep breath, he sat her upright; steadying her on her feet.

"I can't believe you're here," she looked him over, ran her hands over his shoulders, over his arms.

"Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you," his eyes were sweet on her, his arms opening up regrettably to allow her to move from him, to stand on her own. "Back from the North Pole."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed; her heart so full of joy, so light with excitement; at finishing the trek, at seeing her husband. She felt like she was floating. Taking a breath, she turned her eyes back to the rest of her team; smiling wide as she looked them over. "I'm so proud of them," Maddie sighed, her hand moving up to hold onto his, their fingers intertwining.

"I'm so proud of you," he brought her hand to his lips for a kiss; holding her skin to his mouth for a moment, relishing the warmth, the softness. Maddie turned back to look at him, her fingers reaching to stroke against his cheek and she smiled wide. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, the Trek guide called them all back to the entrance, wanting to take a few more photos; one last shot of them all in their gear before they were free to shower and change and meet up again in about an hour for dinner.

"I have to..." She nodded her head to the side; nearly lost in his blue-eyed gaze.

"I know," he nodded; holding onto her for just a beat longer before he released her fingers. "I'll be right here."

"Hmmm...." Her lips pressed together as she looked him over; head to toe. "Best surprise yet, Captain. Best surprise yet."

Harry chuckled as she walked away, missing her next to him the moment she took the very first step. But he smiled with pride as she took her place next to the other trekkers and when photo time came, he pulled out his phone and snapped a few of his own.
After the photos had ended, they were all dismissed to settle in. They had instructions to meet for a celebratory dinner that evening; a chance to unwind and have conversation without the sub-zero temperatures and bitter winds.

So Maddie had waved good-bye to her new friends, promised to be there for dinner and then, with Harry’s hand locked into hers, she led him from the airport, to the awaiting cars, back to the hotel.

Maddie shut the door behind her, clicking the lock into place and when she turned back into the room, he was right there in front of her with that brilliant smile of his.

"Hello," his eyes twinkled as he moved closer. She watched as any sort of public persona he had worn in the airport faded and it was just the two of them.

Harry and Maddie.

Her with her back against the door. Him closing the distance between them with confidence and determination.

"Hello," she echoed with a smile as the space lessened between them. As he stepped up to her, into her space, her hands rose and for a split second did not know where to go. They wanted to be everywhere. As his arms moved around her, as his hands pressed to the door on either side of her, hers slid into his coat and over his chest. It was warm and soft in there and under her right hand she could feel his heart pounding. "It's really you." Her eyes flashed up to meet his and he nodded with a sweet, soft smirk.

"It's really me," he stepped closer; his body pressing tighter to hers.

Maddie's hands moved up his chest to his shoulders; his broad, strong shoulders. And her smile pulled higher. "I thought it was going to be days before I saw you," she ran her fingers up his neck into the soft spikes of red hair at the nape.

"I couldn't wait that long," he shook his head as his hands on the door slid closer to her body, closer to her. "I hope you don't mind."

"Oh God," she shook her head, tears threatening to well in her eyes. "I don't mind. Not at all. Not in the least." Her hands slid back down, pushing his coat off his shoulders as they went. "I've missed you."

"Ha!" He laughed out into the room, moving his hands from either side of her so that she could push his coat from him. As it slid off his last arm, he tossed it aside and focused in on her; his eyes serious and full of want. "God Madeline," when his hands moved back to her, they bypassed the door, bypassed the tease and went straight to her hips. "You have no idea how much I've missed you."

"Well..." Her voice dropped low, her hands reaching back out to him, her fingers curling around the fabric of his shirt. "Maybe you come on over here and..."

If he ever really needed an invitation, that was all of one he needed. With that familiar smirk of his lips and that well known dance in his eyes, he leaned in and for the second time that day, for the second time in four months, his mouth caught hers.
The first few passes of his lips over hers were a soft, sweet "welcome home" but when her fingers tightened on his shirt and her mouth opened under his and she let out that small breathy whimper, the heat in the room—between them—peaked.

And he couldn't hold back any longer.

With a moan into her mouth, he pressed in. His tongue moving in between her lips as his hands on her hips moved higher; sliding up in between them, over her stomach, over the swells of her breasts. Making her moan.

As his mouth continued to move with hers, his hands wrapped around the front of her coat and pushed; wanting her out of it. Wanting her out of everything. Forcing her hands from his body, he tugged her coat off and tossed it away.

And just like magnets they were forced back together.

It was hot and feverish and full of this desire that had been building and smoldering since he had left her four months ago.

His hands wasted no time as they moved back to her hips, this time slipping up under the hem of her shirt. When his flesh met hers, she gasped into his mouth and her eyes flew open. With a smile against his lips, she pulled away; her breath coming up short and heavy, her lips pink and swollen and happy.

"Harry..." She breathed as her body reacted instinctually to his; pressing against him even as she tried to move away. "I....I haven't even showered."

"I don't care." He was quick with the words, quick with a shake of his head; his tongue licking his lips as he bent in to kiss her again.

"Ha!" She laughed loudly and happily as her hands pushed at his chest. "But I do!"

"Maddie..." He groaned in that frustratingly sweet boyish way he had.

"I haven't shaved my legs in weeks," she eyed him, her body arching out against him as his fingers tickled over her ribcage.

"Madeline," he grinned as his hands moved around her back pressing hot against her, bringing her closer against him. "I've just returned from months in the desert. I survived a helicopter crash. I swam for miles and you..." His eyes looked her over and his cheeks grew pink; the corners of his eyes crinkling up in his smile. "You're back from the North Pole and you look...so fucking sexy..." She rolled her eyes but he held her tighter. "And you're here. In my arms and I swear to you....Maddie, Maddie...I don't care about any of that. Please." His smile softened, his eyes growing wide. "Please. Let's make love."

There was a moment of hesitation, a blink of her eyes when all she wanted to do was tear off his clothes and take him right there against that door. She had thought of this moment so many times, wanted his hands on her, his mouth on her; wanted him so much. Harry caught her pause, caught her second of indecision.

And he moved in. His hands were moving under her shirt, back around towards the front of her. His lips were kissing at her mouth, her chin, her jaw; moving over her in a heated sort of need. As he dipped down into her neck, Maddie laughed at the way his slightly fuzzy chin tickled her skin.
Harry chuckled against her, pressing her closer, tighter. "Oh God..." She groaned as her own desires moved her into him; wanting his hands all over her. Needing his hands all over her.

When Harry pulled back from her neck, his eyes were flickering with amusement; with love and humor and everything she had missed about him while he was away. "God baby I've missed you so much," he shook his head, his fingers moving deftly as they found the softness of her breasts.

Even though she moaned, even though she wanted this—wanted everything about where his hands were headed, where his lips were leading them, she shook her head and moved to stop him. Her hands moved up under her shirt, her fingers wrapping around his wrists and when he pulled back from her with confusion in his eyes, her lips curled up in a smile.

"I need to take a shower baby," she pushed his hands out from under her shirt. "I need to take a hot shower and wash away this trip and..." She bit her lip as she moved away from the door, as she stood tall and wrapped her arms around his neck; tipping up on her toes to kiss him. "And when I come back..." Her lips kissed his...slow and hot and full of promise.

Harry groaned at the way she made him feel, groaned as he nodded, his hands patting her ass as he surrendered. "Go. Shower. And come right back here."

"I swear on my life," her eyes met his in a solemn vow. And then with one last kiss, she stepped away from him; her hands sliding slowly down his chest as she moved.

He watched, his teeth pressing into his bottom lip, as she walked away and his entire body and soul ached for her to return. "Just a shower Sussex!" He called out. "No shaving!"

With a laugh Maddie stepped into the bathroom and shut the door behind her; leaving a breathless, happy Harry in her wake.

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When Maddie stepped out of the bathroom, a cloud of hot steam drifted out with her. Wrapped only in a large towel, her eyes immediately sought and found him. He had taken off his coat, his shoes and his sweater. Standing only in his jeans and a button-up, he flipped mindlessly through the channels on the television.

Until he heard her. His eyes snapped up to her and his smile spread wide. Without another glance to the TV he shut it off and tossed aside the remote control.

"All done..." Maddie smiled at him, feeling silly as she felt her cheeks blush under his gaze.

"And wearing just a towel," he nodded to her with that damn smirk of his; his arms folding over his chest as he looked her over. She shrugged and kept walking, right up to him.

"I assumed whatever I put on would be coming off," her hands were on him instantly; as if his hot, hard body was their natural home.

"You assumed correctly," Harry's voice dropped as her fingers moved over his folded arms up to the buttons of his shirt.

"Any reason you're still dressed?" She looked up to him under lowered lashes and the smile on her face made his knees weaken.
"None that I can think of." His head shook, his arms unfolding.

"We should remedy that." Maddie's eyes twinkled as her fingers worked quickly over the top two buttons.

"We absolutely should," he agreed with a chuckle, his own fingers working up from the bottom. When they met in the middle his hands caught hers and he pulled her closer to him. He wasn't sure if it was just the fact that he had been gone for months or if it was that she had just accomplished this amazing fete or if it was just that he wanted her as he always had—with everything in him. He wasn't sure exactly what it was but the site of her, the smell of her, the feel of her in the room with him—it warmed his blood, ignited his pulse and swelled his heart.

And there was a moment; a fork in the road when they both knew that this could go in two different directions. This could be the wonderfully loud, boisterous, laughingly fun reunion where she tore his clothes off and he tossed her towel aside and they fell into bed in a heap of rushed, heated desire. Or it could the other way; with high emotion and maybe a few tears as they pushed together, allowing it to feel as big and momentous as it possibly could. Harry watched Maddie closely, his lips turned up and his hands on hers; waiting for her to decide which way they were going to go.

She looked up at him, her lip pulling between her teeth. And then, as her smile stretched wide, she decided. Her fingers reached out to touch him; pushing into his now open shirt to his bare chest underneath. His skin was hot and her warm fingers against him made his breath catch. Maddie chuckled as his muscles jumped beneath her hand, as they grew accustomed to her touch again. Stepping in even closer, her fingers moved to trace a line from his sternum to his belly button. His chest rose and fell and Maddie's heart pumped faster as he watched her reaction to him.

A small sigh fell from her lips as her hands flattened out against her teeth. And then, as her smile stretched wide, she decided. Her fingers reached out to touch him; pushing into his now open shirt to his bare chest underneath. His skin was hot and her warm fingers against him made his breath catch. Maddie chuckled as his muscles jumped beneath her hand, as they grew accustomed to her touch again. Stepping in even closer, her fingers moved to trace a line from his sternum to his belly button. His chest rose and fell and Maddie's heart pumped faster as he watched her reaction to him.

"There we go," she grinned; heat rising to her cheeks as she looked him over appreciatively. Her hands flattened out over his chest, sliding down to his stomach and then with a twitch in her lips, her fingers wrapped around the buckle to his belt and tugged him closer.

"Jesus..." He moaned; his own hands sliding up her arms, up her shoulders to hold her at the sides of her neck, tipping her face up to his. As his lips fell hot against hers, her fingers went to work. She unbuckled and unzipped and within seconds, she was pushing at his pants wanting them off. Now. She pushed down as far as she could without pulling her lips from his and then he took over, stepping out of the pool of clothing at his feet and stepping closer to her.

"Harry..." Maddie sighed into his mouth as his body pressed against hers. She ached to be closer.

"Mmmm..." He smiled and pulled back, watching as his hands moved to her towel. With a teasing look in his eyes, he slipped his fingers into where the towel was tucked around her. With a tug and a flick, the towel was tossed aside; just like that. "My God..." He groaned, his hands moving around her instantly; pulling her hot, naked body flush against his.

"Oh my God..." Maddie laughed, her hands catching his shoulders as he wrapped himself around her again. "I've missed you Harry. I've missed...this."
"You have no idea," he shook his head. He was so full of desire, so full of love; so full of her.

"Hmmm..." She arched against him, her hands dancing up into his hair, pulling his mouth back to hers. "Maybe you show me."

"Yes ma'am," he nodded and dipped to kiss her again; hotter, heavier. As he gathered her closer, he moved to turn them, to turn her back towards the bed.

But feeling bold, Maddie stayed put; instead she pulled her lips from his and with her hand flattened out over his chest, she gave him a light push back towards the bed. Harry smiled big and wide when the backs of his legs hit the bed and when she pushed once more, he did exactly what she wanted him to; he sat down on the bed and moved back towards the center. His hand held onto hers as he moved, as she followed him onto the bed on her knees. When he reached the pillows at the head, he settled back and with wide eyes he watched as his gorgeous, naked wife moved her legs over his and straddled his thighs.

"My God," he breathed heavily, his hands moving to her hips as she scooted closer. "You're beautiful."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back as she laughed. "You've been in the desert for four months; clearly you're a bit jaded."

"Watch your mouth," he leaned up as his right hand slid up the side of her body; his left sliding down. As his fingers moved into her hair, turning her mouth down to his, his eyes flashed wide and his smile grew. "Madeline Sussex...is that a smoothly shaved leg I feel?"

Maddie's eyes twinkled as she shrugged. "I don't know."

"You know that wasn't the deal," his fingers tightened as they moved down her leg towards her knee. "I think somebody's in some trouble."

"Yeah?" Maddie held his gaze, her hands settling on his shoulders; her fingers tickling at the back of his neck. "Exactly how much trouble are we talking about Captain?"

His eyes narrowed and his hands slid back to her hips and then, with his own desires pulsing below her, his fingers danced across her hip, across her stomach and then they moved; slowly and teasingly down towards her center. "Quite a bit of trouble," his voice was low and husky as he reached her hot, wet center where all of this build up had pooled, waiting for him.

She sucked in a breath at the feel of his long fingers stroking against her; her body acting on instinct and arching towards him. "Harry..." She breathed, her hands tugging into his hair.

"Madeline," he shook his head, his lips smiling as he leaned in to capture her nipple; hard and ready and aching for attention. She moaned when he pulled it into his hot wet mouth; gasped when his tongue flicked over it.

"Please...." She breathed.

"Please?" He echoed with a smirk and a cocked eyebrow.

Her eyes looked down at him, her tongue tipping out to wet her lips and then with this brilliant confidence and this unyielding sexiness, she wrapped her hands around his wrists and pushed him back. Harry's eyes went wide for just a moment as he watched her move over him; scooting
higher as she pushed him back against the pillows.

And when her hot little fingers wrapped around his hard, pulsing cock, his head tipped back and his eyes closed and he had to work to keep himself from dying right there at her fingertips.

"Harry..." She called to him, wanting him with her now that he was finally with her. She had waited so long to be close to him, so long. She knew she simply couldn't wait any longer. His eyes pulled open and his hands moved back to her thighs; slowly and lovingly and when she lifted her hips up he sucked in a breath and braced himself. And then with a twitch of her lips, she moved the tip of him to her hot, wet entrance and she breathed. "Now."

He couldn't look away from her; couldn't tear his eyes from watching as she slid herself over him. With a groan and a gasp, Maddie sat down onto him, into his lap; taking all of him as far into her as she possibly could. Her cheeks flushed and her body tingled but her eyes stayed locked with his as she sighed.

It felt so good, beyond good, to be there with him; wrapped around him as he pushed up into her. His hands slid hotly over her skin; her hips her thighs, back up her side. He was getting the feel for her again, letting his hands take back the memories; letting his body reclaim this intimacy with her.

And she felt amazing. Everything about her was amazing; her soft skin, the curves of her body, the way she felt clenched around him. When his hand moved up her neck and into her hair, Maddie looked down at him and there was this moment; this beat of heaviness that passed between them. This look that spoke of all of the time they had been apart, of all that had happened, all that had been said, all that had been tested. And for just a moment the weight of it all almost pulled them from the light frivolity of what was happening. But Maddie wasn't ready for that. She wanted to dive into it, wanted to address it at some point.

But not yet. Not until they had reunited. Not until they had loved over each other, until she had communicated to him in more ways than words just how much she had missed him, how happy she was to have him back with her; in her arms.

Holding his hand in her hair, she leaned forward and pressing her chest to his, she kissed him. Hot, heavy and deep.

Harry's head lifted up off the pillow, both of his hands burying into her hair, holding her to him. Because even though she was moving forward without the talk, without going down that deeply emotional road they would get to eventually, he needed her to know.

He needed her to know; she was it. She was everything. And this, being with her there in Svalbard, making love after so much time apart.

This was his whole world.

"I love you," he spoke into her mouth, unable to stop kissing her long enough to get it all out in one breath. "I love you so much. Maddie..."

She nodded; holding his hands to her as she let him push his tongue into her mouth, as she let him nip at her lips and smooth over them with his. And then she pulled back, pressed her forehead to his and whispered. "I love you too."

And then, blissfully, she began to move.
Her lips kissed down his neck to his chest, her hands sliding down his arms as she sat up; her hips rising and falling over him. And then she lifted up higher, nearly all the way off of him. With a clenched jaw he watched her lower herself back down; moaning as she moved. Harry's head shook, his hips arching up to her as his fingers gripped her hips and he sucked in a breath.

"Maddie..." He gasped; wanting her to slow down—needing her to slow down.

"Captain," she grinned; rising and falling, rising and falling. Rising. And waiting. And falling.

"Maddie," he groaned; his hands holding tighter, stalling her in his lap. With a chuckle, he looked up at her, biting back his breath, trying to calm his heart. "If you don't slow down, I'm not going to make it..."

He could see her ego puff up, he could see the smirk on her face seconds before it materialized. She looked so fucking proud, so happy that he didn't even mind that she was about to unman him—simply because she could.

"Maybe I don't want you to make it," she laughed as she leaned over to kiss him. Her tongue pushed into his mouth as she clenched her muscles that were wrapped around him, causing him to groan against her lips.

"Baby..." He wrapped his arms around her then, holding her to him in effort to stop her movements; to allow himself a moment to pull it together. "Maybe I don't want you to make it either."

"Mmmmm..." She grinned and pushed against his chest, wanting to sit up. And though he needed just a moment longer, he released his hold on her and watched as she sat tall and proud in his lap. "It's been four months Harry..." She reached for one of his hands, moving it to her breast as she brought the other one to her center, just above where they were joined. And then, as she began to move again, as his hands went to action where they were placed—knowing exactly what to do—Maddie's breath came up short and her eyes locked with his. "I promise you..." She shook her head as the rush began to inch through her body. "I'm not going to make it."

They were both right. It had been so long, too long and they wanted it too much—wanted each other too much. With a few more strokes, a few more rises of Maddie’s hips, of Harry's hands stroking at her, of his groans, of her gasps.

They were so close to the end—even before they had begun they were so close to the end. But when Maddie's breath changed, when it pulled short and quick and her hands moved to press his closer to her, when her eyes slid shut and her head tipped back—it took all Harry had to hang on, to stay there with her just long enough.

"Harry..." She called out into the room, her fingers gripping at his as she moved against him, as she pushed and pushed and then, as she grew closer and closer, Harry sat up. With one hand wrapped tightly around her waist he pulled her down onto him as his lips moved over her.

Her neck.

Her shoulders.

Her chest.
And when he dipped down to take her nipple into his mouth, when he pulled her down roughly to him, he felt it take her over.

"Oh!" She gasped.

Her fingers pressed into the skin of his shoulders, her eyes rolling closed, her head tipping back and then it happened; wave after wave of pleasure washed over her as Harry held her collected in his arms.

"Harry...Harry...Harry..." She moaned his name as she fell apart and before the last of her orgasm moved through her, Harry was moving them.

He had to.

With arms wrapped around her, he flipped her back onto the mattress. Pulling her knees high and around him, he slid his hands up her still pulsing body and took her hands from his shoulders, linking his fingers into hers and pressing her hands up above her head, into the mattress.

He stroked into her once.

Twice.

And on the third time, he lost it.

He lost himself.

Groaning her name into the soft skin of her neck, he let go and pushed all of himself into her.

They stayed there like that for a moment; her legs wrapped around him, his face in her neck. As he lifted his head so that he could look at her, their eyes met and a matching pair of wide grins spread across their faces.

"Wow..." Harry chuckled, dipping to press a kiss to her shoulder.

"I'll say," Maddie sighed, arms moving out from under his so that she could hug him.

"I think we broke a world record," Harry joked as his arms tucked underneath her, wanting to hug her close.

"What can I say," Maddie smiled up at him as he looked down at her. "I missed you. My body missed you."

"Ha!" Harry nodded; loving her more and more as she laughed along with him. "God you're amazing."

"Thank you," she lifted her lips to his. "And...thank you..." She winked.

"No no," he laughed with a shake of his head. "My pleasure." Harry kissed her then; softer and slower before he pulled back, looking her over. "You okay?" His hand smoothed down over her hip.

"I am," she nodded. "You?"
"No," he laughed and shook his head. "But I don't think I'm going to be okay ever again." He smiled as he rubbed at her hip; his voice falling sincere for a moment. "I love you Maddie...I love you and I missed you...so much. Do you know that?"

"I do know that," she smiled simply, her fingers moving to ruffle his hair. "I do."

"Good," he nodded, turning to kiss her wrist. "Jesus..." He laughed at the way his heart pounded. "I think it's me who needs a shower now."

"Is that so?" Maddie grinned up at him, her legs tightening their hold on him, not wanting him to pull from her just yet.

"Yes Ma'am." His eyes twinkled as she struggled to let him go. "We're meeting for dinner in half an hour and I'm definitely going to need a shower."

"Fine," Maddie huffed, letting her legs loosen around his hips.

"Fine," he mimicked her huff as he pulled, regrettably from her; kissing her as he moved from the bed—her lips, her chin, her chest, her stomach.

"Go ahead and take a shower..." Maddie sighed as she watched him walk away from her, enjoying the view as he did. "But no leg shaving Sussex! We don't have time for that!"

And as he stepped into the bathroom, she could hear his loud boisterous laugh echo around him.

And it was the sweetest thing she had ever heard.

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When Maddie and Harry stepped into the large, private dining area where all the other trekkers and their families were beginning to gather, they looked every bit a young couple in love. Refreshed and showered and smiling, Maddie was glowing as she held tight to his hand; tucking herself close to him. And when Harry looked at her, which was often, it was impossible to miss the adoration he held for her.

It was that way throughout the entire night. Her wanting to be close to him, wanting to have contact with him and him, bursting with pride and devotion. He stayed next to her as she excitedly introduced him to the others.

"You remember my husband, Harry?" Her eyes twinkled every time she said husband.

They met everyone. They met Michelle's husband and her two young children. They met Sheryl's sister and her mother. They met Wendy's wife. They met Louise's boyfriend. They spent time with the guides, Harry listening to tales of the trip; of Maddie on skis in the Arctic. And then they met Andrew who despite the blushing protests from Maddie, pulled out his camera to show Harry some unedited footage from their last day on the ice.

As everyone gathered around the table, around Andrew, they were glued to the small screen with laughter and a few tears. And as they watched it for the third time, the look on Harry's face, the pride in his eyes as he looked to his wife, her hand wrapped up in both of his—the pride never once faded. It never once faltered.

He was so in love with her; more than he had ever really been.

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And later, much later, after bottles of wine and toasts of champagne and one amusing story after the other, they were all drawn apart—towards their own rooms and their families and their plans for home.

Harry wrapped an arm around Maddie's shoulders and held her close and snug as they entered their room for the second time that day; blissfully happy and content.

And together.

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Things in their room, between them, were warm and calm and quiet. They dressed for bed and this time as they slipped in next to each other, they were filled with the sweet familiarity that comes with being home. Harry settled into his pillow and lifted his arm, inviting her in. And she went; eagerly and happily, snuggling into his side, resting her head on his shoulder. His arms wrapped around her and pulled her closer and Maddie closed her eyes; relishing in the way her senses reacted to him.

The smell of his skin, of his hair. The feel of his steady breathing. The sound of his heartbeat under her ear. The smoothness of his skin, the tight, hard muscles. Her hands moved over him; softly and soothingly, welcoming back the feel of him next to her. Maddie sighed closer and Harry chuckled as he turned to kiss the top of her head. As her fingers graced across his hip, just under his t-shirt, they ran over something new; a scar. Maddie's eyes flew wide and she lifted up to look down at him.

"What is that?" Her voice was small, the confusion still hanging on, even though she knew better. He blinked and hesitated and it only fueled her concern. Pulling back the blankets, Maddie sat straight up in bed, leaning to turn on the light. "Harry..." She ran her fingers over it again. "What is this from?"

"It's..." He faltered only for a second before he sucked it up and told her. "It's from a burn."

"A burn?" Her eyes lifted to his; full of concern. "From the crash."

"Yes." His head nodded and his eyes stayed fixed on her; watching as she processed it all. Her fingers ran over the length of it, her eyes welling up with tears. "Maddie..." His hand reached out to hers but she pulled back; out of his reach.

"I..." She shook her head; swallowing back the lump in her throat as she tried to fight it—the return of those feelings.

"I'm okay," he was soft with her; knowing this as bringing up a lot from her. His hands smoothed over her back as she turned away from him.

"I'm not," she whispered in a choked up voice. "I'm not okay...you have a burn?" She turned teary eyes back to him. "What else is there?"

"Hey..." He sat up on his elbows. "Don't cry. It's okay. I'm okay. I..."

"What else is there?" She was firmer with him, her fingers smudging out the tears that pressed from her eyes.
"There were a few burns, Maddie," he tried to stay calm and at ease with it. "I told you that. You knew that. There were a few burns and a few cuts."

"Where?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted. "Where else are they?"

"What? You want me to strip down and show you?"

"Yes!" She nodded, not at all concerned about sounding silly. "Yes. I want to see what happened to you. I want to know what permanent scars were left on your body."

"Maddie..." He sat all the way up.

"You won't show me?" She blinked.

"Of course I'll show you. I just...you're upset and..."

"We were in Wales when it happened," she cut him off; her mind drifting back to that night. "Will and I were at the hotel in Wales. The event was over and I had just had the run in with the reporter..."

"Wait," he shook his head. "What run in? What reporter?"

"And he had come up to push me back in line..."

"Push you back in line?" His eyes narrowed and his voice dropped. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

But Maddie wasn't fazed, was deterred by his change in tone. "And then Fynn walked in with Will's phone and it was like the floor dropped out from under me."

The sound of her voice, the waver and the sadness, snapped Harry back to her in an instant. "Maddie..."

"We got in a helicopter and then a plane and...it wasn't until we landed in London that I knew you weren't..." She gulped and blinked at the tears. "That you weren't dead."

Maddie felt her throat tighten, felt the palms of her hands begin to sweat and all of the feelings from that night rushed back to her. She threw the blankets off of her and moved from the bed. Harry was behind her in an instant, moving around to her side; stepping into the path of her pace. When she turned to look up at him, the look in her eyes broke his heart.

"Maddie..." He groaned against his own feelings; of regret and worry and guilt.

"I didn't..." She let out a light, bitter laugh. "I didn't know what to do. I...if Will hadn't been there, I would probably still be in that hotel room unable to move. I..." She shook her head a bit wildly. "Even now...after all this time, even seeing you standing here and feeling you and..." Her hands reached out to his chest to feel his warm body underneath them, as if to check; to make sure. "Thinking about it just..." One of her hands moved to clutch her own chest and a few, scattered, fresh tears slipped from her eyes. "I was so afraid Harry. So afraid."

"I know," he whispered, his words catching on the lump in his throat. "I know. Come here..." He pulled her into his arms then; wrapping his body around hers, pressing her close to him. "I'm so sorry for that night Madeline. I'm sorry the phone call came, I'm sorry you had to worry. I'm sorry
that you had to wonder and not know and...” His eyes looked up to the ceiling as he fought for control of his own emotions. "I'm sorry I didn't come to you that night. I'm sorry I didn't do this...right then..." He leaned to press a kiss to the top of her head as she tried to calm her tears, as she listened to his heart beat in his chest.

After a few minutes of standing just like that; held together by his arms, Maddie nodded against him. She knew he was sorry, she knew that the last thing in the world he would ever want would be to hurt her. She knew that in her bones. But it didn't stop her from hurting. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"You have nothing, nothing to be sorry for," he ducked down to catch her face in his hands, to look into her eyes. "Listen to me. You have nothing to be sorry for; not for being mad, not for being upset, not for hating me..."

"I..." She interrupted. "I never hated you..."

"No?" He smiled sweetly; knowing her better than that.

"For only a second," she smiled and wiped at her eyes, feeling silly.

"Okay," he nodded, his lips pulling higher as one of his hands left her face, reaching for her hand. "Here..." Standing tall, he pulled her hand in his and moved it around to his back; pressing it to the skin just above his hip. Maddie felt a thin, long puckered line of scar tissue and her eyes flashed up to him. "This was a cut." His voice was low and soft as he ran her fingers along it. "There were ten stitches."

"Harry..." She breathed.

"And this..." He slid her hand around to his stomach to a small circular spot. "This was a burn. A bolt came loose and it was hot and..." He shrugged lightly and pulled her hand over to his opposite bicep. "There's a cut here. Less than five stitches. No big deal."

"Harry," she let out a bit of a whimper and he rubbed his thumb over her fingers that were pressed to his arm.

"You wanted to know..." He whispered. "I want to show you. Maddie..." He slid her hand down his side, over his rib cage to another spot. "This is a burn and right below it," he moved her hand again. "A cut. There are some on my legs and..."

"Stop," she shook her head, pulling her hand from under his.

"But..."

"Stop," she cried. "I thought I wanted to know, thought I wanted to see but..."

"I'm okay baby," he caught her face in his hands again. "Look at me. I'm here. There were cuts and burns but nothing big. I took a hit to the head but...I'm okay."

"I..." She croaked and shook her head again; her hands running along his forearms, her fingers wrapping around him as her eyes fluttered up to his. "Were you...were you scared?"

The air between them grew heavy as he drew in a long slow breath; his eyes not moving a fraction away from hers. She watched as he swallowed, watched his Adam's Apple bobbed in his throat.
She could feel his hands tighten on her face, feel his fingers rubbing at her temples.

And when his voice sounded out into the room with a slight shake to it, it resonated deep inside of her soul. "Terrified." Maddie's lip wavered, her eyes filling with tears but Harry continued. "Not of the crash, not of the swimming..." He shook his head. "Of the phone call I knew you were getting, the look I knew was on your face...of the thought that I might never see you again."

"Shhh..." Maddie pressed her fingers to his lips, shaking her head trying to rid them both of that thought.

"Listen to me Maddie..." His voice was rich with emotion. "That night when I finally called and told you I was..." He took a breath. "I told you I was staying. That was the hardest decision I've ever had to make. I knew you would think I was choosing the Army over you and..."

"I didn't think that," she shook her head.

"I knew you would be upset and..."

"I just wanted you home," her voice cracked. "I wanted you in my arms. I wanted to touch you and feel you and know for sure that you were okay. I just needed it more than I've ever needed anything..."

"I know," he pulled her into him again; wrapping her up in a hug. "I know." He kissed the top of her head and cleared his throat. "I realized a lot that night. I spoke to my father and he was upset and he told me; it was time to stop playing soldier, time to start playing husband."

"No, no," Maddie shook her head, pulling back from his chest to look up at him. "I don't feel that way. I don't think you're playing and I don't think you need to stop, I just..."

"Maybe I do," he cut her off.

"What?"

"Maybe I do..." He shrugged; his hands smoothing over her back. "I don't know Maddie. I really don't. I think...I think we should get back to London, get back to normal and then we should talk about it because the last thing I want...the last thing I want would be for my children to grow up without a father."

"Harry," she blinked at the tears in her eyes and smiled up at him.

"And in the meantime..." He dipped lower so he could match her gaze. "Whenever you need to make sure I'm here, that I'm okay, you just..." He took her hands in his and placed them on his chest. "I'm right here; right under your fingers and I swear to you...I'm not going anywhere."

Maddie, full of emotions she could barely name, nodded her head and wrapped her fingers around his t-shirt; pulling him to her with one swift movement. The heat in his lips, in that kiss radiated around them. Maddie's arms moved up and around his neck and suddenly her primal needs and desires were paramount to everything else.

"Love me Harry..." She moaned into his mouth, pressing closer to him as his hands moved around her. "Now...please..."

With a groan all his own, Harry scooped her up into his arms and took her right back to the bed
from which they had just came.

This time wasn't about the lively, lightness of a welcome home. This time, as he pulled her clothes from her body as his mouth moved over every inch of her skin...this time was about laying all of the emotions, all of the stress and worry and love and ache at the feet of the other. This was about claiming each other again; about reclaiming everything between them that was heavy and hot and full of the love they had for each other.

The first time had been about welcoming home, about a reunion after a long time apart.

This time was about bonding them back to the other.

There were tears and cries and moans and calls out to God.

And it was everything; everything they had missed, everything they had put on pause, everything they had built towards, everything the needed, everything they wanted,

Everything.
Chapter 150

The Well Child Awards had always been one of Harry's favorite to attend and after having attended them for the first time last fall, Maddie had quickly and easily become a fan. It didn't even matter to either of them that they would be spending their first anniversary working since the work they were doing was something they both enjoyed a great deal.

To begin their day, they slept in just as late as they possibly could and then shared a wonderful breakfast before Maddie was hurrying off to the shower so she could be ready when Tara showed up to pin up her hair. She was excited for the night. It was the first official function they had undertaken together since Harry's return and having moved dates this year, it was the beginning of the summer festivities instead of the end. Soon there would be Trooping the Color, the Royal Ascot, Polo. This was just the first of many.

As Maddie sat in her chair in a spare bathroom making small chat with Tara, there was a delivery made; a replica of her wedding bouquet, complete with a sprig of delphinium and a bottle of champagne in the vintage year she was born. Though her suave, cheeky husband was nowhere to be found, she brought the flowers to her nose for a sniff and asked that the champagne be put on ice. She couldn't show up to an event with children with champagne in her system. Plus, they had decided to celebrate their anniversary later that night after work was over. She would enjoy it with her husband later.

When Harry finally did waltz in, nearly an hour later when they were both dressed and ready to go, Maddie's cheeks were pink from the look of him; her heart speeding up in her chest. Though the time apart because of his deployment was in no way a gift to their relationship, it had certainly been a catalyst for weeks of amazing reunion sex. And for that, at least, she would be thankful.

"You look...tasty," Maddie whispered in his ear as they slid into the backseat of the car; the doors shutting around them.

"Tasty?" Harry chuckled under his breath. "That implies that you would like to..."

"I would," she met his gaze as the car set in motion. "Later. With the champagne you sent over."

"You're on fire tonight, love."

"Just you wait," she winked; feeling the excitement in the air between them, the happiness. Maddie could barely believe they had been married a year, it felt like last week that she had stepped into St. Paul's and took that long walk to meet him.

It felt like there's no way it could have been a year already and then in some ways it felt like there's no way it could have only been a year. They felt so much closer, so much stronger, so much more ingrained in this marriage, in this life they had created together.

"Well," Harry let out a breath and scooped her hand up into his. "I'll be happy to wait," he kissed her fingers. "Also, if I haven't told you already..."

"You have," she grinned.

"You look beautiful," he said it again anyway. "And..."
"And?" She wagged her eyebrows.

"And thank you."

"Thank me?" She tilted her head to the side. "For what?"

"For being not at all put out that we're spending our anniversary working instead of on a beach in Necker or the Maldives."

"No, no," Maddie shook her head, a wide, beautiful smile lighting up her face. "This is perfect. Absolutely perfect."

"Yeah?" He chuckled as their car pulled to a stop.

"Yes," she squeezed his fingers and dropped his hand as their doors were pulled open. "Trust me. This is exactly how we're supposed to be spending our night."

"Well, if you say so..." He nodded a look across to her, finding it difficult to tear his eyes away, before he turned and stepped from the car.

"Oh I do," Maddie smiled wide as she stepped from her own door, moving around the car to follow him.

They were greeted quickly and sweetly by a team of people ready with big smiles, bows and curtsies and then they were escorted inside.

This really was one of Maddie's favorite events; only a year in and she already knew the elements of a fun night. Harry and children; that was really the beginning and end of it all. It made her heart swell in her chest to watch him interact with the kids; to watch how his face lit up when they smiled. As she had done before in the US, Maddie had Libby bring along her balloons and pump and she spent the reception time following Harry around and making balloon animals at request while he charmed and joked and winked at her over young heads.

They really were quite the team and there was nobody there in that building that night who would ever say otherwise.

When the reception began to die down and everyone was being moved to their seats, Maddie turned her bag of tricks over to Libby and followed alongside Harry, his hand at her back as they entered the ballroom. The lighting was beautiful; the standard soft pinks and lavender that had always been associated with the group. As they were shown to their seats, Maddie could see him pat his suit coat just above the inside pocket where his speech was tucked. She watched as he smoothed his tie and turned to her, waiting for her to take her seat before he did.

With a deep breath to calm her oddly shaky nerves, Maddie sat down; smiling at those around her as Harry followed suit.

"Are you doing okay?" He whispered, his fingers grazing her knee as he looked her over quickly.

"I'm fine," she breathed; smile wide as she patted his hand. "Thank you. I'm fine." And just as he squeezed her knee, the lights dimmed and the program began.

The President of the Foundation was speaking, thanking guests and sponsors and Maddie knew that he was ramping up to introduce Harry. Leaning closer to him, she gestured for him to do the
same, as though there were something she needed to tell him.

"Hey..." She smiled at him, her fingers reaching out to stroke his tie.

"Hey..." He grinned; his eyes watching her playfully; their back and forth from earlier having spilled over into the night. "You know I have to be up there in less than a minute."

"I do," she nodded and took a breath. "Do you remember just before I gave my first speech as the Duchess?"

"Yes," he let out a small chuckle, not sure why she was bringing it up but amused by it nonetheless.

"It was at the first Walking with the Women event and I was nervous and you leaned in and whispered the most inappropriate sexual thing you could think of...trying to throw me off..."

"I was...offering my support." He countered with a playful smirk.

"Sure..." She laughed; her cheeks stretching as she smiled.

"Listen, if you're trying to throw me off..." He warned; not at all easily fazed.

But Maddie shook her head, pulling at his tie as her lips moved to his ear. And very discreetly, so that nobody would be the wiser, she whispered the words that would stop his heart, "You're going to be a father."

"Ladies and Gentleman," The President's voice boomed out around the room. "His Royal Highness, The Duke of Sussex."

Harry pulled back from her slowly; his mind absolutely unraveling at her words. His eyes hit hers and for a beat she second guessed her decision; nervous that he was about to lose all of his finely-tuned control. His eyebrows arched just a fraction of an inch and her head nodded the tiniest of bobs. Trying to cover, she smoothed his tie before releasing him.

"You're up tiger." And though she was smiling, she was biting her lower lip to keep from crying tears of happiness. Joining in with the crowd, Maddie clapped her hands as she watched him rise to his feet, his hands moving to button his suit coat. Summoning everything he had learned over his last 30 plus years, he kept his face calm; a steep contrast to what was happening underneath. She watched him as he moved from their seats, nodding to other guests as he took the stage. She felt positively giddy; like a big mushy mess of a girl, ready to weep at the power of this moment she had just handed him. Those who were watching her face, saw pride and warmth and a deep, deep love for her husband.

Harry took to the stage with pep and life and when he stood at the podium and looked out at the room, his eyes first sought her.

"Wow..." He breathed; his voice cracking in a way only she noticed. His hands fell over his heart for just a moment before he cleared his throat and began.

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Five Weeks Earlier
When Maddie and Harry finally arrived back in London from Svalbard, they discreetly slipped out of the crowd and left the airport in an unmarked car. Deliberately wanting to separate themselves from the attention and spotlight the other trekkers were about to receive, they simply wanted to go home; to see family and be together in their space.

So they had hugged and said their good-byes on one side of the tunnel and they were on their way with nobody the wiser.

Their first stop? Clarence House.

Maddie and Harry were barely through the doors before Charles and Camilla were hugging them both; Charles with his hands on Maddie's cheeks, his arms wrapping around Harry and holding him tightly to him. He was so happy to have his kids back; so happy they had both made it through their journeys and had returned to them in nearly the same state they had left.

No sooner had Maddie stepped out of Camilla's arms, Will and Kate were coming down the stairs with a sleeping Arthur tucked away in a guest room.

Though Harry still had questions for his brother about what exactly had gone on in that hotel room before the call had come about the crash, Maddie had insisted he let it go and he had begrudgingly agreed. Even though...when William sat aside a lifetime of brotherly ribbing and instead pulled him tightly into his arms, Harry went and held on just as tight.

"Madeline," Kate smiled wide as she hugged her; kissing her cheeks. "My goodness, look at you. You look amazing..."

"Yeah?" Maddie laughed under Kate's gaze.

"Yes," the brunette nodded. "That fresh Arctic air did wonders for you. Look how happy you are!"

"Oh and I'm sure that had nothing to do with what was waiting for her at the airport in Norway," Harry groaned with narrowed eyes, laughing as he pulled Kate to him for a hug.

"Not a thing," Maddie shook her head playfully at him as she turned to hug Will.

"Welcome home sister," Will's voice was warm in her ear. "I'm really happy to have you back."

"Thank you," she smiled in return, kissing his cheek as she stepped out of his embrace.

"Now..." Camilla stepped forward, tucking her hand into her husband's arm as she looked at the lively group of children. "How about some champagne?"

With a smattering of applause and wholehearted agreement, they followed her into the sitting room; ready to celebrate Harry's return and Maddie's accomplishment.

The night had been full of elation. They had drank champagne and had dinner and when Arthur woke up from his nap, Harry nearly fell over himself trying to get his hands on the little guy who seemed to only want Aunt Maddie.

"Don't worry Sussex," she teased him as she hugged their nephew. "I'll put in a good word for
"My God, he's grown so much," Harry shook his head as he looked him over. "I didn't think I was gone quite that long."

"It felt that long, didn't it Arthur," she kissed his cheeks. "It's good to have Uncle Harry home, isn't it?" And then, as if on cue, he started clapping his hands; bringing laughter from every one of them.

"God Maddie," Harry groaned, his hands smoothing over his nephews soft brown hair. "I want one."

"Me too," Maddie's eyes danced as she held his eyes. "And...if you take me home right now, we can start working on one..."

The Well Child Awards

By the time Harry had finished his speech and they had moved on to handing out the awards, he had managed to pull it together enough to get through it all. He had found a way to pull his mind temporarily from the reality she had just handed him so that he could do what he was there to do.

But when the program ended and everyone began to gather for pictures, his will and resolve were not nearly as strong. Not when Maddie moved to stand next to him as they snapped away. Harry watched her closely as she climbed the few stairs to the stage and the wave of emotion he felt wash over him nearly knocked him off his feet.

"Right over here, Your Royal Highness," the photographer directed Maddie to Harry's side and she went; slightly nervous.

"Hi there," Maddie smiled at him.

"Hi there," he shook his head at her; still reeling from her announcement—trying his level best not to stare at her stomach, not to reach out and touch her there. As the staff continued to bring children to the stage, his hand moved around her waist, pulling her closer to him and he swore his heart was going to leap from his chest. "Tell me you weren't messing with me."

"What?" She was shocked. "Never. Never about this." They were speaking under their breath as everyone was being put into place.

"You're really..." His eyes were swimming with tears; his voice brimming with emotion.

"Yes," she swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Okay," the photographer turned to them. "We'll have you two right over here..." She pointed and they followed.

They followed even though the only thing either of them wanted to do in that moment was run as far away from people as they possibly could. And celebrate.

And as the children moved around them, it took all Maddie had not to cry; watching him respond to the kids, knowing they were going to have one of their own; knowing that at that moment,
inside of her, was one of their own. Pulling it together, she snapped her attention away from him and bent down. Crouching next to Harry she sighed as the kids pulled at their clothes, pulled at their attention; at their hearts.

Four Weeks Earlier

"Buckie Bishop?!" Harry snickered as they walked up the path to Bishop and Ella's home. "You're joking!"

"I'm not!" Maddie exclaimed with a wild shake of her head. "I'll bet you right now."

"Bet me what?" He arched an eyebrow, looking her over appreciatively.

"Whatever you want Captain," she tossed out her own smug smirk and held out her hand. "I swear to you, in less than a minute you are going to meet the newest addition to the family...Buckie Bishop."

"Fine," he huffed, taking her hand in his with a firm shake. "But tell me...why in the hell would they call him Buckie?"

"Ha!" Maddie snickered and reached to knock on the door. "I'll pay you a thousand dollars if you make sure I'm there when they tell you."

Three hours into their dinner with the newly expanded Bishop family and three things had happened.

One, Maddie had won her bet: Bishop had verified that they were in fact going to call his namesake and first born son, Buckie.

Two, Maddie owed Harry one thousand dollars because he had waited for her to return from helping Ella put Buckie down to bed before he asked Ella about her particular name choice. And when Maddie watched Harry nearly spit Scotch all over their living room, she decided it was worth every single dollar.

And three, they had finished off an entire bottle of Scotch.

As they sat around the living room toasting Buckie's arrival, Harry's safe return and Maddie's ass—which Ella had proclaimed was the most amazing ass to ever return from the Arctic—the three of them (minus Ella) got well and drunk.

Before they left, Harry was already flirting with her from across the table.

Before their car even left the drive, Maddie had her hands on him.

And before they could even kick off their shoes in their own foyer, Harry had his lips on her and was tugging at her clothes.

That night, drunk on Scotch and this desire they had for each other that only seemed to be getting stronger, they sank to that second stair Harry had been on the day he left and together, with half
their clothes still on and the other half on the floor around them, they made a whole new memory there.

The Well Child Awards

They smiled for photo after photo after photo; hugging the kids, laughing at their jokes, shaking their parents' hands. And finally, after it was all over, they were done. With a smile, their hostess for the night lead through the corridors towards the exit of the building. In truth, Maddie didn't know how much longer either of them would make it. When she had dropped this news on her husband, she hadn't accounted for just how much it was going to open up for her. She needed to be alone with him; needed to share this moment with him.

And he needed that too.

"I'm sorry," Harry smiled charmingly at their hostess as they passed an empty office; his hand resting on Maddie's arm to stall her. "Would it be okay if we stepped in here for just a moment? I need to place a phone call and..." He patted at the pocket of his suit coat with a shrug.

"Of course," the lady nodded, not at all put out by the request. "Not a problem at all."

"Love?" Harry looked to Maddie, standing to the side to let her walk past him into the office. He nodded his thanks to their hostess and followed her in; shutting the door behind him.

"Oh, Harry, I'm sorry that I told you that way..." Maddie had no time to finish her thought before he had gathered her in his arms; his mouth moving against hers. "Oh..." She sighed into his mouth; surrendering to the moment, to him. Every single built up emotion he had held onto since the moment she had uttered those words, poured out of him and into her through that kiss. And when he finally pulled back from her, she was breathless and well kissed.

"Madeline..." He ducked own a bit to meet her eyes. "You're pregnant?" His voice was low, soft; full of hope. Maddie bit her lower lip, savored the look in his eyes, the smile on his face and she nodded.

"I'm pregnant."

"Oh my God..." He shook his head; his lips returning to hers. His hands slid over her body; over every curve, over every turn. "When?" He kissed her jaw. "How?" He kissed her neck.

"How?" Maddie laughed, her hands holding onto his shoulders for stability. "I think you know exactly how...daddy."

"Oh God," he pulled from her, his hand going to his heart and his eyes turning sweet on her. "Madeline..." He pushed her hair back from her face, cupping her cheeks. "When?"

"I don't know," she shook her head, wiping at the tears in her own eyes. "I mean...those two weeks after you got home all we did was..." She laughed as she remembered and he laughed with her; pulling her back into his arms with a fierce hug. "It could have been any of those."

"Jesus..." He was shocked; in the best way. "I...how long have you known? When did you find out? When did you suspect? My God..." He kissed her again. "I have so many questions."
"I know," she nodded, bringing her hands to his cheeks. "And I want to answer all of them. But can we...can we go home and be alone and change and..."

"Yes," he breathed. "Absolutely yes. We can...God Maddie. We can do anything you want to. Anything."

One Week Earlier

Maddie would never forget the day it all came together; the day the math met up with the odd feelings she had been having. She would never forget that moment when she was sitting in Ella's kitchen, cuddling little Buckie while Ella went on about the after effects of giving birth. Maddie was only half listening as she stared down at the chubby beautiful little boy while his mother ticked off dates and weeks and months.

And then as if it were a true Eureka moment, it struck her.

Holding the baby tighter to her, she rose to her feet and walked right out of the kitchen towards Bishop's office in the back of the house. It took Ella a few seconds longer before she spun around and noticed her friend was missing.

"Maddie?" Ella called out as she walked down the hallway. "Maddie? Where did you..." She spotted her best friend out of the corner of her eye as she passed by the office. Stepping back, her eyes narrowed. "What are you doing?"

Maddie didn't answer as Ella walked in and stood behind her. Maddie was focused on the wall calendar behind Bishop's desk, her eyes staring off as she worked something over in her head.

"Seriously Maddie, you're freaking me out. What are you doing in here?"

"Counting," Maddie's voice was barely there, her eyes not looking to Ella as she ran over the numbers in her head again.

"Counting?" Ella's face screwed up. "Counting what?"

"Days," Maddie breathed and then, with wide eyes, she turned from the calendar to her best friend. Ella watched with concern as she saw the beginnings of tears brewing.

"Maddie, come on. What is it? What's wrong?"

"Oh God," Maddie seemed to be shaking just a little as the corners of her mouth tipped up. "I...Ella. I need your help."


"I..." Maddie took in a deep breath. "I need your help and I need you to keep it...Oh God Ella. You can't tell a soul. You can't tell Bishop even."

"Okay," Ella agreed; more concerned but not at all deterred.

"You can't say anything. You can't..."
"I swear," Ella held up her hand in an oath; meaning every single word. "I won't tell a single soul."

"Okay," Maddie took another deep breath, letting it out slowly before she took a few steps closer to her best friend and then, with a flicker of hope in her eyes, she whispered. "I think I need a pregnancy test."

"So she went out and bought you one?" Harry and Maddie had left the Well Child Awards; had waved to those who were waiting outside and slipped into the car and once they were home, behind their own closed doors, she had told him the story of how she had figured it out.

"No," she shook her head as they sat together on their couch. "She had one there. She gave it to me without questions or anything. I brought it home and..."

"When did you take it?" He asked; his fingers stroking over hers that he held in his lap.

Maddie grew teary as she smiled at him. "I took it this morning. I snuck out of bed while you were sleeping and..." She blinked as a tear rolled down her cheek. "I wanted to surprise you."

"You did," he breathed; his grin pulling higher. "My God, baby....you did." His hand moved to her cheek.

"Are you mad? About the way I told you and..."

"No," he cut her off quickly. "I'm not mad. I'm...I'm the furthest thing from mad, Maddie. It was perfect. I mean...I would have liked to have seen the test but..."

"I still have it upstairs..." She pointed with wide eyes. "Do you want to see it?"

Harry nodded, leaning in to kiss her. "I do. I really do," he laughed at himself.

"Okay," Maddie sighed and rose to her feet, pulling him with her. "Come on...daddy."

Harry stopped in his path; his face softening as a hand moved to his chest. "Oh wow..." He breathed. "You have no idea what you've...no idea..." He pulled her back to him hugging her close.

But she did; she had an idea. She knew exactly what he was talking about, the feelings he was alluding to because she had them too. She had felt them that entire day as she had struggled to keep this secret, as she had prepared to let him in on it.

"Come on," her eyes sparkled as she stepped out of his arms, as she pulled on his hand. "I have something very important to show you."

Harry followed her up the stairs, matching her smile and her pep as they hurried to their room. As she stepped into their bathroom, he tossed off his suit coat, pulled at his tie; his eyes catching his reflection in the mirror as he passed. His smile seemed to take up his entire face.

"Here we go..." Maddie stepped back out into the room, moving slowly over to him as she held out the long slim stick with the purple cap.
"This is it?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, nodding to the plastic in her hand.

"It is," she grinned as he took it from her fingers, studying it with a serious look on his face.

"And the plus means..."

"Positive," she supplied, biting softly at her lower lip as she watched him.

Harry's lips curved up and his eyes grew soft and sweet and his shoulders sagged and when his eyes lifted to meet hers, it took her breath away.

"You're pregnant." He spoke with conviction, with reverence.

"I am," she nodded, stepping closer to him. "We're going to have a baby."

Harry's laughter, his exuberant joy rang out into their home; his eyes welling up with tears as he looked her over. "We're going to have a baby..." He repeated her words with stun in his voice. And then, as his eyes caught hers, his focus shifted. Sitting the test down on his dresser, he moved to her. "Tell me...are you okay? Are you feeling okay? Is there anything you need or..."

"I'm fine," Maddie smiled sweetly, her hands rubbing up his arms that were moving around her.

"Does anybody else know?"


"Do we need to...I don't know..." He chuckled as he gathered her closer. "Do we need to take you to the doctor or..."

"Not yet," she sighed, her hands moving higher up to his shoulders. "In about three weeks is when I should go in. I'll be about...eight weeks then."

"Eight?" His eyebrows lifted. "So that means you're five right now."

"I am," she nodded.

"Five weeks pregnant."

"Five weeks pregnant."

"I don't know what to say Maddie," his fingers lifted to stroke her cheek, to tuck a loose hair behind her ear. "I...I don't know what I could possibly give you that would ever equal this...that would ever make you feel like I feel right now..."

"Funny you say that," she turned her lips to kiss his hand. "Because it seems like you already gave it to me..." Her hand slid down over her still flat stomach and her eyes hazed over.

With a laugh caught up with emotion, Harry leaned in to kiss her; his lips loving over hers as she hugged him close.

"I had thought...this morning, I had thought we would end the day in bed eating that top layer of our wedding cake and drinking champagne..." He chuckled with a shake of his head. "But this is
so much better than that; worlds better."

"It is," Maddie agreed and then, with a tiny shrug she sighed. "Though the cake does sound really good..."

"I'm on it," he cut in quickly; eyes dancing as he kissed her once more. "You put on your pajamas and crawl in bed. I'll go get the cake and I'll be right back."

"Yeah?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows and he nodded and stepped away. "Okay," she agreed; happy at the idea.

Harry kissed her once more and then took a few steps to the door before turning back to look at her; hand pressed to his heart. "Hey Maddie..."

"Captain?" She looked up from the belt on her dress.

With a voice full of sincerity and eyes full of love, he swallowed and looked right at his life; his future. "Thank you. For this...for everything. Thank you."

She had to bite her lip to keep from crying, to keep from caving under the emotion of it all. With tears in her eyes and smile on her lips, she pressed her hands to her chest and nodded. For as much as he wanted this, for as much as he had wanted this for a very long time—she wanted it too.

And finally, finally...she was going to have it.
When Maddie woke the morning after the Well Child Awards, she woke with a smile on her face and when she rolled over in their bed to face him, she found one on his face as well.

"Good Morning," she smiled, blinking back the last bit of sleep left in her.

"Good Morning..." He answered in that husky, morning gruff of his. "Mum."

She giggled as he pulled her closer to him, sighed as his lips fell into her neck. "My God...can you believe it? We're going to be parents."

Harry kissed up to her jaw. "I woke up thirty minutes ago and all I've been thinking about was last night...wondering if it was a dream."

"No dream," she shook her head, pulling his cheeks into her hands. "All real. We made a baby."

"We did..." His eyes were so full of warmth and happiness and love that Maddie could feel it in the lump in her throat. "Tell me. How do you feel?" His hand slid down over her stomach.

"I feel wonderful," Maddie smiled, watching as his eyes raked over her.

"Can I get you...anything?" He looked back up at her, bringing his arms around her.

"Mmmmm..." Maddie thought for a moment, her teeth biting at her lip as her eyes twinkled. "Do we have anymore cake?"

"Ha!" Harry laughed. "No love. I think we finished off the cake last night. However..." He bent to kiss her again. "If you want me to I can make a call to the baker myself; order up another."

"You would do that for me?"

"I would," he kissed her cheek, her jaw. "I'd do anything for you."

"As much as I love the thought..." She sighed, pressing his lips closer into her neck. "I think that a specially ordered wedding cake remake from the palace might just tip somebody off to something..."

"You're probably right," Harry groaned and pulled back from her neck, smiling down as he leaned over her.

"But I suppose that does raise the question..." Maddie's fingers ran lightly over his chest. "What are we going to do about this new secret of ours?"

"What are we going to do about it?" Harry chuckled, settling into the bed, tucked up against her.

"I mean who do we want to tell? Who do we need to tell?"

"Well..." He chuckled into a sigh; scooping her hand into his, kissing her fingers. "There's definitely a part of me that wants to tell just...everyone who will listen."
"Well a lot of people would listen if you did that," she snickered.

"And..." He sucked in a breath. "There's a part of me that wants to tell no one; that just wants to keep this to ourselves. At least for a while." He kissed her hand again. "What about you?"

"I think maybe I'm leaning more towards option two," Maddie felt a little nervous as she thought of what would happen when word leaked to the world.

"Me too," Harry agreed.

"You know," Maddie turned closer to him. "A lot of people wait until the second trimester before they tell anyone."

"That would give us what...seven more weeks?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Of course...we would need to go to the doctor in there and...How do we even go about seeing a doctor without..."

"Well..." Harry dropped her hand and reached to tuck her hair back from her face. "I usually go through Thomas for stuff like that so...I suppose that would put one person on a Need-To-Know list."

"That makes sense," Maddie agreed easily. "Who else would need to know?"

"I'd like to let Jim and Arthur and the rest of the protection detail know. I mean, they're going to figure it out pretty easily once they are around us for any extent of time."

"Fair enough," Maddie shrugged. "What about the family?"

"Well..." Harry took a breath. "If it's okay I think I'd like to wait for a bit. I mean...we can tell yours if you want but so very little is ever just mine and..."

"Okay," she cut him off. "That's all you need to say. We can tell them towards the end of the first trimester. We can tell them then."

"Yeah?" His eyebrows went up, eyes hopeful.

"Yeah," she ruffled his hair. "So, we'll let in Thomas, the doctor, the protection detail...and everyone else can find out in seven weeks?"

"Yes," Harry grinned as he nodded. "Except."

"Except?"

"I think we should let in one more person...probably two."

"Who?" Her eyes narrowed as she watched him.

"The only other person that knows there's an actual chance..." His fingers drifted down her body, back towards her stomach.

"You want to tell Ella." Maddie grinned.
"Mmmm," he nodded, flattening out his hand and smiling up at her. "And Bishop. I just feel like she's probably dying holding this in..."

"She is," Maddie snickered, knowing his assumption was correct.

"Is that okay? If we tell them?"

"Of course it is," Maddie nodded happily. "They'll be so happy that we're having a baby..."

"Yes. Finally," he exhaled with a grin. "After all of that trying..."

"You loved the trying," she eyed him.

"True statement," he kept his hand on her stomach as he moved to kiss her mouth; longer, softer, sweeter. "I adored the trying."

"Me too," she smiled against his lips, pulling his mouth back to hers as he moved over her. "In fact..." She snuggled in closer. "I don't think that the trying should have to stop..." She pulled her leg up over his hip. "Do you?"

"No..." He shook his head, his hand running down her hip, over her thigh; cupping her knee as he pulled her leg higher and closer. "Not at all."

"Thank God," Maddie breathed as he settled himself between her legs. "I would hate to think that now that you're making me a mother, you find me somehow...untouchable."

"No, no, no," his grin flashed wicked as he pressed against her; his hands smoothing over her cheeks, into her hair. "In fact, if possible, it's increased my...need...to touch you."

"Well by all means..." She pressed up against him, holding his eyes with hers as she did. "We should meet those needs."

Harry chuckled, low and warm and then very slowly, very deliberately, his hands moved from her cheeks. They slid down her neck, down her collar bone, rounding over her breasts in a hot way that made her arch out, made her moan for more contact. Which he was more than happy to give her. Flashing a smile as he moved, he bent to kiss her there, to press a hot, wet, open-mouthed kiss to the fabric that covered her already hard nipple.

"Harry..." She breathed.

"Mmmm..." He answered, sliding over to pay the same attention to the other.

Maddie's fingers stuffed into his hair, holding him closer to her as she settled into this amazing feeling that washed over her; the fire that always gathered at her center when he loved on her like this. His hands moved down her stomach and back up, pulling up under her shirt finding her skin hot and eager for his touch. He grinned as his lips followed, kissing up her stomach as he pulled her shirt higher and higher.

"Harry..." She breathed.

"Mmmm..." He answered, sliding over to pay the same attention to the other.

Her fingers left his hair so that he could rid her of her shirt and when they returned to him, they were greedy to rid him of his. She watched with wide, hungry eyes as he sat up and pulled his own off and discarded it just as quickly.

"You know Captain," Maddie groaned, her fingers stretching out to dance down his chest, along
the soft trail of hair that lead south. "You are going to be the sexiest father in the country..."

"Oh?" His eyebrows rose as her hands pushed into the band of his boxers.

"In all of the land..." She grinned, her eyes flashing wide as she found him hard and ready.

"Is that so?" He growled as she wrapped her fingers around him.

"Mmmm..." She nodded, her skin flushed, her body washed with this constant want she had for him. "God Harry, I think this baby of yours has amped up my hormones. I need you so bad..." She groaned as she stroked at him.

With a loud, ridiculously happy laugh, Harry pulled her hand from his boxers, moving it to the pillow next to her head. "What do you say we meet those needs?" His eyes flashed dark, his smirk devastating as he leaned back in and captured her mouth with his.

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Telling The Bishops  

Maddie had to hand it to her best friend; she really went all out in her efforts to remain true to her word. The day she had handed over the pregnancy test, she had sworn she wouldn't say a word, she had sworn she wouldn't press for answers or ask any questions. She had handed it over and let it go.

And she was about to be rewarded for her efforts.

Though they both wanted to guard this news as only theirs for a while, keep it between just them, Harry had felt the slightest celebratory obligation to alleviate the anxiety and stress he knew Ella must be sitting with. She knew there was a possibility Maddie was pregnant and she had no idea what the results were and she had sworn herself to secrecy. He couldn't help but suggest they do the right thing and let her in; ease the tension. Clearly she could be trusted to keep a secret.

So Maddie agreed and two nights later they were sitting with Bishop and Ella in their dining room with little Buckie in his bedroom, sleeping through dinner. Though Harry had threatened to wake him up, dying to play, he had backed off when Bishop warned of potential future payback.

"So listen," Harry began, clearing his throat and leaning in as he looked to their two friends across the table. "There's something we need to tell you."

Ella's eyes flashed wide for a split second before she pulled it back together. Maddie smiled as she jumped in with her husband. "It's something that truly nobody knows, something that we don't want anyone to know..." She looked to Harry who met her smile with a sweet one of his own.

"But we thought that you should be in on it since..."

"Hold on," Bishop cut in, holding his hand up to stop them. "If you're going to tell me about another deployment, you can stop right there. I don't even want to hear it."

"I'm not being deployed again," Harry chuckled at the look on Bishop's face. "I swear it."

"Are you sure?" Bishop looked from Harry to Maddie.
"Easy darling," Ella ran her hand over her husband's shoulder. "Maybe you should let them speak."

"Do you know what they're going to say?" Bishop's eyebrows lifted as he looked to his wife.

"No," Ella blinked, shaking her head. "Of course not. But...he just returned from Khundu. Surely they won't send him back and..."

"Hold on," Maddie's hand reached out to Ella's, her smile wide as she saved her friend from having to hide something from her husband. "Harry's not going anywhere."

"I'm not," Harry's grin spread across his face. "In fact..." He nodded to his wife who sucked in her breath and for the first time since telling Harry, she whispered the truth.

"I'm pregnant."

As Bishop and Ella vacated their seats, as Harry's pride filled the room, Maddie wasn't sure who among them was the happiest, who had the most 'happy tears' in their eyes. But, as she received hugs and kisses she knew that her heart had never been fuller.

Trooping The Color

Maddie stood in front of her full-length mirror checking her hair one last time before the cars outside were ready to take them to Buckingham Palace for the Trooping The Color. As she smoothed her hands down over her skirt, her eyes graced over her stomach and though she clearly wasn't showing, wouldn't be for a long time, she couldn't help but let her gaze settle there with a smile.

A baby. Their baby.

With a happy sigh, she ran her hands over the material once more and looked up from her stomach and she caught his reflection. Harry, dressed in uniform, was standing just behind her and off to the side, watching her with adoring eyes.

"Hi," Maddie's cheeks blushed at being caught; her hands pulling up. "Are we ready to..." She moved to turn towards him, but he moved quicker.

Stepping up behind her, his arms moved around her, his hands sliding over the small of her stomach—where hers had just been. "I know it's crazy..." His voice was low as he dropped a kiss to her shoulder. "I know it's much too early to see anything but..." He hugged her tighter to him. "I can't stop looking."

Maddie laughed, her hand moving to stroke his cheek as he leaned on her shoulder. "Well you're going to have to stop looking Captain." She turned around in his arms, turning to face him. "Because we're about to go out in front of your adoring public."

"My adoring public?" He snickered.

"And people will see you looking at me with that face..."

"What face?" He lifted his eyebrows.
"That I-impregnated-my-wife face..." She tipped up to kiss him. "The one you've had on your face since I told you."

"I'll do what I can," he shrugged noncommittally. "But I'm making zero promises."

"You still want to wait to tell the family?" She moved closer into him, loving the warmth he exuded.

"Yes," he gathered her in. "I like that this is just...ours. It'll be everyone else's soon enough, it's nice that it's just us for now."

"Well...us and the Bishops," Maddie reminded him; her hands smoothing over his backside as her grin stretched.

"Yeah, but they aren't talking," he kissed her upturned lips and nudged her nose. "Okay love, are you ready for a parade?"

"No," she bit at the corner of her lip with a slight giggle. "But I am ready to take this suit off of you and call you Captain while I..."

"Shhhhh..." Harry pressed a light finger to her lips, whispering. "There are people right outside this door and while I love this newfound..."

"Lust?" Maddie supplied.

"Drive," he laughed as he finished. "I don't know that the household staff wants to hear about it."

"Fair enough," Maddie shrugged, patting his ass before she stepped away. "Come on Captain. Parade time."

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Royal Ascot

"I think you're getting bigger," Harry's eyes were fixed on Maddie's stomach as they drove to the races. The month of June had nearly flown past them and his obsession with his wife, with his growing child hadn't diminished even a bit.

"Well thank you darling, what a lovely thing to say," she snickered.

"You know what I mean..." He pulled her hand into his and kissed her fingers. "I think you're getting...bigger."

"And I think you're seeing things," she leaned across the back seat to kiss him. "It's been a week. I'm..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm six weeks along Captain. I doubt I look bigger."

"More round," he had to keep himself from touching her, his eyes dancing as he held her eyes.

"Wishful thinking," she tapped his nose with her finger.

"You're beautiful," he kissed her again before sitting up; sighing as he pulled away from her, as he tore his eyes from her. "You're so beautiful it hurts sometimes."
"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back against the leather seat. "You're such a sap."

"Sorry?" He turned narrowed eyes to her.

"Since the day I told you, you've been mooning over how beautiful I am, you can't take your eyes off of me and your hands..." She lowered her voice and smirked. "Who knew you'd be so turned on by..."

"You," he cut her off, reaching over to stroke her cheek. "I'm turned on by you. And you are...beautiful." He leaned over once more as the car slowed to a stop. "Even before you were carrying my baby you were beautiful." His lips pressed to hers. "Come on Mum, let's go to work."

"And that," Maddie whispered, smoothing her hand down the front of his morning coat as he pulled away. "You're going to have to watch that."

"Or what?"

"Or the whole world is going to figure you out."

Meeting Baby Tindall

The newest member of the royal family, little Mia Tindall, came in the middle of the night, gracing the world and the family with her presence. Maddie and Harry waited a few days, waited for the initial madness to die down before they sat out to Gatcombe Park to meet the sweet little girl and deliver a gift.

It was truly a test of Maddie's will, of her strength, watching Harry cuddle the tiny little baby in his arms, kissing her cheeks, smelling her hair—all while holding onto this great big secret. And when Maddie took little Mia into her arms, Harry was damn near a ball of mush. Blaming it on lack of sleep and a post-deployment, hectic schedule, he managed to cover for the way his eyes mooned over his wife. They stayed for a while, passing the baby back and forth until all three of the Tindalls were yawning and then they excused themselves and headed back to London.

Maddie loved it when Harry was allowed to drive. She loved it because he loved it; he felt free and independent and in charge. She loved the look in his eyes and the smile on his face and, as she did this night, she loved tucking her arm through his and watching as he navigated them home from their visit to meet new baby Mia.

"Harry..." Maddie's voice was soft; just like the air between them, just like her hand on his arm.

"Hmmm?" His hand moved from the steering wheel to her leg, smoothing his thumb over her knee.

"Do you have a preference?" Her eyes tipped up to look at him.

"A preference?" He lifted his eyebrows, his eyes trained forward. "For what?"

Maddie smiled to herself, her hand moving his from her knee to her stomach. "For our baby."

Harry's head snapped towards her, looking down at where she had placed his hand before turning
his attention back to the road. "Oh wow..." He chuckled, his hand rubbing against her belly. "God no...I don't think I do."

"You wouldn't prefer a boy? A little red-headed namesake?" Maddie held his fingers to her as she let her mind drift.

He chuckled. "Would we really call him Harry?"

"Maybe Henry," Maddie smiled over at him. "Or would you rather a little girl with curls and a talent for wrapping her daddy around her finger?"

"Oh God," Harry groaned happily. "She would have me wrapped around her little finger."

"She really would," Maddie agreed.

"Her mother certainly does," he moved his hand back to her leg and squeezed.

"No preference?" Maddie asked again, letting his clear attempt at woo pass her by.

"Absolutely not," he shook his head. "I want a healthy baby....two if they're in there."

"You shush your mouth," her hand smacked at his arm. "Let's see if I can make it through one before you start ordering up doubles."

Harry laughed at her then. "I have no preference Madeline. Do you?"

"Nah," she shook her head slowly, watching him closely as he moved to sit by her. "I'm with you. Just one healthy little baby..." She sighed. "With your red hair."

"Oh God," Harry groaned again. "Poor kid."

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The Big News

"There's something I need to talk to you about." Harry's voice in the doorway to the living room drew her eyes up from her book. He had been gone the entire day; had just stepped from the shower and dressed before he made his way down to her. His hair was still wet as he moved into the room.

"Yeah? You okay?" She sat her Kindle to the side; pulling her feet up underneath her.

"I am," he nodded easily; lightly. "In fact I've never been better."

"Okay," her smile inched up on one side, watching him closely as he moved to sit by her.

"I thought you should know that I had a conversation today..." He faced her as he spoke.

"Just one?" She joked.

Though his smile cracked, he stayed on point, "about leaving my active duty role in the Army."

"Harry..." She shook her head quickly but he continued on.
"I would end my time with the Army Air Corps and take a staff position here in London. I would remain a Captain but I would help coordinate big events and projects for the Army and..."

"Harry." Her voice flattened, eyes narrowed.

"Maddie." He volleyed back just the same.

"You're going to be happy in an office?"

"Yes."

"At a desk?"

"Yes."

"No!" She tossed her hands in the air. "Harry. You know you don't have to do this; not for me, not for your father or..."

"My son?" He lifted his eyebrows. "My daughter? My family?" Despite her very best efforts, she felt a lump rise in her throat. "What if I'm doing it for me? What if it's time? What if it helps my career in the Army..."

"Does it?" She had softened so much at the mention of their growing child. "If you took the staff job, would it help with your career?"

"Yes," he nodded. "It's important to have this kind of experience in order to advance any further."

"I don't know Harry," she looked down at her hands. "When I brought this up before you left you were just..." She sighed and looked up at him; wide, watery eyes. "You were so upset at the mention of it, at the thought of it. I just don't want you to feel guilty or obligated or..."

"Maddie love," he reached for her hands. "I don't do things like this out of guilt or obligation. This is something I want; something I want to look into, something I want to talk about. They're going to meet tomorrow morning and have some answers for me towards the end of the week. I just wanted to make sure you were aware."

"Well, I'm aware," she took a breath. "I'm not completely sure where I stand..."

"You're trying to be difficult?"

"I'm trying to make you happy."

"Well you have your work cut out for you my dear," he shook his head with a chuckle. "There's not much that you can do to make me any happier than I already am."

"Jesus..." Maddie rolled her eyes, tugging his hand closer to her. "Do you even know when to let up?"

"It's not likely," he laughed along with her and, for the moment, they let the conversation draw to a close.

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First appointment

"I feel like I'm on a secret mission," Maddie giggled softly as she followed along with Harry; holding tight to his hand as they were lead through back doors and around corners. Harry chuckled as they continued to move.

"You're thinking about how you could have been a spy, aren't you," Harry nodded, waiting as Jim stepped through the last door, looked around and then waved them through.

"Thank you Jim," Maddie smiled as she stepped by him, humored by the fact that their protection detail knew more about them at this point than their families. "I could have..." She mumbled to Harry and stepped into the office.

"I know," he laughed and followed her in.

The office had been closed for the afternoon "for training”. While the majority of the staff were out of the building, they were immediately greeted by a nurse; older with a warm smile and a soft, quiet voice. "Your Royal Highness," she did a quick curtsey as she shook first Maddie's hand and then Harry's. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"No thank you, I'm fine," Maddie had a quick shake of her head as she smiled at the nurse; their attention drawn to the side as the doctor entered the room.

"Good afternoon," she smiled at the two of them.

"Good afternoon," Maddie turned to greet her; remembering her from when Arthur was born. "Thank you for letting us come in today."

"Of course," she nodded quickly, taking Maddie's outstretched hand and dipping into a quick curtsey before turning to offer the same to Harry. "If you're ready, we can go on back to the exam room, Your Royal Highness."

"You know," Maddie felt her cheeks flush a bit as they followed her. "I think given what we're about to embark upon together, this would be a whole lot easier on me if you called me Maddie instead of..." Her fingers fidgeted in front of her; slightly nervous as they walked along.

"Of course," the doctor nodded. "I completely understand."

"Thank you Doctor Hall," Maddie let out a breath of relief.

"Though I would have to ask that you call me Sylvia." She stood just outside the door to the exam room, gesturing for them to enter.

"That sounds fair," Maddie agreed easily, stepping into the exam room with Harry right behind her.

As the doctor closed the door and reached for a file, Maddie sat down on the exam table and Harry stood next to her; his eyes travellers around the room that had, until this very moment, remained a mystery to him; a sight unseen. Maddie had to bite back a laugh as she watched him take in the pictures on the walls, the instruments that were laid out; as he processed what they might all be for.
"Okay..." The doctor pulled up her stool and opened up the folder in her hand. "Now Maddie, it's my understanding that you've had a positive pregnancy test."

"I have," Maddie nodded.

"Just one?" Sylvia looked between the couple, smiling up at Harry. "Sometimes we have dads come in here with multiple."

"Yes well, I can't very well send him out for an armful of tests," Maddie laughed.

"No. Though I would guess he would be willing to go," Sylvia guessed.

"Absolutely," Harry agreed with a smile.

"I thought so," she could see that the couple was happy; a bit nervous about the unknown but happy. "Now I just have a few questions for you then I'm going to gather a few samples to verify the pregnancy and after that I'm going to do an examination and we'll do an ultrasound."

"An ultrasound?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted. "I didn't realize you could do that so early."

"It's an internal one," the doctor explained, nodding to the machine off to the side. "We won't see much as far as definition is concerned, but...assuming everything is fine, we will see a heartbeat."

"We will?" Harry's voice dropped to a low whisper as his heart thumped in his throat.

"We will," Sylvia nodded.

"Okay," Sylvia finished up with her notes and collected the items on the tray. "I'm just going to take these samples out and I'll be right back. Maddie, while I'm gone, I need you to go ahead and disrobe. You can put on this gown here and cover your lap with this."

"Got it," Maddie smiled as she took the items from the doctor.

"And you, Sir," the doctor turned to Harry. "Are you going to stay?"

"Yes," he answered quickly, his lips pulling higher. "If that's okay..."

"It is with me, if it is with you," Sylvia turned to Maddie.

"Oh absolutely," Maddie nodded, unable to imagine Harry missing this. "Of course."

"Great. I'll be back in a few minutes."

When the door closed behind the doctor, Maddie rose to her feet and reached to remove her shoes.

"Okay," Harry's voice dropped low as he moved in closer. "I'm sorry but I have to ask. What on Earth is that for?" He pointed at the tray of instruments.

Maddie looked over and snickered, pulling off her dress and setting it aside. "The specula?" She unclasped her bra and laid it with her dress. "You're a smart man, Captain. What do you think it's for?"
"Oh God," Harry's eyes flashed wide for just a second before he caught sight of her nearly naked and his focus shifted; his smile returning. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Of course," Maddie laughed, slipping out of the last bit of clothing and reaching for the gown. "I've done this before. You however..." She tied the string behind her neck and reached up to hold his cheeks in her hands. "I think maybe you should sit down for this big guy."

"Yeah? You think so?" He lifted his eyebrows, leaning to kiss her; pulling back as a knock at the door sounded.

"Come on in," Maddie called out, stepping back from Harry and returning to the table; bringing the makeshift blanket over her lap.

"Okay," Sylvia stepped back in and shut the door, turning to the two of them with a wide smile. "You'll be happy to know that the blood and urine samples both confirm what your test did. We have a positive pregnancy on both."

Maddie turned happy eyes to Harry's and she could feel the warmth rise between them.

"That's fantastic news," Harry reached for Maddie's hand; squeezing it lightly in his as the doctor moved forward.

"Yes it is," Sylvia agreed. "Now we're going to take a look. Maddie, why don't you go ahead and lay back. I'll just pull out..." She maneuvered the table as Maddie laid back. "The stirrups." As she produced them, Maddie slipped her feet into them and Harry took it all in slowly. "Can I get you to scoot down just a bit...there we go."

"Harry," Maddie tugged on his hand, pulling his face up to her with a smirk. "You okay?"

He nodded easily. "Are you?"

"Yes," she laughed lightly as the doctor moved about; getting into place, selecting instruments. "Come here..." She was soft as she commanded him. Despite his curiosity about how this all worked, about this new layer of knowledge he was gaining there in that examination room, he went to her. All of his attentions focused on her as he smiled down at her on the table.

"Yes love?" His thumb stroked over her fingers. "What can I do for you?"

"Okay Maddie, you're going to feel a little pressure now..." The doctor called up as she moved into place. Maddie sucked in a swift breath, her fingers tightening on Harry's and her eyes glancing towards the screen as it bounced to life.

"Nothing..." Maddie whispered to her husband as she pulled him closer. He leaned over to be with her, his free hand resting on the bed behind her head as his eyes followed where hers were looking. "I don't need anything. I just..." She had to pause to collect her voice, turning to smile at him; his face so much closer to hers. "I just wanted you right here when we see our baby for the first time."

Harry blinked at the tears threatening in his eyes, swallowed at the lump in his throat and wrapped his hand more snuggly around hers, turning to kiss her temple. "Then I'll stay right here until..."

"Okay you two," the doctor clicked a few buttons on the computer, her eyes watching the screen
carefully as she made records, as she captured a few screenshots. And then, with a wide smile, she
looked up to them. "You see this small circle...right here, the one that looks like it's flashing a bit?"
She pointed to the screen.

"Yes," Harry whispered as Maddie nodded, her fingers pressing to her lips as she watched with
wide wet eyes.

"That's your baby," the doctor nodded. "The flash you see...that's the heartbeat."

"The heartbeat," Harry echoed in his warm, heavy voice.

"So everything's..." Maddie could barely speak as she watched, as Harry moved in closer, his free
hand sliding on the bed to her hair. "Okay?"

"Yes," the doctor smiled; taken by the emotion between the couple, the feelings in the room.
"Everything's perfect. In roughly thirty-two weeks, the two of you...you're going to be parents.
Congratulations."

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"Okay Captain," Maddie whispered as she snuggled close to his side, under the protective wrap of
his arm as they walked along the sidewalk towards Leo's bar where they were set to meet friends.
"You're going to have to pull it together once we get inside."

"Pull it together?" He smirked as he looked down at her with wide eyed feigned innocence.
"What do you mean?"

"The gooey look, the hand that keeps making its way to my stomach..." She hugged him tighter,
knowing that his attentions were a direct result of their earlier appointment, of seeing the very
beginnings of their baby on the ultrasound screen. "The way you keep glancing at that screen print
the doctor gave you," she nodded towards the chest pocket of his suit coat where she knew the
photo was.

"Hmmm..." Harry smiled blissfully, his free hand patting over it. "It was very nice of her to print
us two."

"It was," Maddie agreed with a chuckle, thinking of her own copy in her purse. "But once we get
into Leo's it has to stop. Our friends will notice."

"Aw come on," he groaned, his arm bringing her even closer. "Nobody pays that much attention
to us...except for Bishop and Ella...and they are not here." He kissed the side of her head and
reached to open the door for her. "But I'll do my best."

Maddie chuckled as she slipped past him, "Thank you." As they stepped inside, they nodded to
the staffer at the door, smiled to the few people who looked up as they passed and made their way
back to the table already occupied by a handful of their friends; including Sean and Kiki, Anne
and Penelope and Leo, and somebody Maddie didn't recognize.

They all rose to their feet to greet them; wide smiles and cheery words. Maddie hugged Leo as
Harry hugged Sean and Kiki and then the bright bubbly blonde Maddie had never met stepped up
to Harry, her arms outstretched as she laughed.

"Hazza!" She nearly bounced as she pulled him into a hug.
"Wow," Harry hugged her lightly seemingly surprised to find her there. "I had no idea you would be here, no idea you were even back..." He shook his head, looking past her to Leo.

"I just moved two weeks ago," she sighed happily. "I called Kiki, told her I missed the gang and she invited me tonight..." Her hand moved over his cheek as he stepped away from her; quick and light but enough so that Maddie caught it. "It's really good to see you again. Really good." Harry smiled with a small nod, his body moving magnetically back to Maddie. "How have you been Haz?" The woman kept her eyes on him.

"Wonderful," Harry's eyes met and held Maddie's; the perfect little secret they shared passing between them. "Actually...there's somebody you should meet. Maddie..." He wrapped his arm back around her, careful to keep his eyes from gracing over her stomach. "This is Maddie..." He couldn't help the way his lips formed around the words, the way his voice lifted as he said them again. "My wife." He winked at Maddie and nodded towards the blonde who was watching them both intently. "Maddie this is an old school mate. Cassandra Whitworth."
Maddie considered her and Harry's first three months to parenthood a lucky one. They had wanted to keep it to themselves for a while, enjoy this little, enormous secret between them for this small amount of time before they had no choice but to start sharing it with everyone around them. And they had been able to do that. Maddie had experienced very little morning sickness, certainly nowhere near what Kate had. And so far she had been able to mask any of the rounding out her body was doing. She had always been played out as curvy in the press, so nobody seemed to notice.

Except for her husband; her shameless, adoring husband who woke her every morning to his own special brand of inspection. His hands would round over her body, checking for changes, noting the slightest dip and bump. Though it might have been enough to make somebody self-conscious, every new curve was cataloged with the widest of smiles, the proudest of sighs and he always, always followed it up with some of the most amazing loving they had shared. Just as they had that morning.

Yes. The first trimester had been brimming with shared secrets, glances that were meant to be just for them, and an insatiable appetite for the other. But this weekend marked the first of their second trimester and they knew that soon it wasn't going to be a secret any longer. So, after the polo match Harry was playing in that warm summer morning, they were heading to Highgrove for the remainder of the weekend where they would be letting Harry's family in on the news.

But first. It was polo time and, as Maddie settled in with Ella, Bishop, and Buckie, Harry readied to go to the field; his eyes never drifting far from his wife—who, in his mind, couldn't be sexier than she was at that exact moment. Happy, relaxed, loose curls blowing in the breeze and glowingly pregnant.

"Okay," Harry clapped his hands together as he glanced around. "I think it's time for me to go. You'll be okay with the Bishops?" His eyebrows lifted up over his sunglasses as he turned a wide grin to her.

"Of course," Maddie nodded with a soft laugh, remembering her very first polo match when he left her with Bishop for the first time. "I promise not to let Bishop buy me drinks."

"That's my girl," Harry's grin widened even further as he moved to her. His head bent to kiss her, his hand reaching out.

"Easy Captain," Maddie caught his hand and pulled it around her waist; her eyes twinkling as her voice dropped. "You touch my stomach out here and the game's over."

"Sometimes I can't seem to help myself," he flashed his eyebrows and tightened his hold on her; drawing her into him as his lips met hers. As far as normal happily married couples go, the kiss was nothing; a few extra seconds, a slight pass of his tongue against her lips, a soft little moan from her. But they weren't simply a normal happily married couple. And the photos snapped in quick succession in those five seconds would be up and shared worldwide before the end of the match.

Handsy Harry had returned. Her Royal Handsiness was back in the game.

"Play well," Maddie had a hard time stepping out of his arms, taking her lips off of his. "Play
"I always do," he winked; his cocky confidence making her want him even more than she normally did. With a deep breath, he stepped further away from her and turned to their two friends standing just off to the side with smirks all their own. "Ella. Bishop..." He leaned in, his fingers pinching lightly at the baby Bishop held tucked in his arms. "Buckie. I'll see you all afterwards." His eyes met Bishop's as an understanding passed between them; a look they shared when they were passing off one of their loved ones into the other's care. Maddie rolled her eyes slightly, her smile tipping up even more. It was silly and ridiculous and should be a little insulting. But she thought it was cute.

"Good luck Harry!" Ella called out as he took a few more steps away from them; his eyes reaching back to Maddie with that love-sick-puppiness that should have faded long ago. "Jesus," Ella groaned. "Get a room."

"Ha!" Maddie clapped her hands together, nodding to her husband who was equally amused. "I'll see you in the stables a little later?"

"Hey!" Harry pointed to her with one hand, covering his heart with the other. "Don't even joke, wife."

"Who says I'm joking?"

"Making promises you can't keep..." He shook his head and took the few quick steps back to her; capturing her lips once more. "Stay out of trouble."

"Get out there and play polo," she narrowed his eyes and, giving the photographers one more to circulate, she slapped his ass and sent him on his way.

"Okay lovely ladies," they were nearly halfway through the match when Bishop moved from the blanket; standing and brushing off his pants. "I'm going for drinks." He bent to kiss Ella, his fingers stroking her cheek. "What can I bring for you Mum?"

"Ginger ale and mint leaves," Ella kissed him back, squeezing his fingers as he pulled away; standing tall.

"Okay," he nodded and turned his eyes to Maddie. "And you, Your Royal Highness?"

"Same for me please," she smiled up at him as she held Buckie close to her, happy to be cuddling the little baby.

"Got it," his smile pulled higher as he was reminded of the fact that she was expecting. "I'll be back soon."

"Thank you Bishop!" Maddie called out.

"Thank you Bishop..." Ella echoed and watched as he walked away from them. "So..." She leaned closer to her best friend, pulling her eyes away from her husband, her voice dropping. "How are you feeling?"

"Really well actually," Maddie whispered back, dipping to kiss Buckie's soft head.
"I cannot believe you haven't had any sickness at all," Ella sighed. "My entire first trimester was nothing but sickness. I became intimately acquainted with the bathroom."

"Ew..." Maddie's nose wrinkled as she leaned down to talk to Buckie. "Did you make your Mummy sick little man? Did you?"

"It's okay baby," Ella leaned over to kiss his little head. "It was all worth it." She rubbed his head and sat back, her eyes scanning out over the polo match; watching as Harry trotted by. "So. It's the end of your first trimester?"

"Just this week."

"When are you going to let the family in?"

"As a matter of fact," Maddie smiled. "We're going out to Highgrove after the match today. Will, Kate and Arthur will be there." Maddie felt the blush rise to her cheeks. "We're going to tell them then."

"Wow." Ella knew what a big deal it would be; the excitement and the significance.

"And next week when we're in the states, we'll let my family in on it."

"Can you believe it?" Ella sighed again. "Just how fast it's going by. In six months you'll be a mother..."

"No," Maddie shook her head. "If it weren't for the telltale signs, I wouldn't believe it myself."

"What signs?" Ella snickered, her eyes rolling in mock annoyance. "You haven't been sick. You look like you haven't gained an ounce anywhere..."

"Well I have," Maddie narrowed her eyes. "Things are a bit...rounder."

"Nice." Ella laughed.

"And...my hormones...."

"Out of control?" Ella offered.

"You have no idea," Maddie groaned with a chuckle.

"Yes I do." Ella nodded, biting her lips at the memory. "I don't think Bishop's ever worked so hard in his life." With a sigh and a wink, both of them dissolved into laughter on the blanket as the polo match played on.

It wasn't long before Bishop was on his way back to them. Buckie had fallen asleep in Maddie's arms and they had transferred him into his buggy; shaded and cool for his nap. As Maddie watched her husband lead a charge down the field, Ella sat up and focused her eyes on something down the way.

"Okay..." She drew out the word. "Who is that woman with Bishop?"

"Where?" Maddie turned to look, her eyes squinting as she found him walking towards them;

"You know her?" Ella turned to look at Maddie.

"Cassandra Whitworth," the tone of her voice as she said the name, the way her mouth moved around it told Ella all she needed to know. "She went to school with Harry and Bishop at some point, moved away to Japan for her last years of school. Just moved back. I met her a while ago but...I don't know..." Maddie shook her head and moved to rise to her feet. "There's something about her that just....doesn't sit right."

"Yeah?" Ella studied her for a minute and then looked back at her quickly approaching husband. "Is it the fact that she's preoccupying my husband?"

"Yeah. I just...I don't know. But it looks like you're about to see for yourself."

"Fantastic," Ella took a deep breath and rose to her feet just as Bishop and Cassandra approached the blanket. 

"Love," Bishop leaned in to kiss Ella and handed over her drink. "Sorry it took so long." He kissed her again; slower and longer.

"It's okay," Ella smiled against his mouth. "Though it seems as though you met somebody..." She turned to the bright-faced blonde standing next to him.

"Ah yes," Bishop's hand stayed at Ella's waist, handing the other drink to Maddie, as he turned to introduce them. "This is Cassandra Whitworth. Cassandra, this is my wife Ella."

"Hi!" Cassandra's smile was wide, her laugh light and bubbly as she extended her hand to Ella. "It's great to meet you."

"Hi," Ella smiled back; sweet and kind. "It's nice to meet you too."

"And you remember Maddie," Bishop smiled to her.

"Of course!" Cassandra moved to hug Maddie's shoulders, surprising all three of them. "It's good to see you again."

"You too," Maddie's smile was sweet as she watched the woman step back from her.

"God, I have to tell you, I can't believe both Bishop AND Hazza are married!" She shook her head with a loud laugh as Ella's eyes snapped to Maddie's and they shared a look. Ella had caught it; the something Maddie had said didn't sit well.

"Pretty wild," Ella's voice dipped flat and Bishop, catching the shift in her tone, couldn't help the smirk that played on his face. Leaning to kiss her cheek, he hugged her tight.

"How did you two manage to snag them both and tie them down?" Cassandra crossed her arms over her chest, looking from one woman to the other.

"Witchcraft," Ella answered without blinking, bringing a snort of laughter from her husband. But before he could whisper in her ear to ease up just a bit, their son cried out from his buggy; awake from his nap. When Ella moved to step away from him, he kissed her cheek and held her still.
"Here, I'll go," he rubbed her back and moved towards the buggy. "I think it's my turn." With a wide, happy smile, he leaned into the buggy and lifted out his squirming little boy. "My son! Is nap time over?" He leaned down and snatched the bag up from the ground. "I'm going to go change him and then I'll feed him..." He leaned to kiss his wife. "I'll be back."

"Okay," she leaned to kiss her son.

"Behave," his eyes leveled with hers as he kissed her again and turned away, leaving the three women together on the side lines.

"So," Ella was the first to speak as they situated back onto the blanket; eyes on the match. "Cassandra. How do you know Bishop and Harry?" He voice stressed only slightly on Harry's name, bringing a smile to Maddie's face even as she looked away.

"We went to school together before I moved to Japan," Cassandra shrugged lightly with a flip of her hair.

"Oh I see," Ella nodded.

"And Haz and I..." The corners of her lips turned up as she kept her eyes forward, the casualness of her words matching her demeanor. "We...dated."

"Oh?" Ella fought to control the look on her face.

"You did?" Maddie smiled, her eyebrows rising a bit as she took in that new information. "Harry didn't mention that."

"No?" The young blonde frowned only slightly as she watched the players ride by.

"No," Maddie shook her head. "Were you young then?"

"Teenagers," Cassandra nodded, looking off at Harry's horse as her eyes grew a bit hazy, a little distant, as though she were drawing from the past, from a memory that made her smile and sigh. "It was one of those things...you know? It was wild and crazy and we were young and in love and free and..." She let out a deep breath and turned her eyes to meet Maddie's. "And then I moved to Japan with my parents and we just...I suppose you could say I was the one that got away."

And then Maddie caught it; the small, tiny flicker in this woman's big, bright eyes that told her exactly what was happening. She wasn't 'an old friend' here to reminisce, she was making an attempt to mark territory. Maddie wasn't sure how to react; surprise, disbelief, straight up laughter?

"Oh really?" She went with intrigue, a small smile curling up the corners of her mouth. "He's never mentioned you before so I suppose he's managed to get over that particular loss." She could see Ella stewing in shock just beyond Cassandra's shoulder.

"I suppose," Cassandra nodded, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear before she very casually, very easily shrugged and offered offhandedly, "if you ever really get over that sort of thing." Maddie's eyes narrowed thoughtfully as she leaned in, unsure if she had really heard the woman correctly. But before she could say anything, before Ella could open her mouth and smack the woman, Bishop was back with Buckie.

"Okay!" He laughed as he lowered to the blanket with the three of them; oblivious as to what had just occurred. "Both Bishop men have clean pants and bottles...." He glanced to Ella and then to
Maddie. "How's the match?"

"Really good," Maddie smiled, her eyes sliding to Bishop as he offered his son a bottle. "You didn't tell me that Harry and Cassandra had been a thing..."

"A thing?" Bishop snickered. "Is that what you would call it?" He glanced across to Cassandra with a wide-eyed, disbelief that made Maddie, in all of her pregnant, emotional glory, feel quite satisfied. "I mean we were what? Twelve? Were we even kissing with tongues then?"

Ella laughed easily, nudging her husband with her foot. "I'm betting you were."

"You know me so well..." He tweaked her foot. "But Harry wasn't."

"I don't even want to know how you know that," Maddie rolled her eyes and laughed; pleased that the conversation was moving in this direction, irritated that Cassandra was there, that she was saying these things so freely and easily.

"Well..." Cassandra exhaled, recovering from the way Bishop had stomped on her mood. "It was a long time ago...but it's good to see him again."

"Yeah." Ella answered flatly. "I bet it is." Bishop's eyes flashed up to her, wondering what he was missing that made her sound like that.

"So..." Cassandra took a breath and leaned forward, looking directly to Bishop. "What's the plan after the match? Is the crew going out for drinks and debauchery? Like we used to?" Maddie could tell she was doing this on purpose, trying to regain some of her standing; her history with Harry, Bishop and their friends.

"Nah," Bishop shook his head, his allegiances clearly defined, even if he had no idea what was going on. "The crew has changed. Ella, Buckie and I are going back to the city and...Maddie, aren't you two headed to Highgrove?"

"Yes," Maddie grinned as she remembered the trip, the reason for it. "We're meeting family for the weekend."

"Ah," Cassandra's eyes shifted down at the blanket.

"But," Bishop offered. "I saw Sean and Kiki at the bar when I picked up the drinks. You should check with them, they might be heading out."

"There you go!" Ella's smile pulled high, her eyes holding onto the sass that was so uniquely her. "You should check with them."

"Good idea." Cassandra rose to her feet, brushing at her pants as she did. "I think I'll go do that now. It was good to meet you and to see you again..." She looked down at Maddie and then out at the field. "He's really riding well today, isn't he?"

"What the..." Ella started but Maddie hurried ahead, her hand moving over her stomach without a conscious thought as she smiled wide up at Cassandra.

"My husband? Yes. Yes he is."

Cassandra smiled down at her, catching her meaning, and with a nod, she turned and left. Ella
managed to keep her mouth shut for just enough time for Cassandra to step out of ear shot and then her eyes met Maddie's who were wide with surprise.

"Oh my God."

"I know!" Ella was stunned as she looked to Bishop for answers. "What the hell is her story?"

"Her story?" Bishop lifted his eyebrows as he looked up from feeding his son. "What do you mean?"

"She and Harry dated?" Ella asked.

"Well sure...I guess," he shrugged. "To a twelve year old they did. They sat next to each other in groups, held hands...kissed a couple of times."

"Without tongue," Maddie pointed out.

"I'm sure of it," Bishop winked at her.

"Did you two ever?" Ella nodded to him.

"Nope," he shook his head. "No way."

"Because Harry did?" Maddie asked.

"Yeah," he shrugged again. "After Sunny Pinder, it's been a hands off policy between us."

"Fair enough," Maddie turned her eyes back to the field.

"Sunny Pinder?" Ella's voice dropped.

"Another time love," he flashed a grin in her direction.

"Hmmm..." Maddie's lips pressed together thoughtfully. "So they dated..."

"They did," Bishop watched her. "Why do you ask?"

"She just...I don't know," Maddie smiled. "When she talked about it, it seemed like it was a little more than that."

"Really? Why?" Bishop turned Buckie over in his arms to burp him.

"Because she SAID it was more than that," Ella rolled her eyes.

"Hmm...I don't know what to say," Bishop shrugged. "Maybe it was to her?"

"Clearly," Ella reached for her drink.

"Harry never said anything at all about dating her," Maddie turned to look at them.

"He probably doesn't remember to be honest. Do you have any idea how many girls have thrown themselves at him over the years? Hundreds."
"That's helping?" Ella snickered.

"Hundreds," Maddie chuckled as she remembered Harry's life before her. "And she was one of them."

"Looks like it." Ella groaned. Bishop, looking between the two of them, watching their faces, leaned in to look at Maddie.

"Please tell me this doesn't bother you."

"Oh it doesn't," Maddie shook her head quickly. "Not at all actually."

"It does ME." Ella interjected.

"Oh Ella, come on..." Maddie looked over at her with a twist of a smile.

"It DOES." Ella made no apologies as she shook her head at them. "You go ahead and be the bigger person. But I'm bothered. If she were talking about MY husband the way she was talking about yours...I would be slap-you-in-your-pretty face bothered."

Bishop couldn't help but laugh at that. "You're crazy love," he winked at his wife and then turned his attentions back to Maddie. "Don't worry about her. My money says Harry doesn't even remember her."

"Well I suppose we'll find out," Maddie shook it off, looking back to the field, back to her husband as his horse galloped by. With a wide smile she waved her fingers at him and nobody—not Maddie, not Ella, not Cassandra, not the press—nobody missed the smile he threw back at her; the nod of his head and the point of his fingers. Nobody.

After the match was over, after Harry stood on the stand with his team accepting the trophy and the gifts, he hurried over to where Maddie stood with their friends. As he approached, the three of them broke out into a small round of applause.

"Thank you, thank you," Harry rolled his eyes as he leaned to kiss his wife.

"Sweaty, sweaty," Maddie laughed as she kissed him back.

"You like it," he winked; tugging her tighter, making her laugh even more.

"I do, I do," she sighed and hugged him full on; wrapping her arms all the way around him and pressing her lips to his. "You played well today."

"Thank you," he loosened his hold on her and turned to their friends. "Can I cuddle the little one before we have to go?"

"Sure," Ella nodded, happily handing Buckie over to him; watching as Harry took him like a natural.

"How did he do?" Harry nodded down to the smiling little baby.

"Great actually," Maddie watched them both closely.
"And you?" Harry leaned in to kiss her again. "How did you do?"

"Just as well," she grinned, the image of him with Buckie Bishop making her heart soft and her body warm.

"Oh hey," Bishop nodded to Harry as he picked up their blankets and bags. "The ladies had a question for you."

"Oh yeah?" Harry lifted his eyebrows.

"No we didn't," Maddie rolled her eyes.

"Yes you did," Bishop smirked. "Ask him."

"What is it?" Harry looked to Maddie, waiting for her to let him in on whatever they were talking about. But she stalled, feeling silly, and she took a breath and then Bishop moved ahead.

"Did you and Cassandra ever date?" He flinched as Ella smacked his arm.

Harry looked up from the baby with narrowed, confused eyes. "Who?"

"Ha!" Bishop let out a loud bark of a laugh. "See," he nodded pointed eyes to his wife, swinging them to Maddie. "Who?"

"What the hell is going on right now?" Harry watched the exchange.

"Cassandra Whitworth," Maddie supplied with a sigh. "She sat with us for part of the match and told us that the two of you dated."

"Oh..." Harry's eyes squinted in thought and then he shrugged. "Is that what we call it? I was like ten."

"That's what she called it," Maddie smiled at the way he dismissed it all. "She said she was your one that got away."

"What?" Harry snorted. "No she didn't."

"She did," Maddie nodded, looking at Ella who quickly agreed.

"Please," Harry rolled his eyes. "I don't have a 'one that got away' Maddie."

"You sure about that?" Maddie winked at him; playing along.

"I am." Harry arched an eyebrow. "Why are you asking me this? You have something you would like to confess?"

"Please," Maddie chuckled along with the rest of them.

"Come on love," Harry nodded to her. "Who is your one that got away?"

Maddie didn't miss a beat. "Bishop."
"There you go," Bishop winked in her direction.

"I know you think that's funny," Harry's eyes narrowed, his jaw clenching as he shook his head at her. "But one of these days you're going to push those jokes too far and..."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed into a sigh; letting it go. "Come on."

"Listen..." He smiled, moving closer to her, seriousness settling over his face. "I could have had a one that got away. Many times. But I'm a smart man, love. I'm smart and tenacious and stubborn and...I married her." He shrugged. "That's it. There is no other 'one' for me; never has been. I went after the one and I have no intentions of letting her get away..." He leaned in to kiss her again; slower and softer.

"Awwww..." Ella's head tipped to the side as her smile warmed.


"Fine, fine," Harry groaned, turning over the baby reluctantly. "We need to head out to the country too I suppose." His eyes danced as he looked to his wife.

"Yes we do," she grinned in return, her mind moving forward to what they were going to do that weekend.

"And we're done talking about Cassandra?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Who exactly?" Maddie's forehead scrunched up and laughter followed; all thoughts of the young blonde slipping far away from the group.

"So..." Harry scooped Maddie's hand into his, bringing her fingertips to his lips. "Tell me, love. How do you want to tell them?" They were nearly to Highgrove and Harry had one thing on his mind as he drove.

"Well..." Maddie snuggled closer, her entire face smiling as she looked to him. "If it's okay with you, I thought that maybe I could tell Kate first...alone. Just the two of us."

"Really?" Harry's voice was soft as he glanced down to her.

"Yeah," she nodded, pulling his hand over to her; holding it in both of hers. "I don't want to just drop it in her lap. I don't want to surprise her with it, not after all that's happened."

"You think she's still..."

"No," Maddie shook her head with a smile. "I think she's much better. I think she's...fine. I just want her to hear it in a place where she has time to process...if she needs time to process. Is that okay?"

"Of course," Harry agreed easily. "You'll let me know when it's time to tell everyone else?"

"I will," Maddie loved how fine he was with following her lead, letting her decide how it was going to go. She took a breath and looked out the window at the scenery that flew by, thinking
about the reactions they were about to garner. She chuckled to herself. "Your father is just going to...."

"I know," Harry laughed with her. "I know." He pulled their hands back to him; kissing hers again. "I can't wait."

"I cannot believe he's walking!" Maddie clapped her hands for little Arthur as he toddled around the lawn at Highgrove. They had enjoyed a light lunch with the family and then she and Kate had taken Arthur down by the treehouse while the men went out to shoot.

"I can't believe he's going to be one!" Kate's smile was wide as she watched her son fall to his bum with a little tiny laugh. "Good boy Arthur!"

"Are we going to have a birthday party for you little one?" Maddie bent down to talk to him, letting him hold on to her fingers as he stood back up. "A big birthday party for such a big boy?"

"Gran offered to host something at Buckhouse," Kate explained. "But I think we're going to do something in the gardens at Kensington."

"Oh that will be lovely," Maddie spoke to Kate, her eyes locked on the little boy who was amusing them both; who glowed under such attention. He stood up full and tall and then he let go of Maddie's hands and clapped his together, much like his parents had been doing as he had learned to walk. "Oh my God!" Maddie clapped her hands as she laughed. "He's too precious Kate."

"Isn't he just?" Kate laughed as Arthur toddled away from Maddie, exploring a bit further away from them.

Maddie watched him amble and then with a deep breath, she turned to look at her sister. "Listen, Kate...there's..." Maddie let out a puff of nervous breath, rolling her eyes at her own. "Ha! There's something I want to tell you."

"Oh?" Kate glanced over at her, curious. "What's going on? Are you okay?"

"Yes," Maddie sighed happily. "I'm more than okay. I'm..." She looked down at her hands and then with a small shrug, back up to Kate. "I'm pregnant." It was the first time in quite some time that she had said the words aloud and the emotion caught in her throat.

"Oh my God," Kate whispered, her hand rising and pressing to her chest, her eyes welling up as her smile tugged at her cheeks. "Oh my God! Maddie! You're...you're pregnant? Really?" Her eyes flashed down to Maddie's stomach out of reflex more than in search of evidence.

"Really," Maddie nodded, watching as joy gathered in Kate's face.

"Oh my God!" Kate squealed with laughter as she bounced from her spot. "Come here!" And she was pulling Maddie into her arms in an enormous, joyous hug. "Oh Maddie...Congratulations..." She pulled back to look her in the face and the love that was shared pulled at Maddie's feelings. "Congratulations. I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you," Maddie's emotions brimmed at the abundance of excitement Kate held for her. "Thank you so much Kate..." She was relieved and reassured and thrilled that Kate seemed to
have no hint of sadness, not one sliver of anything but happiness for her.

"Oh!" Kate hurried to grab Arthur before he made good mess of Charles' flowers. "Come here little Arthur..." She scooped him up into her arms, bringing him back to where they were. "Your aunt Maddie just told me that she's going to give you a baby cousin! A little baby cousin to play with! Isn't that exciting?!" Kate looked back to Maddie. "How far along are you? When are you due? God, how did Harry react? Did he blow a fuse? Ha...I bet he did...Oh Maddie, Maddie..." She leaned in to kiss her cheek. "I'm so happy for you. Aren't we Arthur?" She bounced the baby in her arms, her eyes moving back and for the between them. "My God. Have you told Charles? When are you going to tell everyone? How are you going to tell everyone?"

"Well..." Maddie laughed at the stream of questions she had for her. "I was actually hoping you might be able to help me with that."

Maddie watched as their family moved about the room animatedly. This cozy room at Highgrove held such warmth and love and life. She smiled as Charles put on a record, completely ignoring the antiquated jabs from his sons. She watched as Camilla poured a nightcap for her husband, her hand resting lovingly on his back as she handed it off. She watched as Kate returned with little Arthur dressed and ready for bed, sighed when Harry lifted him from her arms with the full intent on sneaking in a last bit of play time before he had to go down for the night. Kate laughed and joined her husband on the couch across from Maddie. And when she looked to the blonde who seemed entranced by her red-headed husband on the floor with the toddling little man, she sighed into her husband's side; clearing her throat.

Maddie heard the sound, lifted her eyes up to Kate and with an already emotional heart, with eyes already holding back the tears she knew were going to come, she nodded and sat her drink on the table in front of her. Looking down at her husband who was holding Arthur up by his fingers, laughing as he bounced and giggled at his Uncle, Maddie smiled. "I'm not sure which one of them is having fun right now; Arthur or Harry."

Will snickered, Charles chuckled, and Kate took a deep breath. "Tell me Maddie, when are you going to let him have one of his own to play with?"

A light laughter rounded the room as Will lifted his eyebrows to his wife, surprised at her question. And Harry; warm, happy Harry, looked right to his wife and he knew. She was ready to break the news.

With a wink to her husband, Maddie grinned. "In about six months actually." And even though Kate had known what was coming, she gasped anyway; she couldn't help it.

"I'm sorry," Charles blinked. "What did you just say?"

Harry scooped Arthur up into his arms and looked right at his father. "She said that in about six months...you're going to be a Papa...." His voice caught in his throat. "Again."

All of a sudden, all at once, that warm, cozy country room that seemed to be on the last few minutes of the downward fade into sleep—became all at once completely alive.

There were shouts of excitement, smattering of applause and a roar of happiness. Maddie was pulled from the couch and into her father-in-law's warm embrace as Harry rose to his feet, letting Camilla kiss his cheeks and ruffle his hair.
Then they switched and it was Camilla's turn to hug Maddie, to offer her congratulations. It was Charles’ turn to hug his son tight to him, unabashedly proud and happy.

"Well done," he patted the back of his head.

"Well done?" Will joked, moving into the merriment with a hug to Maddie. "It's she that has to do all the work." He kissed her cheeks. "Congratulations darling."

"Thank you," Maddie hugged him tight before turning to Kate. "And thank you..."

"You're welcome," she hugged her close, speaking into her hair. "I'm so happy for the two of you. Unbelievably happy."

When she stepped out of Kate's arms, she found herself the center of attention. Her cheeks flushed and she laughed nervously. "Okay, carry on with what you were doing..." She waved her hands as they laughed along with her; easing up just a bit.

"Come here," Harry smiled down at her, his eyes dancing with delight. "Well done love."

"Congratulations daddy," Maddie grinned as he leaned to kiss her; Arthur still tucked smiling in his arms.

"I love it when you say that," his grin deepened before he pulled away.

"Me too," she sighed and watched as he spun back around, making Arthur's bubbly laugh sound out into the room. There were tears and sighs and laughter; and a whole lot of love in that room that night.

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"Hard to tell it's summer out here," Harry stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat as he and his father walked along the lines of the orchard. "Bloody freezing."

"It is," Charles agreed quietly, the smile that had been on his face since the announcement not fading even a bit.

"Care to tell me where we're going?" Harry lifted his eyebrows.

"Not really, no," Charles answered easily, bringing laughter from his son who followed along without much question, without any argument. As the excitement had begun to quiet in the house, after Kate had taken Arthur to bed, after everyone began to retire, Charles had handed Harry his coat and nodded for him to follow. So Harry had kissed his wife and done as requested.

Harry took a deep breath, letting the crisp air fill his lungs, his eyes turning up to the sky as they walked past the last of the trees and towards the tree house, towards the area they had played in as children. Though he didn't know the point of this walk just yet, though he didn't understand the significance at that moment—he could feel his emotions begin to bubble.

The sound of their pace, of the crunch of earth beneath them, of the rustle of the breeze; it was comforting and soothing. The sky was cloudless; the stars bright, the moon brighter. And there was a natural ease between them; father and son. It was nice; wonderfully nice.
They passed through the grass, walked by the treehouse to the end of the lawn and then they slowed to a stop. Harry watched as his father reached into the inside pocket of his coat, pulling out two cigars and a lighter.

"What's this?" Harry smirked, delighted as Charles handed one over, pulling one into his mouth.

"We're celebrating," Charles' voice was low as his fingers brought the flame to his cigar. Puffing twice, he passed the lighter to his youngest son.

"Thank you," Harry took the small silver rectangle from his father and followed his lead.

"You're going to be a father..." Harry watched his father as he said the words, as though they were still sinking in. "Goodness Harry. A father."

"I can't get over it either," Harry chuckled. "Every day since she told me I've just been in this...blissful haze."

"Sure," Charles nodded, understanding completely. "How is she doing? Has she been sick?"

"No," Harry shook his head, seeing the concern on his father's face. "She's felt well nearly the entire time."

"And the baby..." Charles puffed. "The baby is fine?"

"The baby is perfect," Harry's face grew smug. "But how could it not be."

"Of course," Charles laughed; loving the qualities that made up his son. He took another drag, a deep breath and then, as his eyes grew a little far off, as his smile pulled higher and deeper, he pulled the cigar from his mouth and nodded just behind where Harry stood. "You see this tree?"

"The English Oak?" Harry turned to look, his cigar perched out of the corner of his mouth.

"Yes," Charles nodded, stepping past his son, his hand reaching out to touch the bark. He stood there for a moment, looking it over and when he spoke, his voice was low and soft. "We planted it, your mother and I, the year you were born." Harry's emotions swelled in his chest. "There's one for Will across over there," he nodded his head but stayed focused. "And this one is yours..." He let out a deep rumble of laughter. "It's grown stronger and taller than your brother's. But let's not tell him that."

Harry snorted in laughter. "Of course," he agreed.

"You know that I would give anything to have her here tonight," when his father's eyes rose to meet his, Harry was silenced by the look in them. "She would have loved being a grandmother, loved watching you become a father. She would have brought champagne and hugged you until you groaned and insisted she release you..." Charles looked off in the distance as Harry fought with the tears in his eyes, in his throat.

"I can't imagine ever insisting such a thing," Harry's voice was nearly a whisper as he allowed himself a blink of a moment to imagine it.

"No, no," Charles shook his head. "Me neither." He took a deep breath, allowing them both a beat to gather their emotions. "She would have been proud...as am I. Incredibly proud of the man you've become, of the family you are growing. Madeline is..." Charles shook his head, his face
warming as he thought of the young woman who was very much a daughter to him.

"I know," Harry breathed; reverent as he thought of her. "I know she is."

"Good," Charles nodded. "Good that you know."

A contented sort of silence settled over them and they both embraced it, happy to be there in each other's company, happy to sit with their thoughts on that clear, cool night in the country.

"You know..." Harry was the first to speak, his fingers reaching out to the bark of 'his' tree. "I know that you are aware of the conversations I've been having."

"Which conversations are those?" Charles squinted as he looked to him.

"Of leaving the Army Air Corps."

"Ah..." Charles nodded. "Yes. I suppose I am aware of your inquiries."

Harry nodded, taking another puff of his cigar, looking up at the way the tree grew; tall and strong and sturdy. "I've made a decision." He took a breath; surprised at the feeling of levity that surrounded him as he said the words, as he let his father in. "I've asked Thomas to prepare a statement to be read in two weeks' time..." The corner of his mouth turned up. "I'll be leaving my commission and moving to a London office before the end of the month."

"I see," Charles acknowledged the words, studying his son closely. "You're sure this is what you want?"

"Sorry?" Harry looked to him then; confused and Charles continued.

"Not what I want or what your wife wants?" He lifted his eyebrows. "This is your decision Harry?"

"Yes," he answered immediately with conviction and resolve. "Absolutely this is my decision. Father I'm...Maddie is pregnant. This is...this is what I've wanted my entire life and now I'm going to have it. In six months I'm going to be..." Harry shook his head, a light laugh pushing through his lips. "It seems like just this morning that she's told me. But in fact it's been three months. And in six short ones, I'm going to...I'm going to be a father..." Harry took in a breath; an easy, happy breath. "This is absolutely my decision..." He met his father's eyes, thankful for the concern, and he held them and when he spoke his voice was deep and low and neither of them could escape the significance of his words. "It's always too fast father. It never...it never slows down." He blinked at the onslaught of emotion. "I can't miss it. I can't miss any of it."

"Well okay then son," Charles' voice cracked as he watched his son; the man, the husband, the father—as he watched him walk with ease into this role he had coveted so long. "Okay." The air was heavy between them, weighted with the news of the day, with the words and emotions that had passed there that night.

And Harry, ever the one to break the tension, ever the one to offer a smile, looked up at the tops of the trees and smirked. "Bigger and stronger than Will's?"

Charles couldn't help the loud laugh that sounded from his lungs, his head tossing back as he nodded. "Yes Henry. Bigger and stronger."
"Well," Harry shrugged; smug and pleased. "There you go."

"There you go." Charles nodded, moving to put his arm around his son's shoulders as they both began to walk; slowly and peacefully back to the house.

When Harry returned to his room that night, it was dark and quiet. He tried not to make noise as he snuck in, tried to keep it down as he shed his clothes, stepping into the bathroom to brush his teeth before he went to bed. As he slipped in between the covers, he tried not to move too much, tried not to jostle or pull or nudge her awake. She was sleeping so peacefully there in that bed; snug and tucked in and beautiful. He didn't want to wake her, would hate to disturb her sleep.

So he moved quietly and slowly and he settled there on his own pillow. Sighing, he let his body relax, let his mind come down from his talk with his father, from the walk and the words and the way the cold air had perked him awake. He blinked, scrubbed a hand up over his face and he turned to look at her.

He would never tire of looking at her, never find boredom in studying her face, her curves, her smile, her eyes. God how he loved her. He swallowed back the emotions that seemed to always come when he thought of how lucky he was; how blessed his life had been. With another sigh, he smiled and reached out, bringing the blankets closer around her; tucking her in.

And then, quite unexpectedly, her lips curled into a smile and without opening her eyes, she spoke to him. "I can feel you watching me Wales..." Her eyes pulled open, her smile crept higher.

"I can't help it." Harry grinned. "Maybe you should try sleeping under the pillow or something?"

"Think that would help?" Maddie's nose scrunched up as her arms came out from under the blanket.

"I think it might," he nodded with a chuckle.

"Can I come in?" She nodded to the spot on his chest, the place under his arm.

"Of course," he lifted his arm, lifted the blankets, and sighed as she snuggled right up to him; close and tight and warm.

"Where did you go?" She asked as she settled in.

"For a walk," Harry's arms moved around her, his fingers gracing up and down her arm. "Out on the grounds."

"Yeah?" She yawned and inched even closer to him.

"Yeah..." He breathed, turning to kiss the top of her head. "I have a tree."

"You do?" She laughed lightly. "Just one?"

"Mmmm," Harry nodded. "But it's bigger and stronger than Will's."

"Of course it is," Maddie snickered, finding his musings adorable. "Well..." She turned in his arms, looking up at him. "We told the family."
"We did," his eyes were bright in the moonlight, his fingers lifting to tuck her hair from her face. "And in one week we'll tell the Colorado contingent."

"Yes we will," Maddie scooted further up him; more onto his chest, closer to his face. "Can I just say something?"

"Of course," Harry nodded; his hands smoothing over her back.

"I love being your wife," her words were sweet and kind and it pulled at his heart. "I love being your wife and your friend and I'm really going to love being the mother of your children. I just...I just really want you to know that."

Finding far too few words in his brain than were needed to adequately reflect all that he was feeling, Harry nodded his head and lifted up from his pillow. His hand was gentle behind her head as he pulled her in to meet his lips.

He was soft as he kissed her; soft and warm and thorough. The way his lips moved against hers, the way his tongue begged for admission to her mouth—it was all meant to convey the emotions that were pulsing through him; from their announcement, from the congratulations, from the walk with his father.

From the knowledge that their child, the baby they had created was growing right then, right there in that room, in her body. He would never ever get over just how much it all meant to him.

So when she deepened the kiss, when she moaned into his mouth, he wrapped his arms around her and he moved them both; turning her back onto the mattress and leaning over her. His lips teased away from hers as his eyes opened to look down at her.

"Are you okay?" He whispered, his hands running lovingly over her; down her side, up under her shirt.

"Yes," she nodded, her body moving towards his hand; arching out to him.

"You know that if it ever becomes too uncomfortable or you're worried about hurting the baby or..." He nudged her knees apart, making home between them as she chuckled.

"Aw come on Captain," she ran her hands up his arms to his shoulders, loving the feel of him pressed against her. "You're impressive but that baby's all the way up there..."

"That's not what I meant," his eyes narrowed as he shook his head. "I just meant that if..."

"Shhh..." She pressed her fingers to his lips, moving her hips against him, knowing the exact reaction she would garner. "Come on baby..." She pulled him down for a kiss. "Make love to me?" She whispered against his lips, moaning into his mouth. "Please....please...."

He didn't need a third please; didn't even need the first. He was so incredibly in love with her, in lust with her. He had only needed her reassurances that she was still comfortable with him over her, with the way he pressed against her. Though there would come a time when their lovemaking would change, when their growing baby would necessitate a position change...on this night, in this room, Maddie longed for his body over hers, for the way he moved in and out of her, for the way they connected in that warm, delicious way. And as his hands moved her out of her clothes, as his lips moved her into this heavenly place with him, she wasn't sure she had ever felt closer to
him; ever more in tune.

And it made her so incredibly happy.
Arriving in Colorado this time was different, seeing her family this time was different. This was the first time they had all bypassed Maddie and went straight to Harry. But Maddie understood. This was the first time any of them had seen Harry since his deployment, since his accident. She understood their need to reconnect with him, to prove to their own minds that it was real; that he was okay. As each new family member arrived, as each one welcomed them, they would all inevitably tear up, hug him tighter than they probably should be and in the most sincere, genuine voice, they would welcome him home.

It was quite the homecoming for him; seeing so much feeling and emotion on the faces of Maddie's family, of his family. Being the man he was, he let each of them do what they needed to do to breathe a little easier. And for each it was different. When Kyle arrived, he kissed his cheeks, relieved to see Maddie's spirits back and when Harry thanked him for all he had done, for dropping everything and going to London, he shook it off and let it go. Derek had read more articles about it than Jenna had and with every question he asked, Harry was happy to answer; to discuss. And whenever Hannah would pass by him, she found she had to touch him; rub his back, nudge his shoulder, and occasionally pull him into a hug. He let them all do what they needed to do. And in truth, if he was being perfectly honest, it felt wonderful to be so cared for.

Though they had come to Colorado for the wedding, they had allowed themselves some time before hand; to get settled, to be with the family, and to manage a few things on their "To Do" list. There was a slew of bridesmaid events that Maddie had on her calendar. They would be gathering with the family to watch the US airing of the Walking With The Women expedition. And finally...there was a tiny little announcement that would be made.

Maddie had decided to tell the family in increments. First and foremost would be her mother as it was a miracle she hadn't given in and blurted it out over the phone. Then she planned on taking Amy aside and telling her; wanting her to know before the wedding and the honeymoon. And finally she was going to tell the rest of the family after the wedding was over; wanting desperately to not pull any attention away from the bride and groom.

And all of that began about thirty minutes after they had arrived at Hannah's home. After the Protection Detail ran through the house, Harry helped with the unloading and unpacking and distributing of all they had brought with them.

"Truly, we're only here for ten days, right? We'll be back in time for Remembrance Day or do I need to call in sick for that?" He teased Maddie as he passed her on his way up the stairs to their room.

"Such a funny man," Maddie called after him as her mother chuckled. "Perhaps I'll leave my husband for you."

"I would suggest a quick getaway but..." Harry held up a bag with a smirk on his face. "Who are we kidding."

With a shake of her head and a light laugh, Maddie turned her attention away from him and looked directly at her mother.

"It's really good to see him here," Hannah confessed; her eyes soft and her smile small. "It's good to see you too but it's just really nice...to see him."
"Believe me I understand," Maddie nodded with a wide grin before tilting her head to the side. "Come sit with me?" She took a few steps. "Let's chat while they take care of all that."

"You got it," Hannah clapped her hands together, following as her daughter led her towards the back family room. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, no, mom..." Maddie shook her head, easing onto the large, comfortable couch. "Come sit. I'm fine."

And she did. Hannah grabbed a light blanket off the back of her favorite chair and sat down next to her daughter. "You look good darling," Hannah rubbed her shoulder. "Are you doing well? Taking care of yourself?"

"I am," Maddie nodded; her eyes already dancing dangerously close to giving it all away. "I've been doing really well and I'm taking excellent care of myself. Listen...there's..." Maddie paused, her heart thudding in her chest as she suddenly felt nervous; a happy sort of anxious. "Wow..." She bit the side of her bottom lip and smiled; her flushed cheeks pulling wide. With a deep breath, her eyes lifted and met her mothers and, going for the most direct route, she sighed. "I'm pregnant. You're going to be a grandma."

Hannah blinked, opened her mouth to speak, and then Maddie watched as her mom's face washed over with joy, her eyes welling with tears. "Really?" She whispered; her voice caught in her throat. "I mean you're not...you're...Really?"

"Really," Maddie nodded, her own eyes tearing up. "I'm just through my first trimester. The baby is due in February and..."

"The baby," Hannah cut in, her hands moving to her mouth, down to her chest. "Oh my God...Maddie...a baby. You're going to be a mother."

"I know," Maddie smiled. "And you..." She reached out to wipe a tear from her mother's face. "You're going to be a grandma."

Hannah moved on the couch, pulling Maddie into her arms as both women let their warm emotions take hold. With laughter and a few tears, they hugged and held each other and celebrated this news.

"Okay ladies," Harry's voice rang out into the room as he stepped inside. "I think we're all moved in and..." He stopped and looked them over. "Everything okay?"

"Is everything okay?!" Hannah pulled back from her daughter, turning wide, teary eyes up to him. "Is everything okay?!" Before anyone could say anything else, she was off the couch and pulling him into a great big bear hug. With slight confusion, Harry hugged her back, chuckling as she pulled back, held his face in her hands and kissed his cheeks. "Good job Harry. Great job." And then she pulled him back into her arms.

"You told her," Harry looked to Maddie over Hannah's shoulder; his eyes dancing, his smile wide.

"I couldn't help it," Maddie's eyes turned apologetic.

Harry chuckled at his wife, at his mother-in-law still hugging him tight. "But we had the whole
thing with the grandma picture frame and the ultrasound and..."

"I couldn't wait!" Maddie laughed at herself. "Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad," Harry laughed, his hands rubbing over Hannah's back as she looked up from his shoulder.

"Hold on," she spun around in his arms to look at her daughter. "There's a grandma picture frame and an ultrasound?!"

"There is," Maddie nodded.

"Well what are we doing?!" Hannah laughed, pulling back from Harry. "Somebody better go and get them!"

"Well I suppose that would be me," Harry took a step back from her. "I'll just run up and grab it. I'll be right back."

"Thank you," Maddie reached up to take his hand.

"No problem," he rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand. "You doing okay? Need anything?"

"No, no," she shook her head. "I'm just fine, thank you."

"Good," he dipped to kiss her and as Hannah watched with an 'awww' on her lips, he slipped from the room on a mission to find the gift that Maddie had worked meticulously to put together, that she had abandoned the instant she saw her mother. The excitement that was generated in that room that night would carry with all of them into the week, into all of the family festivities. As excited as Maddie and Harry were to be parents, Hannah was to be a grandmother.

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Maddie and Harry had one full day to settle in, to relax before the family began descending upon Hannah's house. Once the family had discovered that the documentary about Maddie's trek to the North Pole would be airing during her time in Colorado, they put together a viewing party; food and drinks at Hannah's and every single one of them present and accounted for. They had a few days before the wedding festivities officially began and this was a low-key easy way to start it all out.

The day began with an announcement from another Royal Palace; an engagement for Prince Carl Phillip from the Swedish Royal Family.

"Oh look at that," Maddie smiled as she nudged Harry. "Looks like Carl Phillip and Sofia are taking on some of the worldly attention for a while."

"It's sweet of them," Harry leaned in to kiss the side of her neck. "You let me know when you're ready to draw it back in..." His hand slid down over the small round of her stomach; his eyes dancing.

"Ha!" Her hand pressed over his, holding him close. "Maybe we let the family in before the rest of the world."
"Maybe," he kissed her neck again; smiling against her skin. "You ready to watch yourself ski to the North Pole?"

"I don't know," she chuckled. "I'm ready to see the footage, ready to see how it all came together but...my involvement in it? I don't know if I'm ready to see myself on TV."

"I know the feeling," he shrugged. "But it's going to be wonderful."

"Eh," she shrugged with a smirk. "Either way it'll be nice watching Kyle watch it."

"Ha!" Harry's head tossed back. "Always competition with you two."

"Always," Maddie nodded with a wide grin; her focus shifting back to their day.

The family had all arrived and the quiet country house had turned into a hotbed of excitement, conversation, and laughter. With food all around and drinks flowing, they had a bit of time before the episode started. So while Harry talked to Derek and Gary about what had happened over the ocean and his new post in London, Maddie took her chance to pull Kyle and Amy aside. They slipped off to the room Maddie and Harry were staying in and as Maddie shut the door, they moved inside, turning to watch her Kyle with curiosity than Amy.

"What's going on?" Amy watched as Maddie moved closer, her face wide and happy and full of mischief.

"You okay?" Kyle studied her carefully.

"Of course," Maddie nodded quickly. "I just...there's something I want to tell you and just you; for now. I'm going to tell everyone else after the wedding but the two of you will be gone and I want you to hear it from me...And the only way to do that is to tell you now, before it's too late and the world knows."

"I'm so confused," Kyle shook his head.

"Yeah, sorry," Maddie chuckled and then there was a flash of a moment when her eyes twinkled and her grin pulled higher but with a casual shrug, she let them in. "I'm pregnant."

"What?!" Kyle's eyes went wide.

"Oh my God," Amy gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. "Oh my GOD. Maddie!" She moved then, pulling Maddie into a hug. "You're pregnant?"

"I am," Maddie nodded with a teary smile.

"How far along are you?" Amy pulled back, holding onto Maddie's hands as she looked her over.

"I just finished my first trimester," Maddie laughed lightly at the look on their faces.

"Oh my God..." Kyle shook his head slowly, his whole body warming for his cousin's great news. "Come here," he moved to hug her; sweet and soft and easy. Turning to kiss her cheek, he smiled. "Congratulations."
"Congratulations Maddie," Amy was beaming as she clapped her hands together. "My God, Harry must just be..."

"Oh he is," Maddie laughed, wiping at the tiny tears that perked up during these moments of sentiment. "He's been just a ball of crazy energy for months. But we're so excited."

"And Hannah?" Kyle crossed his arms over his chest. "You've told her, I'm sure."

"The second we arrived," Maddie rolled her eyes as she remembered. "I couldn't keep it a secret any longer than that."

"Sure," Amy nodded, knowing what that urge must be like. "Wait. Hold on. You said you're only telling us?" Her finger drifted between herself and Kyle.

"Yes," Maddie nodded.

"But why?" Amy's face scrunched up as she looked to Maddie.

"I'm going to wait until after the wedding is over, after that has passed. You two will be on your honeymoon and I'll tell the rest of them..."

"But...why?" Amy repeated. "Why wait?"

"Because," Maddie sighed. "Because I don't want to...this is your time, Amy. This is your wedding and your celebrations and your excitement. I can wait a week before I jump in on that. Let's let the wedding be the center and after it's over, I'll bring the family in."

"What?!" Amy laughed, her head shaking back and forth. "That's absurd!"

"It's not," Maddie shook her head.

"Yes it is," Amy moved forward, her hands clasping Maddie's shoulders as she met her eyes. "This is a family celebration; the wedding. And adding a new member to the family...God Maddie, that only makes it better."

"But..." Maddie tried again.

"No," Kyle spoke up. "She's right. You have to tell the rest of them. It's not fair to keep it to yourself."

"Not fair?" Maddie raised her eyebrows.

"Besides," Amy shrugged. "You don't think people aren't going to notice that you're not drinking? That you're not toasting with champagne? At a wedding? At the bachelorette party?" She laughed. "Come on."

"Well...I hadn't exactly thought that part through," Maddie's eyes narrowed.

"Clearly," Kyle snickered even as Amy smacked his arm.

"Come on," Amy was sweet and sincere and being completely honest with the woman she considered her cousin, always her friend. "Tell them. I'm not at all...worried about you taking any excitement or attention or...Jesus..." Amy rolled her eyes. "Tell them. You tell them or...or I will."
"Nice," Kyle grinned at his soon-to-be wife before he looked to Maddie. "You have to tell them. We should all get to be excited as a family for the week...not after when we're all scattered."

"I..." Maddie laughed lightly. "I don't know what to say..."

"Well, 'I'm pregnant' will probably do it," Amy snickered.

"Lovely," Maddie sighed. "I just. Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent sure," Amy nodded without a second thought. "Kyle?"

"Oh absolutely."

"Okay then..." Maddie took in a breath. "I...I'll talk to Harry and I guess we'll...wow. I guess we'll let everyone in."

"Yeah!" Amy clapped her hands before she hugged Maddie again. "I cannot wait to see the looks on their faces. It'll be like an early wedding present."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "Well when you put it that way..."

They returned to the party just as everyone was settling to watch the documentary. Harry was beaming as Maddie returned to the room, accepting a hug and a kiss from Amy and a big, warm hug from Kyle.

"Congratulations," Kyle spoke under his breath.

"Thank you," Harry smiled even wider before he patted Kyle on the back. "You should get on in here and get a good seat. You're about to see a whole new level of badass, my friend."

"Oh here we go," Kyle rolled his eyes. "Of course you would say that, she's your wife."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed as they all moved into the room. "He wasn't talking about me...." She settled onto the couch between her mother and her husband. "Soldiers without limbs...doing things that are going to blow your mind."

Watching herself on screen was certainly cringe-worthy, but watching the progress of the team, the way they moved towards their goal, over hurdles and barriers together—watching that overshadowed the other. It was clear, however, that she was the only one struggling at all to watch it. Her family was engrossed, even Kyle who had quickly gotten over his jealousy and competitiveness and became wrapped up in the stories.

"Truly Maddie," he turned to her about a quarter of the way through. "You should be really proud of yourself."

"You really should," Harry added; his eyes and his smile beaming bright throughout the entirety of the documentary. He knew he looked ridiculous with his wide grin and the way he would clap his hands at pivotal moments, the way his breath would suck in playfully during the dramatic moments, made even more dramatic by the editors' choice in music. And though Maddie rolled her eyes at him, slapping at his arm more than once, she knew he was proud; beyond proud. And
she couldn't be too mad about that.

As the documentary edged closer to the end, the group grew silent and watched as the women made it to the North Pole. They watched with tears in their own eyes as the team reached their goal; happy tears, hugs, and shouts of victory there on the screen in front of them.

"I still can't believe I was there," Maddie whispered to Harry as she blinked back her own resurgence of tears.

"I know the feeling," he whispered back, pinching her cheek lightly with his fingers; leaning in to kiss her. "You did good love."

"Thank you," she took a deep breath and turned her eyes back to the screen where they were showing their arrival at that tiny little airport in Norway. "Oh my God..." She nudged Harry’s arm and nodded to the screen.

Though Andrew Bradley had kept true to his word, though there were no direct shots of Maddie and Harry's reunion, though they hadn't seen any photos or video of that moment—there on the screen in front of them, beyond the reunions of the wounded women, if you knew what to look for—you could see Maddie, wrapped up in Harry. She felt Harry's hand squeeze hers as she breathed through the emotions that welled at the memory of how great it was to see him; to hold him.

But they weren't the only ones that noticed. "Look!" Jenna half stood from the couch, her hand pointing at the screen. "It's Maddie! And Harry!"

"Hold on," Amy reached for the remote, pausing the TV as everyone moved closer; some standing, some scooting to the edge of the couch—all to get a better look.

"Is that you?" Jenna looked over to the two of them.

Maddie took a deep breath and nodded. "That's us."

"You were there?" Derek leaned up to look over at Harry. "But I thought were still...."

"I was," Harry nodded. "I had just landed in Greece not long before that. I had a few days left of decompression but I wanted to..." He waved his hand at the screen and shrugged. "What can I say? I needed to make things good with my wife and occasionally I can pull a few strings and..."

"You're killing me," Gary groaned, his head shaking at the sappy look on his wife's face.

"Sorry," Harry laughed.

"No you're not," Kyle smirked.

"No I'm not," Harry agreed.

"Hold on," Jenna held her hands up. "You're telling me that this..." She walked over to the screen. "This is the first time you saw him after the deployment?"

"Yes," Maddie smiled with a shrug.

"But....how in the world did the journalists not get more shots of that?" Jenna was impressed; from
a purely 'royal watcher' standpoint.

"The lead on the story was a nice guy," Maddie explained; smiling as she remembered.

"He was," Harry agreed.

"Well, I would assume that got you out of the doghouse," Derek chuckled.

"It did," Harry nodded, his eyes swinging to Maddie who was biting her lip as she smiled back at him; her mind warmed as she remembered.

"What a reunion," Amy sighed back into her seat.

"It was," Maddie's eyes never left Harry's as she spoke. Then, with lifted eyebrows and a nervous smile, she added. "I'm actually pretty sure that's the night I got pregnant."

Harry's face flashed bright as she said it, his eyes pulsing wide and his smile pulling higher and then she swung her eyes out to the rest of the room.

"Hold on." Jenna spun around from the screen.

"Wait." Dena sat up.

"Did you just...." Jenna's eyes grew increasingly wider as she moved closer.

"No no. Wait!" Dena waved her hand.

"Did you say pregnant?" Gary's grumpy face turned warm and sweet.

"I did," Maddie nodded as Harry's hand moved to her shoulder. "I'm pregnant. Just over twelve weeks."

And the room erupted.

The screen on the TV remained frozen on that exact moment as Maddie's family reacted to the news as if they had just been handed a prize in a great, great game. In an instant, they were on their feet; clapping and laughing and going on about the believability of it all.

All of them moved to hug her, all of them moved to hug him; to congratulate them both, to talk of the blessings and the perfection and the excitement. The excitement that just seeped into every corner of that room, every smile, every hug, every burst of happiness from around the room. Maddie felt so full of love and warmth and support that she thought her smile would never fade from her face. And it felt amazing.

With Harry standing next to her, they laughed at her family's reactions, they fielded a whole bevy of name suggestions—from the sweet "You should work Jay in there somewhere," to the eye-roll inducing "It doesn't get any better than Kyle"—and they felt great love and a sense of protection in the room. And they knew this little baby already had such an amazing team ready to love him or her; just as they did.

By the time Maddie and Harry got up to their room that night, they were tired. It had been a long
evening; a celebratory evening, but a long one no doubt. They had stayed up late letting their family in on all they knew; the due date, the big appointments, how the news would be dropped on the rest of the world and when. And then, after another round of hugs, kisses and even a few sneaky pats to Maddie's stomach, they said goodnight and the family filtered out. There was still a whole week to celebrate, the wedding and all the activities that surrounded it were that much sweeter—just as Amy had insisted they would be.

And finally, finally, the expectant parents were alone with each other.

Harry sat on the edge of the bed and watched as Maddie moved about getting ready for the night; stepping into her pajamas, slipping inside the bathroom to brush her teeth and wash her face. And when she stepped back in, she caught his gaze and smiled.

"I see you staring..."

"Okay," he shrugged; shameless.

"You okay?"

"Okay?" He puffed out a laugh. "No Madeline. I'm way past okay. I'm...just...over the moon."

"Aww..." She moved to stand in front of him, her hands resting on his shoulders as his moved to her hips. "You're too cute sometimes."

"Hmmm..." He smiled, his hands flattening out as they moved to her stomach. "You're so gorgeous Maddie..." He looked up at her with wide, warm eyes. "Just beautiful."

"You're going to make me blush," she ruffled his hair.

"Good," he leaned in to kiss the small round of her stomach. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," she moved in closer, loving the way his hands moved over her body, loving the way he looked at her as he did.

"Do you..." His voice was soft as he looked up at her. "Do you really think it was that night?"

Maddie felt a rush of emotion, a wave of desire wash through her; her skin heating at the points where he touched her. Meeting his eyes, she smiled. "I think there's a really good chance that it was."

"Wow..." He shook his head, slowly bringing her in; wanting her closer. His fingers moved to the hem of her shirt, lifting it just enough to expose a small patch of skin. And then he leaned in and kissed her there; soft and sweet and were it not for the look in his eyes, it could have been meant to end there. With that small kiss to her hip.

But his eyes were dark and intense and all in one collective breath, the mood of the room shifted. Her hands slid into his hair as his lips returned to her body; lingering, wet and warm. Maddie gasped as his hands moved around her; tugging her closer as his tongue slipped out and ran a line from on hip to the other—stopping to tease at her navel, to torture her with a dip below the band of her panties.

She gasped as he licked just below the lace; groaned as he pulled back and continue on to the other hip—the hips that angled out, wanting to bring him back to her. With a grin up to her, his
fingers tucked inside the waist of her pajama pants, his entire hand sliding in against her skin.

"Harry..." She breathed; her body rousing in the wildest way. The pregnancy had only magnified her senses, her need and drive for him; for the way he made her feel.

"Yes?" He looked up at her with a boyishly smug grin; he knew exactly what the pregnancy had done to her, to their sex life, and he counted himself lucky every time she pulled him from whatever it was he was doing and into her arms. "Are you too tired?"

"No," she shook her head, biting at her lip as her hand slid down to his forearm. "I'm not too tired..." With soft fingers and a firm grip, she moved his hand from her hip right to her center; where she wanted it.

His face lit up; his grin pulling higher, his eyes dancing, and with that smirk firmly planted in place, he slipped inside the lace and let his fingers stroke against her. He loved it when she directed him. "Jesus..." He breathed at the way she felt, hot and wet, at the way she groaned and sighed and let her head fall back. His hand stayed in place, stroking against her in the way he knew she loved and he leaned in; his other hand lifting her shirt so that his lips, his mouth could return to her body. "God Madeline...you feel so..."

"Wet?" She breathed; her voice working around the word in a way that made Harry groan.

"Maddie," he smiled against her skin as his mouth moved higher on a direct mission to her already swollen breasts.

"I want you Harry," she pulled at his hair, her nipples aching to be in his mouth so much so that when he finally arrived, when he finally closed his lips around her, she sighed in relief. "Yes..." She hissed, unable to help herself. He chuckled around her, his fingers still stroking, his tongue beginning the slow tease she hated and loved all the same. "I'm so glad..." She breathed, pressing at the back of his head as he worked her over. "I'm so glad that you're not turned off by me being pregnant..."

"Excuse me," Harry pulled his mouth from her, looking up at her with a knotted forehead. "I couldn't be more turned on right now..." He shook his head, his eyes shifting back to her glistening chest, down to where his fingers moved against her. "I want you...all the time."

"I know," Maddie's breath was growing heavy, her body responding to the way his fingers worked.

"All the time baby..." His voice dropped low, watching as her face changed; as her jaw went slack and her eyes went hazy. "I want you..."

"I know," Maddie gasped as his fingers shifted; sliding just inside of her, teasing her with the promise of more. "Oh God...Harry..."

"Come to bed with me," he commanded with a gentle voice and steady fingers. His mouth moved in, capturing first one breast and then the other; sucking and nipping and then pulling away. "Come to bed with me Maddie. Let me make you call out my name."

"Oh God," she groaned, her knees weakening at the very thought. "Okay..." She licked her lips and tried to gather her breath.

"Right now," he leaned up to kiss at her neck. "Come with me right now." And then all at once,
his hands slide away from her.

With an uncontrollable groan and a reflex of a pout, Maddie's entire body ached at his absence. But he rose to his feet and gathered her in his arms and the way he kissed her; the pull of his lips, the push of his tongue, it made her forget that he had left, it made her remember his command.

"To bed," she whispered against his lips as his hands lifted her shirt; pulling it up and over her head before tossing it aside.

His eyes met hers with a grin and a nod. "Right now."

And that's exactly where she went.
"Oh my God," Maddie sighed into a bit of a laugh as their car pulled up in front of the hotel resort where all of the wedding festivities would be taking place. "How did they find us here?" She nodded her head towards the handful of paparazzi waiting for them outside of the hotel.

"Twitter," Harry groaned. "Somebody saw us in the state, somebody else said that your cousin was getting married..." He took a deep breath as the car pulled to a stop and their protection detail stepped out.

"Honestly," Hannah rolled her eyes; mildly amused. "They really should put their investigative skills to good use and solve crimes."

"Exactly," Harry pointed to her, smiling wide in absolute agreement.

"Nice," Maddie laughed. "Come on you two. We have a few hours to settle in before the welcome dinner."

"I'm right behind you," Harry smiled across the back of the car at his wife; taking a breath as he opened the door and stepped out.

As they emerged from the car, the photographers snapped away; calling out to Maddie and Harry, hoping for a picture that was slightly better or more unique than the one being taken with the camera just next to them. With a small smile on her face, Maddie waited for Harry to round the car to her. Taking her hand in his, and waiting for Hannah, they took the few quick steps into the grand, beautiful hotel. The hotel had been prepared for their arrival and, in addition to the protective detail that had travelled with them from London, they had stepped up their own security. So once they were inside, they were free from the paparazzi that had seemed to find them; even in this exclusive mountainous location.

As soon as they stepped into the ornate lobby, they were greeted by a team of hotel personnel—the General Manager, the Lead Bellhop and the Director of Security. The GM stepped forward first, a tall older man with a smattering of grey in his dark brown hair; an easy smile and kind eyes.

"Your Royal Highnesses," his hand extend first to Harry. "My name is Benjamin Williams and I'm the General Manager. Welcome to our hotel."

"Thank you very much," Harry smiled, shaking his hand before he opened up to Maddie. "This is my wife Madeline."

"Ma'am," Benjamin turned to shake her hand. "It's your cousin who's marrying here this weekend?"

"It is," Maddie nodded with a smile.

"And this is my mother-in-law, Hannah Forrester," Harry's hand was warm and steady on Hannah's back as he brought her into the mix.

"Ma'am," Benjamin nodded as he took her hand.

"Good to meet you," she smiled.
"Well we're very happy to have all of you here," he brought his hands together in front of him and turned to the crew assembled behind him. "This is Mark Kepner. He's our Director of Security." Hands were shaken and Jim stepped forward; meeting Mark and stepping off to the side as the two teams met about their mutual needs. "This is our head bellhop Mitch Parker; he'll be taking up your luggage and this...this is Nicole Martinez, our Front Office Manager. She has your keys ready to go and will escort you upstairs to your suite. And of course, if there is anything at all that you should need during your stay, you have my direct extension. We'll be happy to serve you."

"Thank you Mr. Williams, Ms. Martinez," Harry smiled wide as he took the keys from her. "We're very much looking forward to spending time celebrating with family."

"Of course," Nicole smiled sweetly and turned her attention to Hannah. "Ma'am, we took the liberty of pulling your keys as well." She handed over the cards to Hannah who thanked her and watched as this team of people moved around them; ready to step forward as soon as they were.

"Okay," Harry looked between Maddie and Hannah. "Shall we head upstairs?"

"Mmm," Maddie nodded; ready to unpack and find the rest of her family.

And then with one quick nod of Harry's head, one half step of his foot, the crew moved towards a bank of elevators; the cameras outside of the hotel still snapping away while a few of the guests inside did double takes.

"Harry..." Maddie breezed back into the living room of their suite. They had a full itinerary that weekend. That night, Thursday, it was a Welcome Dinner, the Bachelor and Bachelorette parties. On Friday was a women's tea, the rehearsal, the rehearsal dinner. Saturday was the wedding and Sunday was a brunch before everyone headed out of the mountains and back home.

"Mmm?" His eyebrows lifted though his eyes stayed trained on the phone in front of him. They had settled into their suite at the luxury hotel tucked into the mountains where all of the wedding festivities would be taking place. After they had made sure Hannah was settled in her room, they had gone onto theirs to get ready for the Welcome Dinner with the wedding party and out of town guests. Harry, already dressed, was reading an email on his phone while Maddie finished up.

"Feel this," without a second thought, she scooped up his free hand and brought it to her chest. His eyes widened as his head turned slowly to look up at her. "Sorry?" His lips twitched into a smile as she pressed his hand around the soft roundness of her left breast.

"They're getting larger," Maddie explained quite matter-of-factly. Harry chuckled as she looked down at them; studying them from different angles. "They're rounder and bigger and..." Her eyes lifted to look at him. "You haven't noticed?"

"I..." Harry chuckled with a shake of his head. "I'm not sure it's in my best interest to answer that."

"Charming," Maddie smiled at him; finding the amusement he had already found in their arrangement. "Come on. They're bigger. Don't you think?"

"I think..." Harry turned his full attention to her, his hand sliding out from under hers, down her side, to her stomach. "I think that there are some amazing things happening to your body right
Maddie smiled down at him, her hand ruffling into his hair. "And bigger boobs is one of them?"

"It would appear so," he answered with a cheeky grin before his eyes travelled to where his hand rested. "How's the little one doing?"

"Perfect," Maddie followed his eyes to look at her stomach.

"Can you feel him move yet?" Harry glanced up at her.

"Him?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted, her teeth biting into her bottom lip.

"Sounds better than 'it', don't you think?" He shrugged; not at all issuing a statement of gender preference.

"It does," Maddie nodded, moving to sit next to him on the couch; his arm moving instinctually up and around her shoulders. "And I haven't felt him move yet. Any day now though."

"You'll let me know?"

"Absolutely."

"I'm not kidding Madeline," his eyes grew serious. "You wake me from sleep."

"I get it," she laughed, leaning into him as he relaxed.

"You ready for dinner? For the Bachelorette party afterwards?"

"I don't know," Maddie smiled easily. "It will be fun for sure but I'm pregnant and, you know, not wanting people to know I'm pregnant."

"Sure."

"It will be a great time," she shrugged, bringing her lips to kiss at his jaw. "How about you? You ready to tie one on with the boys?"

"Aw, I don't know," Harry shook his head, though Maddie could see the grin forming on his face. She knew it had been a while since he had gone out and that he was actually looking forward to some time with her cousins. "Tell me darling, you want me to abstain from drinking? In a show of solidarity?"

"No, no," Maddie shook her head with a laugh. "You go ahead. Drink for the both of us."

"Well that will most certainly get one of us into trouble." With a wide chuckle, he pulled her closer; pressing kisses to her cheeks before finding her lips and warming her mouth with his.

"Oh my..." Maddie's voice was low as she tucked close to Harry; her arm linked through his, her fingers wrapped up in his hand. "It's beautiful out here."

"It is," Harry agreed with a smile. The Welcome Dinner was being held in a small, intimate
banquet room off the side of the hotel. In order to get there, they had to walk along a path outside of the hotel, encountering a few paps struggling to get photos from the street. Harry took a deep breath to calm himself as he held the door open for his wife; happy that once they were inside, they were relatively protected from more invasions.

"You're here!" Amy and Kyle were there to greet the guests as they entered; dressed up and beaming with their own unique happy smiles.

"We are!" Maddie's smile was just as big as Amy's as she moved in to hug her. "You look so beautiful."

"Thank you," Amy held her tight as Kyle and Harry shook hands already chuckling about the late night plans.

"This hotel is amazing too, everything seems so sweet and intimate and just...wonderful."

"Isn't it fabulous?" Amy agreed with a nod.

"It is," Maddie squeezed her once more before she stepped back. "And I'm really sorry about the photographers out front."

"Don't worry about it," Amy shook her head; leaning in and dropping her voice. "In fact, it's kept my Aunt Gilda and my mother out of my hair while they go on and on about how royalty will be here." Amy's eyes turned sympathetic even as she rolled them. "And they've been a pain in the ass all week so really...I should thank you."

"Ha!" Maddie let out a burst of laughter as Harry and Kyle stepped over to them.

"Amy," Harry turned on the charm as he leaned to kiss her cheeks. "You look beautiful tonight."

"Thank you Harry," she hugged him back as Maddie hugged her cousin.

"And I'm sorry about the paps waiting in the lurch."

"You two are being silly," Amy shook her head. "It's not a problem."

"You sure? You don't want us to leave? Wear masks on our faces?"

"No!" She laughed, smacking his arm. "Of course not."

"Well if there's anything I can do..."

"Actually," Maddie grinned, tucking her hand into his elbow. "How about you let me introduce you to Amy's mother and her Aunt..." Maddie raised her eyebrows.

"Gilda," Amy smirked.

"Gilda," Maddie repeated.

"Yeah?" Harry glanced between the two women; seeing the look that they shared.

"How do you feel about running a little interference?" Maddie smiled up sweetly at her husband.
With a shrug he cleared his throat. "Anything for the bride."

"That's the spirit," Maddie patted his arm and with a quick wink to Kyle, she led him off in the direction; happy to help distract if they could.

Okay now," Kyle sat down next to Maddie at her table as people began to find their seats, began to settle. "Sending Harry over to Gilda was funny at first but now...fifteen minutes later..." He shook his head, smiling into his glass. "Now it's just plain mean."

"Ha," Maddie laughed, nudging her cousin with her shoulder. "He really doesn't mind. You forget what he does, you know." Her hand patted his knee. "The amount of older women he's chatted up in his lifetime would probably disturb you. It's sweet of you to be worried about him though."

"Hmmm," Kyle nodded, taking a sip of his drink before he turned his eyes to her. "How about you? How are you feeling?"

"Fine," she met his eyes, her smile tipping higher. "Wonderful."

"Good," he grinned. "Can I get you anything? What are you drinking tonight?"

"I'm drinking Mojitos with Jenna," Maddie nodded to her glass on the table.

"Oh is that so?" Kyle's grin pulled higher; knowing she must be messing with him. "Is that how the royals do it?" The it he was referring to meaning 'pregnancy'.

"We have a deal," Maddie leaned closer. "Jenna's drinking Mojitos and every time she goes for one, she brings me ginger ale and mint leaves. People just assume..."

"Ah," Kyle got it. "Smart. So you're drinking Mojitos all weekend?"

"Pretty much," Maddie sighed, her eyes dancing as she caught sight of her husband coming back to their table. "Well would you look at who's finally decided to stop flirting with other women and return to his wife's side?"

"I have a wife?" He lifted his eyebrows, smirking playfully as he leaned to kiss her. "I thought you were my own little Mata Hari, pretending to be on my team all while plotting to turn me over."

Kyle chuckled as Maddie stretched her neck to kiss Harry again. "You two are ridiculous," Kyle sighed and rose to his feet. "I see my cue to head back to the bride. I'll see you in a bit?"

"Sure," Maddie nodded as Harry took his seat next to her.

"And thank you," Kyle eyed Harry. "Gilda's been all over Amy; it's nice to see her have a moment to breathe."

"Any time," Harry shook his head easily. "She wasn't all that bad."

"Ha!" Kyle clapped his hands together. "Clearly you're ahead of me on the alcohol intake."

"Maybe," Harry smirked, reaching for his glass. "We'll catch you up later?"
"I'm holding you to that," Kyle nodded, pointing to Harry as he stepped away from the table; his smile wide and easy as he returned to his soon-to-be wife.

"You're so sweet," Maddie turned her lips into his neck as his arm draped over the back of her chair.

"And you're incredibly sexy," he turned his eyes to her; looking her over without being too obvious. "Honestly, I don't know how you do it sometimes."

"Do what?" Maddie whispered with a soft giggle.

"Stay so goddamn gorgeous; all the time..." His fingers traced over her shoulder.

"It's easy," Maddie patted his leg. "I keep my husband nice and drunk." As Harry's laughter rang out around them, the room began to settle. Hannah and Patrick made their way to their table along with Gary and Jenna; carrying two custom Mojitos and a wink for Maddie. And just as they all moved into their seats, Kyle stood from his chair and called for all of their attention.

It wasn't just the paparazzi outside who were curious about the groom's "royal" family members. It wasn't just Amy's mother and Aunt Gilda who were fascinated with the fact that Prince Harry was among them; that the American Duchess would be in the bridal party.

During dinner there were glances; murmurs of conversation that passed around the room as people realized, as they turned to look—as inconspicuously as possible. Though Harry noticed, he didn't seem to mind; didn't seem to be effected. It wasn't as if he had had a time in his life where this didn't happen. Even Maddie had grown more used to the attention and though everyone seemed to be interested, they also seemed to relax as the night wore on.

It wasn't long before the dinner was clearing out; after Amy and Kyle had gone through the itinerary, passing out welcome baskets with printed times and locations along with treats and "free time activity" suggestions. It wasn't long before the group was splitting up; before Maddie and Harry had returned to their rooms, changed, and readied to head back out into their own night of wild, craziness.

"Okay Captain," Maddie let her fingers slide down the length of his arm into his hand. "I'm heading out."

"With Sampson?" Harry glanced behind her to where their detail were talking; getting ready to go mobile.

"Poor Sampson," Maddie chuckled.

"Are you going to be okay tonight?" Harry lifted her hand in his; his eyes searching hers.

"I'll be just fine," she smoothed her fingers over his cheek and leaned in; kissing him quickly and easily. "Are you really going to wear that shirt?"

"Hell yes," Harry looked down at it with a wide grin. "Jenna's gonna love it when we meet up with you all later tonight."
"Yes she will," Maddie nodded and kissed him again. "Okay Daddy. Be safe. I'll see you later."

"God I love it when you call me daddy," he shook his head, his cheeks slightly pink as he watched her step away from him with a smile.

"More than when I call you Captain?" She called out as she moved towards the door.

"Ha!" He called back, reaching for his light jacket and following behind. "Equally. But for completely different reasons."

"Fair enough," Maddie sighed as they stepped out of their suite, turning to the other for one last time before they headed in different directions.

"Listen," Harry moved in closer. "If you end up with strippers tonight..."

"Please," Maddie rolled her eyes. "There are photographers waiting outside for me."

"If you end up with strippers," he repeated himself with narrowed eyes; his voice dropping as he leaned to kiss her cheek. "Please for the love of God, do not put on any RAF hats." With a wink and a pat to her ass, he pulled back.

"You got it," Maddie chuckled, rubbing his cheek with her fingers before she kissed him once more. "Have fun."

"You too," he nodded. And then with wide smiles and small waves, the two of them stepped away; each heading in their own direction, each with their own shadow of protection behind them.

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"Okay..." Maddie stopped in front of Amy's suite for the weekend, turning to look at Sampson with an apologetic smile. "You ready for this?"

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded back; calm and cool and completely collected.

"Anything I need to know?" She grinned as they reached the door.

"Enjoy your night," he shrugged. "Don't worry about looking out for me. As long as you don't try to lose me, I'll keep up; I'll have my eye on you. We'll have a car waiting outside at all times if we need it."

"Seems easy enough," she sighed and rapped on the door; laughing at the surge of energy that exploded on the other side. Giggles and running and shouting greeted her as the door to Amy's suite was pulled open.

"Happy Bachelorette Party!" The tall brunette called out as she spun to face them. Maddie instantly recognized her from the party. "Hi there! I'm Janet. I'm the Maid of Honor and you must be..." She looked Maddie over; blinked her eyes twice and took a step back. "Oh wow. You must be Kyle's cousin."

"Maddie," she nodded, extending her hand. "And this is Sampson, he's going to be with us tonight."

"Nice to meet you," Janet shook Maddie's hand before turning to do the same with Sampson.
Janet had seen Maddie at the party, had known that she would be there, but she hadn't met her yet. Though she was shocked to actually see Kyle's 'royal' cousin in person, she was able to hide her instinctual surprise really well.

It wasn't quite the same for the other women already inside.

Though Amy, Jenna and Dena were there to even it out, there were two other friends of Amy's who had not yet met Maddie and they were, to put it most simply, a little star struck.

"Okay ladies, this is Kyle's cousin Maddie," Amy's smile was amused as she made introductions. "You met Janet at the door."

"Yes," Maddie smiled.

"And this is Elise, my roommate from college and this is Shelby, she's been a friend of mine since we were in grade school."

"It's nice to meet you," Maddie extended her hand first to Elise. "I hope you don't mind, but I'll be breaking the 'no boys allowed' rule." She laughed as she shook Shelby's hand. "This is Sampson. He'll be coming with us tonight."

"Hi," Elise offered a wave as they all turned to the one man in the room.

"Hello," he nodded to them, his eyes meeting with Maddie's for just a blink of shared humor. "I promise I'll stay out of the way. In the back."

"Fantastic," Janet clapped her hands together, wanting to ease into the party mode. "Now...we've all had some champagne and we were getting ready to head out but..." She turned to Maddie. "If you want me to pour you a glass so you can catch up, we can wait a bit."

"Oh no," Maddie shook her head. "Let's head out. I can catch up at the next place."

"You sure?" Janet was being a great hostess; wanting everyone to have a great time.

"Absolutely," Maddie nodded, catching Jenna's eyes as they all shuffled around; gathering handbags and jackets.

"Fair enough," Janet bounced on her heels. "Okay ladies..." She reached into a large pink gift bag. "For the bride..." With a flourish of her hands, she pulled out a tiara-ed veil, placing it on Amy's head as the others giggled and clapped their hands, following it up with a 'Bride' sash. "And..." She pulled out a giant rhinestone ring for her hand. "And..." With one last flourish, she produced a bright pink feathered boa. Wrapping it around Amy's neck, she called out to the rest of them. "There are some in there for everyone so grab one before you leave!"

"Come on," Maddie linked her arm through Jenna's and pulled her over to the bag.

As they wrapped boas around their own necks, Jenna leaned in and whispered. "If you need anything tonight, just let me know."

"You're the best," Maddie whispered back and, with a quick kiss to her cheek, they followed the party out the door and towards the elevator.

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Their first stop was a lively Mexican restaurant with a lit up patio off the back and music playing over the laughter and conversation that seemed to flow with ease. They were escorted out to the patio; off to a corner that allowed them a little bit of privacy without taking them away from the party in the air.

As they slid into their spots, Janet smiled wide. "I'm going to go up for a few pitchers of margaritas and some chips and guac, does anyone have any other requests?"

"Oh!" Jenna clapped her hands together and stood. "I'll go with you. I want a Mojito. Maddie? You with me?"

"Yes please!" Maddie nodded enthusiastically.

"Fantastic," Janet smiled at Jenna before she turned back to the group. "We'll be right back!"

And they were back in no time; rounds of drinks and snacks and before much time had passed, the whole lot of them were tipsy. Laughter emanated from their little corner of the patio as they got to know each other over drinks. Though Amy's friends were a little timid around Maddie for a while, it was finally her college roommate Elise who took a breath and went for it.

"Forgive me..." Elise, the petite blonde leaned closer to Maddie with a tipsy smile. "But I have just...I've been a fan of Harry's for just...ever."

"Sure," Maddie was cautious but amused.

"A big fan." Elise held her hands apart in front of her.

"Well, it's a pretty big club," Maddie's lips turned up into a crooked grin as her eyes darted up to meet Amy's. Though Maddie was worried about any sort of attention shifting, Amy wasn't; she was having a great time and was happy that all of her friends and bridesmaids were getting to know each other.

"I know!" Elise giggled. "And when you two announced your engagement, I honestly am not sure I've been more excited about anything in my own real life."

"Wow," Maddie took a sip of her drink.

"And on your wedding day," she took a deep breath and leaned in closer. "I woke up at three am and hosted a party with all of my girlfriends and...wow...it was just so beautiful."

"Well thank you very much," Maddie smiled. Elise was being sweet; tipsy but sweet.

"I was wondering..." Elise took a long sip of her drink. "Would it be okay for me to ask you a question?"

"Elise," Janet let out a soft laugh, her head shaking just slightly.

"It's okay," Maddie waved her hand; feeling at ease among the ladies. "What's your question?"

"Well," Elise cleared her throat and leaned in further. "What actually is your last name?"

"It says that on your driver's license?"

"Yep," Maddie nodded.

"Hmm..." Elise seemed thoughtful as she took that in. "Okay."

"Okay?" Maddie chuckled. "Is that it? My last name?"

"Well," Elise took in a deep breath, her smile sheepish. "Can I ask one more?"

"Sure," Maddie shrugged.

"Okay. When I met you earlier, when we were introduced, should I have curtsied?"

"Elise," Amy laughed.

"Sorry!" Elise rolled her eyes at herself, her own laughter joining the group. She looked to Maddie across the table. "I'm sorry. I just...I've wondered and you're here and I just..."

"No," Maddie, shook her head with a grin. "It's really okay. And no. You should not have curtsied. It's really more of a comfort level thing, you know?"

"Sure," Elise nodded, turning to Amy. "Tell me soon-to-be-Mrs.-Forrester...do you curtsey to her?"

"No," Amy smiled to Maddie as she shook her head. "I mean...I think we have sometimes as a bit of an inside, family joke..." Jenna and Dena both snickered as they remembered. "And we probably did at their wedding. But otherwise...no. I don't curtsey."

"Okay..." Shelby leaned in. "I have one."

"Okay," Maddie smiled as her eyes shifted from one friend to the other. "But I'm going to implement a new rule."

"A rule?" Jenna looked to her.

"Every question you ask me is a shot you have to buy for the bride," Maddie grinned as she glanced at Amy.

"LOVE the new rule!" Amy laughed and clapped her hands together.

"Fair enough," Elise laughed along. "I owe you two."

"Yes you do," Maddie reached for her drink and looked to Shelby. "You still have a question?"

"Mmmmm," she nodded. "My friend and I at work have this disagreement. I said that when the papers call you Princess Madeline that it's incorrect; that you're actually a Duchess. But she says that because your husband is still a Prince, you're a Princess." Shelby took a sip and cleared her throat. "I was hoping you might be able to settle a bet."

"Well," Maddie took a deep breath. "You're both a little right. Because my husband is a Prince, and because I do take on the titles of my husband....you could call me 'Princess'. Though...it
wouldn't be Princess Madeline, it would be Princess Henry...because he's the blood royal and I'm not," Maddie smiled sweetly. "Though the title of a Duke is technically higher and he is more accurately referred to as The Duke and therefore..." She exhaled. "It's more appropriate to call me..."

"The Duchess," Shelby clapped her hands together, happy in Maddie's response.

"Exactly," Maddie nodded.

"I knew it!" Shelby felt victorious with Maddie's answer. "That's amazing. Thank you."

"No problem."

"One last one?" Shelby smiled meekly, peeking over her glass.

"One last one," Maddie nodded.

"This is going to sound...really stupid," Shelby was almost embarrassed but had enough alcohol to go for it anyway. "Did they make you take...Princess Lessons?"

"What?!" Janet nearly spit out her drink as she laughed.

"Princess lessons?!" Amy laughed loudly, her head tipping back. "What in the hell would they teach you there? How to wave and where a tiara and..."

"Come on!" Shelby rolled her eyes. "It's a legit question. I've read about it over and over. People from the palace taking aside the girlfriends and teaching them how to be a royal," she defended. "And it's more than waving and wearing tiaras. Right?"

"It is," Maddie nodded; grinning as she reached out to pat Shelby's hand. "But I'm sorry. No lessons."

"Damn it!" Shelby stomped her foot; smiling wide as she did.

"Okay ladies," Amy spoke up, waving over the waitress and eyeing her friends. "You two owe me two shots each....and then..." She smiled at Maddie with sympathetic eyes. "We're going to let Maddie relax and enjoy herself and not...be our entertainment."

"Aw come on," Dena spoke up, nudging Maddie lightly. "She's such great entertainment."

"Thank you, thank you," Maddie smiled and then, tossing a wink across the table to Shelby, she lifted her hand and waved; smooth, easy and just like one might in a parade. And the table rolled with laughter.

"Okay, okay," Amy giggled. They were in their fourth bar of the night and she was well passed tipsy. "I want to know where my husband-to-be is! I need to know what's going on with the boys! I know it's silly but..." She let out a long breath. "I need to know."

"Well that's easy," Elise shrugged. "Get out your phone and call him."

"No!" Amy shook her head. "We agreed to meet up and to not call before we met up."
"Well then how in the hell would we be able to know what he's doing?" Janet peered through her eyes thoughtfully.

"OH!" Jenna perked up wildly next to Maddie, clapping her hands and doing a little dance as she reached into her pocket. "I have an idea!"

"No!" Amy waved her hand. "You can't call your husband! That's cheating!"

"I'm not calling my husband!"

"Well then what are you doing?" Maddie leaned over to try to see the screen of Jenna's phone.

"Actually..." Jenna's fingers moved quickly over the letters on her screen. "I'm googling yours."

"What?" Maddie sat up taller.

"Well, the press knows you and Harry are here in the mountains...surely somebody has seen them out and about and my money says..." A grin spread across her lips. "There we go. We found him. Thank you Twitter."

"Let me see," Maddie pulled the phone from Jenna, reading the screen. "Prince Harry spotted on a behind the scenes tour of a mountain brewery. All men. All drinking." Maddie snickered. "They're touring the brewery."

"Of course they are," Amy smiled as she settled back into their seats. "Kyle loves the brewery."

"Yes he does," Maddie handed the phone back to Jenna. "They're probably going to be there all night."

"Think they'll go to a strip club?" Elise asked, thinking of her boyfriend who was out with the group.

"Nah," Amy shook her head. "That's not really Kyle's thing."

"And there's not really a strip club up here," Maddie grinned.

"Hmmmm..." Jenna stayed in thought, her eyes trained on her phone as her fingers moved over the screen. "I wonder..."

"Wonder what?" Dena looked over to her, trying to see what she was doing.

"Just...if we can find Harry," Jenna tapped her phone and waited a second. "Can we find Maddie...Ah!" Her smile pulled higher and her eyes went wide. "There we go! Maddie has been spotted!"

"What?" Maddie laughed as she leaned back over.

"No way!" Shelby giggled, straining to see.

"Yep!" Jenna sat tall in her chair and cleared her throat. "Princess Maddie..." She eyed Shelby with a smirk, sending giggles around the table. "Princess Maddie is, I swear to God, drinking Mojitos at my favorite bar! Much prettier in person."
"Awww...." Maddie smiled warmly as the rest of them laughed.

"Oh! And here!" Jenna bobbed in her seat. "Duchess of Sussex out with a bachelorette party. Wonder what Harry's up to tonight. Wink wink. Nod nod."

"Hey!" Maddie's forehead pinched together. "I'm not sure I like that wink or that nod."

"Oh my God!" Elise called out, having pulled out her own phone. "Look! It's a picture!" She turned the screen out towards the table.

"Holy shit, that's me!" Shelby pointed at the image of herself sitting next to Maddie.


Everyone's eyes shifted out towards the room as they realized somebody there had taken their picture. Maddie smiled to herself as they all adjusted in their seats.

"Okay, that's a little freaky," Elise's voice lowered.

"A little?" Shelby raised her eyebrows. "People just taking photos of you without you knowing and putting them online and..." Her gaze fell on Maddie. "This happens to you all the time, doesn't it."

"It does," Maddie nodded; her smile still there.

"Wow..." Shelby shook her head. "I don't even know what to..." She reached for her drink and took a sip. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Ha!" Maddie eyes danced in laughter. "No thank you. I'm still working on this Mojito."

"When you're done with that one?"

"Maybe," Maddie nodded. "But come on...let's not let the picture stop the party. We've got an entire night ahead of us and Amy's STILL getting married in two days. So I say...."

"Shots?" Amy suggested with a wide, tipsy smile.

"Ha!" Maddie laughed loudly. "Yes! For everyone but me."

"Wait, why not you?" Janet looked over to her.

"Because," she leaned in towards the center of the table; her voice lowering. "You see how quickly the pictures end up online. The last thing I need is my drunk ass taking shots...all over the internet."


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It was just past one in the morning before they met up with the men. They were going to one last bar, one last stop for drinks together before they called it a night. And every last one of them, save Maddie and Sampson and Jim, were completely past tipsy. In fact, as they met up just a block
down from the bar they were heading to, it was Harry who broke out first.

Stepping into the quiet, dead street, with a mess of red hair and a wide, loose smile, he clapped his hands and called out into the night, "My wife!" His long legs moved him to her quickly.

"My drunk husband!" She giggled as his arms moved around her waist, pulling her into a warm, tight hug. The rest of the group reunited around them.

"My baby..." His voice dropped low, his eyes dancing as his lips pulled up in a wide smile.

"My really drunk husband," she caught his hand before it rounded to her stomach. "You had a good time tonight?"

"I had a wonderful time tonight..." His arms shifted around her, moving almost instinctually to hold her to him, to pull her hand up into his as he began to sway. "It's even wonderful-er now."

"Wonderful-er?" Maddie laughed. "You're making up words."

"I know," he shrugged; so fucking cute she wanted to slap him.

"And we're dancing," she sighed as she moved with him; letting him turn them around. "In the street. Captain...we're dancing in the street."

"We are," he nodded, leaning in to kiss her. "But it's a small mountain town and there are no cars and...God you're beautiful."

"You're so drunk right now," she made fun but held tight; loving the way it felt to have him hold her like this, loving the way he was looking at her.

"I am," he agreed, tugging her tighter and pressing his cheek to hers. "But I love dancing with you even when I'm sober."

"No you don't," she snickered; settling further into their sway, their rhythm. "You always make fun of my dancing."

"I'm such a bastard sometimes," he shook his head, his wicked smile pulling his mouth up at the corner. "I don't know why I do that because I love this..." He tightened his hold on her even further.

"Ahem," Kyle cleared his throat as they caught up with them; his arm draped around Amy's shoulders. "Pretty sure people are snapping some photos. Heads up."

"What? Really?" Maddie glanced around but Harry shrugged his shoulders, unwilling to relinquish an inch of space between them.

"I don't care," he huffed.

"Is that so?" Maddie chuckled.

"It is so!" His voice rose before he caught it, bringing it back down. "Let them take pictures of me LOVING MY WIFE!"

"Easy," she warned, her fingers stroking at the back of his neck.
"I hate that they're always so surprised to find me loving my wife," though the spirit was still high, Maddie knew that he meant those words; that he felt them deeper.

"I know you do baby," she smiled. "Pay no attention to them."

"Can I kiss you? Here in the street? With the cameras?" His eyebrows lifted; desperately wanting to but wanting her permission—not wanting to plaster her all over the headlines without her consent.

"You had better," she winked and giggled as he instantly moved in; his arms dipping her back just a little as his lips caught hers. Though the strokes of his tongue were quicker than he liked, they were no less hot; no less meaningful. No less full of promise. "Come on Captain. We have one more stop before we get you back to your room."

"Where I can love my wife?" His eyes danced devilish as she stepped out of his arms; his hand pulling her fingers to his lips.

"You better believe it," she laughed loud into the night, pulling him with her as they continued on down the street.

"Tell me love, did you have fun tonight?" Harry followed along with her.

"I did," she grinned as she remembered.

"And you Amy?" Harry called out ahead of him. "Did the bride-to-be have fun tonight?"

"She absolutely did!" Amy called back to him, turning to look at him. And then she stopped in the road. "Hold on!" She giggled, giving an order to the rest of the crowd. "What the hell does your shirt say?"

"Ah yes!" He clapped his hands together, his face brightening even more. "Where is she? Jenna!" He spun around looking for her. When he spotted her, he stopped and his grin pulled wide and ridiculously proud. "Jenna! Look at the shirt!" He held out the hem at the bottom so she could see it.

It took her two seconds to read it, her eyes growing large as she bounced on her heels and clapped her hands, the rest of the group laughing as she ran over to him. "Jenna is my homegirl!" She giggled. "Oh my GOD! Harry! Have you been wearing that all night?!"

"All night," he nodded; proud and happy. "And I have one for you at the suite...but with the reverse...me being your homeboy and all."

"Oh my GOD!" She laughed, pulling at his shoulders as she hugged him. "I love it so much! You're the best!"

"I told you she would like it!" Harry called out to Maddie as he kissed Jenna's cheeks, hugging her close and tight.

"I love it," Jenna sighed and stepped from his arms. "I love it so much."

"Perfect," Harry squeezed her hands and then turned back to the group, his arm wrapping around her shoulder. "Come on. Let's have another drink." As applause rang around the group, Harry
tugged Maddie back under his other arm and they all continued on to the party. And it was only their first night.
"I can't believe Kyle and Amy are finally getting married," Maddie spoke softly to her mother as they sat off to the side. Sipping tea and munching at a tray at their own little bistro table, they watched Amy open gifts and be showered with pre-wedding attention.

"You're all growing up so fast," Hannah spoke just as softly, her lips turning up in a warm smile. "I still can't believe I'm going to be a grandma."

"I know," Maddie grinned, her eyes meeting her mother's that were equally as bright, equally as happy. "I can't believe that either." Maddie took in a breath and leaned closer to her. "I'm sorry, you know."

"Sorry?" Hannah chuckled with surprise. "What on Earth are you sorry for?"

"For having your first grandchild all the way across the ocean."

"Oh honey," Hannah rolled her eyes lightly, her hand reaching out to Maddie's arm; comforting and warm. "Please don't worry about that. Please don't. I'm happy for you and Harry and...I'm happy to travel whenever you need me."

"Yeah?"

"Of course," Hannah softened as she looked to her only daughter; her sweet as they took her in. "You tell me when to be there and I'll be there. I don't want to impose on either of you but..."

"You are not an imposition," Maddie was quick with a shake of her head. "In fact, Harry and I have talked about it and...we would love to have you come out closer to the due date," Maddie took a breath and lowered her voice. "We could rent a place for you so you wouldn't have to stay with us but I know that the date is right in the middle of your semester and I don't want you to get off track or anything."

"Shush," Hannah waved her hand dismissively. "I've finished all of my coursework and this next year is all clinical rotation hours."

"Yeah?" Maddie liked how hopeful that sounded.

"Yes," Hannah nodded. "And I'm sure if I talked to my professors in the fall..." Her eyes glanced around and her voice lowered even further. "Will this be public knowledge in the fall?"

"Are you kidding," Maddie snorted. "This is going to be public knowledge in a matter of weeks I'm afraid." She couldn't help but laugh at the way they, and her stomach, were pushing limits every day they managed to keep the world from finding out.

"Of course," Hannah laughed with her. "In the fall I can talk to my professors and I can double up on hours and maybe I'll be done by the time..." She blinked and smiled wider. "By the time the baby is here. And if I'm not then...I don't know. I'll just graduate next summer. One semester off so that I can be there when my grandchild is born?" She shrugged her shoulders and rolled her
eyes. "I wouldn't think twice."

"So you'll come?" Maddie's eyes were wide and her smile bright.

"I will absolutely come," Hannah held her hand. "You tell me when and I'll be there."

As the wedding rehearsals were set to begin, Kyle and Amy were at the front of the church, standing around the altar with the wedding planner as they went over a few details. The wedding party and other important family members were scattered about; catching up with each other, laughing over whatever fun they had found the night before. Maddie and Harry sat together in a pew next to her mother, among her cousins and a bridesmaid or two. With his arm draped over the back of the pew behind her shoulders, Harry's fingers ran soft over Maddie's shoulder.

"What's on your mind?" He nudged her lightly, seeing the far off smile on her face.

"I was just thinking..." She sighed, her breath soft on his neck as she turned to talk to him. "Do you remember our first rehearsal at St. Paul's?"

"Ha," Harry chuckled, his head bobbing in a nod. "When I found you lying on the floor in the middle of the aisle looking up at the ceiling? Yes I remember."

"That was a long walk," Maddie shook her head, biting back laughter.

"It was," Harry nodded in agreement. "This one looks significantly shorter. I think you'll make it, no problem."

"I think so," Maddie sighed, her body leaning further into his; tucking up under his arm. "But it's not about me today."

"Are you kidding?" Harry's forehead scrunched up. "It's always about you baby."

"Oh please," Maddie rolled her eyes, swatting at his knee.

"Hey guys..." Jenna's voice was in a low, hushed whisper as she slid into the pew behind them. "Sorry I'm late. Amy asked me to double check on the menu for tonight. Did I miss anything?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "They just started."

"Good," Jenna sighed; relaxing a bit. "How are you two doing this afternoon?"

"We're good," Maddie winked at Harry who had taken a little longer than normal to recover from the last nights' activities. "How about you?"

"Well I was great," she sighed again, leaning closer to speak to them. "Until I got online."

"What?" Maddie turned to look back at her.

"I have to tell you, Duchess, your fans are hardcore."

"What are you talking about?" Maddie's lips twitched into a smile as her eyes met Harry's.
"I'm talking about the pictures of your husband in that damn t-shirt."

"Sorry?" Harry was amused as he turned back to look at her; eyebrows raised.

"They want to know exactly who the hell 'Jenna' is." Jenna grumbled and Harry rolled his eyes.

"Oh please."

"Oh please!" She nudged his arm with a smirk. "They're coming for you too! Talking about how disrespectful it is for you to be wearing a shirt around with some other woman's name on it..."

"That's ridiculous," Harry shifted in his seat; annoyed and amused at the same time.

"There are pictures of me standing right next to him," Maddie laughed and dropped her voice. "Pretty sure there are pictures of him with his tongue down my throat."

"Nice," Jenna deadpanned.

"We are in a church," Harry reminded her with a wink.

"Anyway," Jenna exhaled. "They think there's something salacious going on."

"They always do," Harry tried a light shrug, meeting Maddie's eyes for a moment.

"Well," she smiled as she leaned in to kiss his cheek. "I suppose you could do worse."

"I could," he nodded in agreement, his smile pulling higher.

"A lot worse," Jenna interjected.

"Ha!" Harry clapped his hands together lightly, turning to look back at the woman he considered his cousin, his family. "I'm sorry I dragged you into this. I promise it will blow over soon."

"Whatever," Jenna rolled her eyes. "I don't care. If you two don't care, I sure as hell don't care..." She shrugged one shoulder and grinned. "I actually wish I had a shirt that said 'I'm Jenna'."

Maddie laughed as Harry thought it over, devious grin playing on his lips. "You know I could probably make that happen."

As Maddie and Jenna laughed, the wedding coordinator took a few steps forward and called them all to attention. "Good Evening. Good Evening..." She waited for a beat as the conversations drew to a close, as eyes travelled to the front of the room. "Thank you. My name is Angela Bender. I'm the Coordinator for the Wedding. I just want to take a moment to thank you all for coming. I know that Kyle and Amy are thrilled to have you here from all over the world to celebrate this important occasion for them. I also know that there is an amazing dinner planned for all of us once we're done here. So in interest of keeping us on track and getting us all to the food and drinks...I'm going to go ahead and get started." She looked down at her clipboard then. "We're going to start out at the altar. I'm going to line you all up where you'll be standing during the ceremony and we'll go through it once. Then we'll walk out and back in and do it again. And we'll do it till you have it." She flashed a grin out at the group, a mild laughter traveling around them and then she looked back at the list. "Now, can I please have the wedding party up front and ready to go..."

"Have fun," Harry kissed the top of her hand before she slipped away from him, making her way to the altar.

As was promised, the coordinator had them trained and ready to go ahead of time. As soon as they had it down, they were excused for dinner. The dinner was amazing; Maddie had gushed over her plate as she ate all of hers and managed to take a bite from Harry's. He had grinned as he watched her enjoy herself and when she asked for more dessert, he was more than happy to oblige. So he excused himself from the table and went on a mission. While he was gone, the groom made his way over to her table with his own mission in mind.

"So listen..." Kyle's voice was low, his eyes focusing in on Maddie as he took a seat next to her; moving in close so as to keep the conversation strictly between them. Curious about his demeanor, Maddie glanced around and leaned in to hear him. "After the rehearsal dinner tonight Gary, Derek and I were going to go up the hill and...light one up..." He whispered. "For old time's sake."

Maddie's lips pulled into a soft smile. "Is that right?" Memories of the handful of times they had snuck off together drifted through her mind.

"Mmmm," he nodded. "Obviously we would take you with us but..."

"I get it," she chuckled.

"But I was wondering..." He cleared his throat and glanced around. "Think Harry would want to go?"

"Wow," Maddie's smile pulled higher; her cheeks turning a bit pink as she thought of what it must be like to experience Harry high. "I don't know," she bit her bottom lip and looked up to her cousin with a shrug. "I think you can ask him but Kyle..." Her fingers wrapped around his shirt as she brought him closer to her; her eyes growing serious as her voice dropped. "Listen to me. It can only be the three of you; you, Derek and Gary. If you were thinking you would take your buddies from school or even Amy's brother, then don't even ask him. You just go." She took in a breath. "But if you're going to ask him, then it has to be just you. That's...too big for me to ever risk putting him in some crazy position."

"I get it," Kyle nodded. "You do know it's legal here, right?"

"Yeah, I know," she rolled her eyes. "Did you see the coverage of Harry in that t-shirt?" Her eyebrows shot up. "I trust the three of you. I don't know any of these other people."

"Of course," Kyle agreed. "We talked about it and we would rather take him than anyone else so...if you're okay, I'm going to ask him."

"Do you trust the dealer?" Maddie held his gaze.

"Yes. I trust the dealer," he smiled sheepishly, leading her to believe that it just might be one of the three of them.

"Then you can ask," she released her hold on his shirt. "And know that if you mess with him, I'm coming after you."
"Fair enough," Kyle chuckled and smoothed out the front of his shirt. "You a little jealous you can't come?"

Her lips curled up at the corners. "Only a little bit."

"You know..." Harry's voice drew out; long and slow and easy as he laid sprawled out on a lounger on the deck with Maddie's cousins. "When you said 'up the hill', I imagined us sitting on tree stumps huddled around under tree limbs."

"Mmmm..." Kyle nodded, taking a puff and passing it on to his brother. They were up the hill and they were hidden from the main hotel but they were at an exclusive cabin that he had rented for him and Amy for the weekend. It was separate and luxurious and completely out of the way. It was perfect for this last little hoorah. "Did you want me to find you a tree stump?" He lifted his eyebrows to Harry as Derek snickered next to him.

"What are you going to do?" Derek laughed. "Run out into the forest and bring back a tree stump?"

"Maybe," Kyle chuckled. "You think I couldn't bring back a tree stump?"

"I think you would need to cut down a tree in order to do that..." Derek countered, reaching to take the joint from Gary.

"You think I can't cut down a tree?" Kyle challenged, causing Derek to laugh even more.

"Do you have a saw?" Derek took a drag, held it and exhaled. "Or an ax?"

"Or a hatchet?" Gary supplied.

"I am sure I could find one," Kyle shrugged, eyeing the tree line just beyond the deck.

"I don't think we should chop down a tree," Harry spoke up, his words jumbled as though there were something in his mouth, a small giggle of a laugh pushing through his lips. "We need the trees."

"Yeah?" Kyle snickered, taking the joint from his brother and taking a puff.

"They make oxygen," Harry explained.

"So you don't want a tree stump?" Kyle looked over to Harry as he held the joint out to him.

"I don't want a tree stump," he shook his head, taking what he was offering and inhaling. "But thank you." He handed the joint back and reached into his pocket; the crinkling sound of a wrapper sounding out into the quiet, peaceful night.

"Mmmm..." Kyle nodded and passed and looked over to where Harry was laying back on the lounger. He watched him for a few moments, his forehead creasing with contemplation. "Hey Harry."

"Hmmm?" Harry glanced over at him.
"Are you eating something?" Kyle kicked back in his chair; relaxing.

"Mmm Hmmm." In fact, he was eating something right at that moment.

"We have food?" Derek leaned forward. "I thought you said we had to stay out of the fridge."

"You do," Kyle chuckled. "But we can order up."

"Did you order up Wales?" Gary laughed.

"I didn't order up," Harry shook his head.

"Please tell me it's not from the ground." Derek eyed him as he relaxed back in his chair.

"My pocket," he smiled, holding up a piece of wrapped candy. "I brought them in my pocket."

"That's some sneaky snacks," Derek chuckled.

"Hold on," Gary who was sitting the closest to him, leaned forward, snatching the candy from Harry's fingers.

"Hey," Harry frowned as he watched it go.

"This looks just like the Christmas candy our grandmother used to keep at our house..." Gary studied it carefully; turning it over in his fingers. "Are you eating Christmas candy?"

"I am," Harry grinned, reaching out to take the candy back.

"Hold on..." Kyle leaned up with a smirk. "You have Christmas Candy in your pocket?"

"I do," Harry nodded, unwrapping the piece in his hand and taking a bite.

"But...why?!" Kyle snickered, watching as Harry ate it. "Why would you have Christmas candy in your pocket? In July?"

"Well," Harry took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he shrugged his broad shoulders. "It's Maddie's favorite."

"What?" Kyle chuckled.

"It is..." Derek nodded his head slowly. "It really is. I remember when we were little and she used to run into grandma's ahead of us so she could get them all...wow..." He smiled as he remembered. "And you have them in your pocket? Maddie's favorite candy?"

"Nearly all the time." Harry took another bite; happy and content as he laid there under the stars.

"But..." Kyle was taking a bit longer to process it all. "Why?"

"In case," Harry shrugged.

"In case of what?"

"In case she wants it," Harry laughed at them, finding the looks on their faces beyond amusing.
"Is this like...a pregnancy thing?" Derek nodded to Harry.

"It's like a..." Harry thought over his word options, his choices for a minute before he abandoned it all together. "It's just a...thing."

"Just a...thing..." Kyle blinked. "A thing you do. Keeping her favorite candy with you?"

"Nearly all the time?" Derek clarified.

"Yep," Harry's lips smacked against each other as he said the word, making a popping sound.

"Smooth..." Derek grinned with a nod. "That's really fucking smooth."

"I'm not trying to be smooth," Harry shrugged, settling back into his chair. "She just...she likes them." He took a long deep breath. "In fact the first time I met her, she was showing me around Bendal, around the new Community Center and she started talking about her father..." He smiled softly as he remembered, his eyes shifting up to look at the clear sky. "She got really quiet and sad and I wanted to see her smile again..." His smile tipped higher and he looked back to the group. "So I asked her what her favorite candy was and she told me; these chewy, minty Christmas tree candies she used to eat at her grandmother's house." Harry nodded to Derek. "And the next time I went to Bendal, I brought her some. You should have seen the smile on her face..." He chuckled sweetly as he remembered. "She still gets it...that smile..." All three of them watched as Harry's mind drifted away from them completely.

"Jesus Christ," Kyle groaned amidst laughter. "Look at you."

"Hmmm?" Harry blinked heavily. "Me?" He pointed to his chest.

"Yes you," Kyle laughed louder. "You're so..."

"Mushy?" Gary supplied with raised eyebrows, his fingers reaching for the joint his brother was passing him.

"Soft?" Kyle offered with a smirk.

"Soft?" Harry leaned forward, his eyes narrowing as his shoulders squared; looking right at Kyle. "I'll have you know I'm a wartime soldier my friend."

"Yes." Gary deadpanned. "We know. We've seen the pictures to prove it." As his brothers chuckled at him, he took a deep breath and looked at Harry. "You in the uniform. You in the fatigues. Can't walk through a grocery store without your pretty ass smiling back at me."

"Did you just say I have a pretty ass?" Harry winked.

"I did," Gary's face cracked into a smile. "One of the prettiest."

"Well thank you Gary," Harry tried for genuine and heartfelt but they could all feel the sarcasm passing between them.

"Don't mention it."

"Ha!" Derek clapped his hands together, his laughter making his sides hurt. "Somebody sounds a
little bitter."

Gary reached for the joint and took a long drag. "Most of those magazines end up in my house. I am a little bitter."

"I'm sorry man," Harry's hand covered his heart as his eyes turned sympathetic. Gary chuckled with a shrug and seemed to let it go easily. "Anything I can do?"

"I think you've done enough," Gary grinned over at him.

"You do know I have to wear the uniform."

"I do," Gary chuckled. "But let's not pretend you don't know the effect it has."

"Well," Harry's eyes flickered in the night as his lips pulled up. "My wife really loves it, if you know what I mean."

"Oh God," Kyle groaned. "When you say it like that, we know exactly what you mean."

"Nice," Derek shook his head.

"What do you want me to say?" Harry smiled cheekily, shrugging. "I'm in love with my wife...and she does so much for me and our family and...I'll do anything it takes to make her smile like that."

Kyle didn't have words to retort that; even he had to smile at Harry's words, at the conviction in his hazy eyes. So he shrugged and took the bud from Gary's fingers. "You do know you kill us with stuff like that."

"Us?" Harry's forehead crinkled in confusion.

"Us...ordinary men," Kyle explained, passing off to Derek.

"You say that like I'm not ordinary," Harry rolled his eyes.

"You're not!" Kyle shook his head. "You with the candy in your pockets and the Handsy Harry craziness all across America....you in fatigues, telling men to go home and kiss their wives..."

"Ha!" Harry clapped his hands as he laughed. "You SHOULD go home and kiss your wife Kyle. You should kiss her every opportunity you get."

"Is that right?"

"It is."

"Listen to this guy," Kyle looked to his brother, thumbing over to where Harry sat. "Giving out marriage advice."

"It's not terrible advice," Derek smiled at his older brother. "Maybe you should listen up."

"Oh yeah?" Kyle's eyebrows shot up as he looked at the three of them, his eyes settling on Harry.

"Here's the thing Kyle...Do you know Amy's favorite candy?" Harry didn't wait for him to
answer; his hazy smile matching his eyes. "If you don't, you should ask her. Because here is what I'm telling you. It's probably something simple, something easy; something ordinary. Something that would cost you less than five dollars to have on hand...and when she's feeling down, you just...give it to her. It's the smallest thing and I swear to you, the smile she'll give you...Totally worth it."

"Is that right?" Kyle had softened; maybe it was the weed, maybe it was the drinks from before, maybe it was the realization that the next day he was marrying Amy.

"It is."

"Well, maybe I'll give that a shot."

"Let me know how it works out," Harry smiled and leaned out to pat his knee, seeing the shift on his face. "You're getting married tomorrow."

A wide, loose, warm smile spread across Kyle's face as he let Harry's words sink in, as he thought of Amy. Nodding, he looked down at his hands; his heart warming in his chest. "I am." As a few tears began to well in Kyle's eyes, he felt Gary's hand on his shoulder. Turning to look at him, he patted his hand with his and they shared a moment between brothers. "I can't believe it."

"Believe it," Gary relaxed back into his chair. "She's an amazing woman. You're a lucky man."

"An incredibly lucky man," Harry agreed easily. "And she didn't make out so terrible either."

"Is that right?" Kyle smirked.

"It is," Harry nodded, sitting back and stretching out. "You're a solid man; loyal, kind...decent hair."

"Thanks," Kyle sighed as the group around him laughed. "And what about you?" Kyle looked to Harry who had tucked his hands behind his head as he reclined. "You're about to be a father."

"I really really am," Harry breathed, his smile stretching from ear to ear. "About to be a father..." He turned his head to look at them. "It doesn't get much better than this."

"No?" Gary lifted his eyebrows; amused.

"No," Harry shook his head and turned his eyes back up to the stars. "About to be a father... And a peaceful sort of silence passed over them; all slipping deeper into contemplation.

"Hey guys..." Derek's voice was soft as he leaned in and broke the silence, his eyes thoughtful as he looked from Gary and Kyle to Harry. "I just...."

"You okay Derek?" Harry nodded his head to him.

"Yeah. I just...seriously..." He took a deep breath. "How exactly do trees make oxygen?"

The morning of the wedding had a wonderful excited rush to it. Maddie left Harry sleeping quite soundly in bed as she showered and dressed. She kissed him good-bye, refused to let him pull her back to bed, and she hurried up to the bridal suite where all of the girls would be meeting to get
ready. For a few brief moments at the very beginning, it was just the four of them; just family.

"I think those boys had a good time last night," Amy giggled as she tugged at the straps of her robe.

"You think?" Maddie chuckled. "Harry came back and woke me up. He spent two hours telling me how much he loved me, listing the reasons why..." She shook her head, even though her cheeks flushed pink as she remembered. "Who knew that Harry would get so wordy when he was high..."

"Well," Jenna's eyes slid from one woman to the other, her smile amused. "Gary said Harry spent an hour telling Derek all about photosynthesis."

"Photosynthesis?" Dena giggled. "What the hell?"

"I have no idea," Jenna shook her head. "But apparently Derek was listening; intently."

"You know what was really weird..." Amy's voice dropped as she moved towards the knock on the door. The stylist had called and was on her way up. "Kyle called me at like two in the morning, wanting to know what my favorite candy was."

"What?" Jenna turned surprise to her. "I mean...Gary asked me the same thing."

"Me too," Dena glanced between them with a furrowed brow. "That's...odd."

"Must have been something they talked about," Jenna shook her head. "How about you Maddie? Did Harry ask you?"

With a sly smile on her lips, she forced her eyes wide and innocent and shook her head. "No. No, he didn't ask."

"Huh..." Amy shrugged her head and took a deep breath. "Weird. Okay ladies. You ready to be curled and primped?"


"Wow..." Amy's smile wavered as her emotions pressed forward. "I totally am."

Maddie was the second one to walk up the aisle. Just behind Elise and right in front of Jenna. When she stepped into the church, she could hear a soft, slight murmur from the guests as they realized who she was, as they recognized her face. In that moment Maddie was infinitely grateful to Amy who had chosen a bridesmaid dress that wasn't formfitting, one that would never have given away the bump that was becoming more and more difficult to mask. With her flowers held in front of her and a bright smile on her face, she made her way up the aisle; slow and steady. She grinned as she saw her mother, winked when she passed Harry and when she saw the look on Kyle's face—she wanted to cry.

It was a beautiful day, a wonderful ceremony and when it finally came to an end, she burst into applause while biting back tears. Walking back down the aisle with her arm tucked into the arm of a groomsman, she caught Harry's eyes and she felt her entire body come alive and warm. It had
been such a long, glorious weekend with family. But all she wanted in that moment was to be with her husband; tucked into his arms and close to his heart.

After all of the reception necessities, after the dinner and the first dance and the toasts and the photos and the obligatory tapping of the wine glasses...after duty had been taken care of, Harry had turned to his wife, scooped her hand into his and led her to the dance floor. It was a nice slow number and it gave her all the reason she needed to snuggle in close as he moved them around the dance floor.

Yes, people had recognized them. Yes, there had already been a handful of tweets about their presence. And yes, a few cell phone photos had been snapped and would be leaked.

But neither of them seemed too bothered by it to care; certainly not bothered enough to stop looking at each other with lovey eyes, not bothered enough to keep their hands to themselves. But it was there on that dance floor when the most wonderful of moments surprised the both of them.

"Oh my God," Maddie gasped in Harry's arms; her eyes welling up with tears in an instant.

"What?" His head turned to her, his hands still holding her as they danced. "Are you okay?" He leaned back to look at her but she held him tight.

"Don't move!" She shook her head. "Keep dancing..."

"What is it?" His fingers stroked against hers.

"Harry..." Her voice was soft and sweet, her breath featherlike against the skin below his ear. "I just felt the baby move."

"What?" His heart leapt into his throat as his feet stalled.

"Don't stop dancing," Maddie looked up at him with wide, watery eyes; a bubble of a laugh pushing through her lips. "I...I can feel...the baby. I can feel it move inside..." She blinked and swallowed at the emotions gathering in her chest. "It's the strangest feeling."

With a smile that took up the entirety of his face, Harry watched her closely; his eyes committing the look in hers to memory. Pride and excitement etched into the creases at the corners of his lips, at his temples. Holding her in his arms, he continued to sway as she experienced this amazing moment inside of her. "You do know that I am incredibly..." He chuckled. "And irrationally jealous that you get to carry the baby."

Maddie laughed then, nodding her head as she tried to calm her beating heart. "I do know that."

"It's like you already have your own private relationship," he tugged her closer.

"You do know that if I could let you experience this...I would." Her fingers slid up into the hair that tickled his neck; her smile growing softer as the moment passed and her pulse returned to normal.

"Yes," he grinned. "I'm sure you would." He watched her for a moment as their dancing returned to normal; as she eased her hold on him. "Has he stopped moving?"
"Yes," she snickered. "He has. You're quite convinced it's a boy, aren't you."

"Actually," Harry's grin grew a bit mischievous, his eyes dancing as he leaned in closer to her. "Since the moment you told me...I've envisioned a daughter."

"Really?" Maddie's eyes flashed wide as Harry nodded.

"I don't know why or really where the feeling came from but yes..." He tipped his lips to hers. "I see a girl in our very near future."

"Wow..." Maddie swallowed at the lump in her throat, feeling suddenly sentimental as she thought of Harry with a tiny little girl in his big hands, in his strong arms.

"What about you?" He nuzzled closer still. "Do you have any mother's intuitive guesses?"

"Mmmm..." She cleared her throat and took a breath. "I don't have an overwhelming sense of things but...if I had to guess..." Her eyes twinkled as she shrugged. "I would say it's a boy."

"Ha!" Harry's laughter rumbled from his chest. "Is there a chance you're saying that merely to go against me?"

The corner of her mouth twisted up in a smirk. "Maybe a little bit."

"I knew it," he shook his head and pulled her cheek to his. "God...I hope she's just like you." As his hands wrapped tighter and his heart swelled larger, he held her to him—held them to him. His wife and his baby; growing and moving inside of her.

Chapter End Notes

I would love to hear from you....what you think of the story, what moments you've enjoyed...thank you for reading!
Maddie woke that morning with sleep still settled in her mind. They were back in London and gearing up for a busy week. She was still tired, still wanted to be curled up next to her warm husband with her eyes pressed closed and her body hanging onto those last few minutes of rest. But her body wouldn't have it. She knew it was too early along to blame the baby for her sudden rise to wakefulness. It wasn't big enough to be pressing against her bladder, wasn't close enough to be causing these 'must get out of bed' moments. But still, she was drinking more water than she ever really had.

So she blamed the baby anyway.

Tossing back her blankets and tossing a humored glare in the direction of her still sleeping husband, she made her way to the bathroom; one eye half open, the other mercifully shut. As though she could somehow hang on to her sleep if she didn't fully wake.

She didn't bother to turn on the light; she moved in the dark, taking care of business and moving to the sink to wash her hands. It was when she reached for the hand towel that she first noticed. The stretching was different, the distance between her body and the counter was different.

She was different.

With a small breath of protest, she pulled open both of her eyes and reached for the light switch and she looked down.

As her breath rushed in, her eyes teared up and her hands smoothed over her stomach. She was different.

"Harry..." It was a whisper; a crack of a breath.

Deeply rooted in a restful sleep, the kind that could have kept him settled in his bed well into the afternoon, he didn't move as she called out again. Though the sun shone in, heating the places on the bed where it hit, though they had a full day ahead of them, beginning with an event that afternoon, he could have very easily stayed in his slumber for at least a few more hours.

But the world had other plans for him; his life had other plans for him. And when Maddie found her voice, when it echoed out of the bathroom and into their room, for every bit of asleep he had been, he was now awake.

"Harry!" She called out, forcing his eyelids to snap open. "Harry! I need you to get in here!"

Before he had really even registered that he was awake, he was out of bed and moving to the bathroom with a clip he hadn't realized he had at that particular hour. He stepped into the bathroom and her back was to him. "What? What is it? You okay?" He hurried over to her. "Maddie?"

"Harry..." She turned away from the mirror to look at him. Her eyes were wide and wet as she met his. "Look..." She smoothed her hands down over her stomach, pressing the light material of the t-shirt of his she slept in over her bump. "There's a bump."

And she watched as her husband; her tall, strong, cheeky husband, reduced to giddy and precious.
"Oh my God," his smile was wide and lazy and warm as his eyes mooned over. "Did that just happen? Overnight?"

"Yes!" Maddie laughed through the tears in her eyes, her fingers running over it, making sure it was real. "My God...Harry..." She met his gaze in the mirror and they both softened even further.

"Oh baby..." Unable to help himself, he moved in, his knees bending just enough so he could run his hands over her belly, his focus solely on her. "There's a baby in there." He couldn't get over it; couldn't get enough.

"I know!" Maddie laughed again, her hands moving into his red hair, stroking his head as he stroked her belly. This was an amazing moment; these quiet few minutes in their bathroom where they both marveled over this most natural of miracles. "Captain...I hate to tell you this but...I don't think we're going to be able to keep it a secret anymore."

He lifted his eyebrows as he looked up at her; a mix of surrender and hopeful tracing across his brow. "No?"

"No," she shook her head softly, her fingers running up over his forehead. "Harry..." She sighed sweetly, her hand cupping his cheek. "There's a baby in there and...everyone's going to know when they see me."

"I know," he sighed, leaning to kiss her stomach before standing up to kiss her. "I know." His heart was torn. On one hand he was deliriously happy to see this outward evidence of what was happening in her body—their baby was growing. And on the other hand, he was faced with this new vulnerability; this forced their hand. The world was about to know.

"Hey..." Maddie was soft with him, knowing for certain the fears that were crossing his mind. "You okay?"

"Beyond that," he smiled softly, his lips leaning into hers again. "I'm beyond that." His hand spread out over her stomach, his smile tipping high. "Okay...okay. We'll tell them."

"Yeah?" Maddie's arms moved around his waist, hugging him to her as her eyes peered happily up at him.

"We can't very well keep it a secret forever," he chuckled into a sigh.

"No," she smiled as she shook her head. "But we can maybe keep it for one more day."

"But the bump..." He grinned like a fool as he ran his hand over it.

"Well," she ran her hands down to rest over his. "My dress for today's event is cut well; it will probably mask our little bump for another day. But the one on Friday..."

"One more day," Harry took a breath. "I'll talk to Thomas today; have him prepare for an announcement tomorrow while we're at the polo match."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, her teeth biting at her bottom lip as her eyes welled up; unexpected and uncontrollable. "Wow..."

"You okay?" He moved his body closer to hers, everything about him in protective mode.
"I am," she nodded and sniffed. "It's just...becoming more and more real."

"God I know," he laughed, dipping to kiss her stomach once more. "We can tell our friends tonight...at Bishop's party. And tomorrow..."

"Tomorrow," Maddie agreed, her fingers tipping his face up to hers. "You sure you're okay with that?"

"Mmm..." He nodded, standing up tall to kiss her; his arms moving around her. "Okay with it?" His lips curled higher. "With you starting to show? With...our baby growing and..." He had to stop or it would likely take him down. "Yes, love. Yes. I'm..." He shook his head. "The world has to know eventually. I'm going to be a...father."

"You are," Maddie blinked at the tears in her eyes. "You absolutely are."

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After their moment in the bathroom in the early morning, Maddie and Harry had to pull apart, had to shift their focus. They had an event that afternoon; with School Sport. They were going to an opening of a new sports facility; a youth center. They would be touring, cutting a ribbon. Harry would be speaking and, most likely, playing some sort of sport with the children. The image of that never grew old in Maddie's mind.

But it would begin a bit more formally. So as he changed into his suit, doing his best to keep his now instinctual giddiness under control, Maddie was getting ready herself. As she stepped into her dress, she knew something for certain.

Hiring Winnifred Ellis, the lovely young woman who had designed her dress and was zipping her up at that exact moment, was one of the best decisions she had made since agreeing to marry Harry. Not only was her talent limitless and classic, not only had Maddie loved every single thing she had ever sent over for her to wear over the course of the year. Not only was she above and beyond in the world of design, she had proven to be incredibly private and discreet.

Because there was no way this woman couldn't have known that Maddie was pregnant. She had made this dress so perfectly; it hid her little bump very well. And, as she was helping her dress, she didn't say a word; didn't toss in a knowing look. Even though it was abundantly clear.

And for this, Maddie was grateful.

"Ma'am," she spoke up as Maddie stepped into her shoes. "The dress on Friday, would you still like to go with it?"

Maddie turned to look at her; a smile already in place. "Yes," she nodded. "Everything will be...out...by Friday."

"Very well ma'am," Winnifred nodded with a small smile, clearly struggling with her own desire to congratulate and her professionalism.

"Thank you..." Maddie's hand reached out to her shoulder; her eyes soft and thankful. "Really. Thank you Ms. Ellis."

"Of course," she nodded again, her smile stretching just a bit higher. "Of course."
A soft knock on the door let them know they were no longer alone and Libby stepped in; bright and energetic.

"Ma’am, the car is here."

"Thank you Libby," Maddie nodded, glancing once more into the mirror; checking her hair and her makeup and glancing quickly and lovingly at the little bump that gave them away. They could make it through one more day. The dress would be able to hide the secret for one more day.

"Madeline..." Harry stepped into the room with a smile so wide, so bright, that Maddie knew in her heart of hearts that he would give away their little secret long before the bump would. "You look..." His eyes travelled down her, his head shaking slightly as his eyes glazed over.

"You too," she stepped forward, her hand sliding along his cheek, pulling his attention back to her face. "The car is here..." But neither of them moved.

"I know," he nodded, his hands tucking around her waist. "I saw Libby on her way out with Ms. Ellis." He jerked his head towards the door where both women had slipped when he had stepped in. "I had hoped I could be the one..."

"The one?"

"To do the fetching," he leaned in to kiss her. "Can I confess something?"

"Of course," Maddie nodded as her hands moved up his arms to his shoulders.

"There's a part of me, a tiny part, that wishes this dress couldn't hide the bump another day."

"Ha!" Maddie's soul was warmed with his words, with the look in his eyes when he said them. "Is that so?"

"It absolutely is," he pulled her closer. "I am tired of the hiding and the evasion. I just want to be...deliriously happy about it."

"You just want to start rubbing my belly in public," she countered with a knowing look.

"That too, that too," he laughed.

"Well Captain, you could always have Thomas drop the news today."

"I could," he tossed it around for a moment. "But this way we'll get a chance to tell our friends first."

"That's true," she leaned up to kiss him once more before stepping back, taking his hand in hers. "Come on Daddy...it's time to go."

"And then you go right on and call me that," he beamed as he followed along. "Lord, give me strength." As Harry hoped to hold it together for one more day, he and Maddie made their way down the stairs and to the awaiting car; hand in hand. Ready to start their day.

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The crowds had really turned out for the opening; people lining the walks, photographers clicking
away. Harry waited for Maddie to round the car to him, waited to put his hand at her back before they moved forward. And if he was a tad more attentive, a tad more protective—nobody was the wiser. They had gotten used to stories of Harry and his roaming hands, of his inability to keep himself from his wife.

Two children stepped up to greet them; offering the cutest bows and curtsies as they met. As Maddie took the small bouquet from the little girl, she caught the look in Harry's eyes and she could see his brain beginning to spiral out just a bit.

They were spending the entire afternoon with children—just as his child was growing and developing inside of her. And there was something about this day, something about their new discovery from that morning that somehow made it more poignant. Her hand rested lovingly on his arm for a moment, trying to pull him back, trying to bring him in. He flashed a smile in her direction and did his best. Standing tall, he extended his hand to greet the adults in the group.

Maddie and Harry handed the media along with them a multitude of memorable moments that day. Harry with his attentiveness as they toured, Maddie with her bright smile and her sweet nature with the kids as they told them about the new facility. There was the moment when they put Harry in front of a soccer goal and handed Maddie a ball. Their back and forth banter, the looks and the winks and ultimately the moment she sailed a ball right past him; lifting her hands in the air in victory. There was the moment when Maddie let a little boy explain to her the finer points of how to throw a ball and the moment when a little girl out shot Harry at the Basketball hoop.

But none were as great as the moment Harry handed them when he took the stage and unfolded his speech.

Maddie watched with a wide smile as he congratulated the staff on what they had put together. She watched with the others in attendance as he complimented the children on their athleticism, as he poke fun at his abilities and offered humility and jokes at his own expense when it came to his wife scoring one on him. He made a point to recognize all the good they were doing there, all the lifelong benefits of sport and activity and the fun that came with it.

And then he lifted his eyes to his unsuspecting wife and with beaming pride and a cheeky grin, he brought the house down.

"And...as I look forward to starting my own journey of fatherhood in a little under six months, I am excited about the opportunity to share these experiences with the first of, what I hope be, many children who are as active and energetic as all of you."

Collectively, the room took a beat; a blink or a breath; a gasp.

And then, collectively, the murmur rose to laughter and applause. The cameras turned in time to catch Maddie's surprise; to capture her recovery, her shy smile and slight wave as the congratulatory feel moved to her.

Nobody heard the end of Harry’s speech; his brief thank you and good afternoon. The children in the room who barely understood the gravity of the moment, began to clap for the Prince and Princess—both of whom they thought would be happy with a little baby. And the adults, who understood very well what had just transpired, moved to offer congratulations and to document the moment.

Thomas shook his head with a smile and a look of 'I should have known' before he slipped out of the back of the room to make phone calls; Buckingham Palace, Clarence House, Kensington. In
less than ten minutes, palace officials would be confirming what Harry had just let out of the bag.

"Their Royal Highnesses The Duke and Duchess of Sussex are very pleased to announce that The Duchess of Sussex is expecting a baby.

The Queen, The Duke of Edinburgh, The Prince of Wales, The Duchess of Cornwall and The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge along with members of both families are delighted with the news."

Harry was quick to her side, driven by a need to bare the brunt of this new attention with her.

"You just couldn't help yourself, could you," she turned her face up to speak into his ear.

"No," he shook his head, his eyes turning soft for a beat. "Are you terribly mad?"

"No," she laughed with a shake of her own head. "I'm not. Though I think you have some explaining to do..."

"My father?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Yes," she snickered. "You should have seen the look on Thomas' face."

"Ha!" He laughed. "I'm sorry I missed it. Come on love...I have some phone calls to make, some apologies to offer." Though nothing about him seemed sorry in the least.

With a strong arm around her back, he turned a smile to the crowd as they said their good-byes, as they stepped back out into the daylight towards their awaiting car. The crowd outside had heard the news and had nearly doubled in size and the roar of applause and hollers made both Maddie and Harry smile wide.

"Oh wow..." Maddie was momentarily stalled as she took it in.

"Congratulations Harry!" A group of girls yelled out in unison, bring Maddie back from her breath with a laugh.

"Thank you!" Harry called back, smile wide as he stayed at her side; taking them both to the car. There was an abundance of love and well wishes that rushed in their direction; that moment from the onlookers and, soon, from the rest of the world.

But as they slid into the backseat, as the doors closed around them and the car moved forward, Harry turned to Maddie and with no reservation at all, he leaned in to kiss her; his hand moving easily and proudly over the round of her stomach.

It turned out there were no apologies to be made. Not one single member of Harry's family was upset or put off by the way in which he announced to the world that he had a child on the way. In fact, Charles was the first—not the only—to put words to the belief that had it been done any other way it might not have been "Harry's".

They were light and giggly as they made their way around their home, changing from their work clothes to play clothes—readying to go to the Bishop home for the party that evening. It was Bishop's birthday and in lieu of the wild nights of his bachelorhood, they were having a party at
their home; friends and family. And Maddie and Ella had already planned to leave early for Kensington with Buckie, wanting their husbands to have the kind of wild evening they hadn't seen for some time.

The moment they stepped in the door, the second Bishop saw them, he clapped his hands together and called out above the noise. "There he is! Ladies and Gentlemen, Daddy Harry!

A raucous round of applause and hoots rang out into the Bishop home; their friends moving to greet them, to congratulate them and kiss their cheeks.

"You are all over the news man."

"What can I say?" Harry shrugged; smug and proud. "I couldn't keep it to myself any longer."

"Well if it's possible, your popularity is off the charts. And you didn't even have to bare your ass," Bishop hugged Harry, kissing his cheek before turning soft eyes to Maddie. "How's the mommy-to-be?"

"A little embarrassed," she narrowed her eyes at him as he hugged her; talking to her husband over Bishop's shoulder. "We could have just had Bishop make the announcement..."

"Ha!" Harry laughed as he received congrats from Leo and then Sean and then Kiki. "Just right outside the gates of KP?"

"At your service," Bishop pulled back from Maddie. "Now I would offer you some Scotch..."

"Yeah, yeah," Maddie rolled her eyes. "Get my husband some though would you? He needs to relax and celebrate."

"On it," Bishop clapped his hands together and turned to his best friend. "I have a fifteen year old bottle of James King in my study. Care to take it down a notch with me?"

"I would love to," Harry's eyes danced as he turned to his wife who was now stepping out of a hug from Kiki. "What can I get for you?"

"Nothing," she grinned with a shake of her head and glanced to Bishop. "Can you tell me where your wife is?"

"Buckie's room," Bishop pointed towards the back of the house. "He spit up all over himself just before the party."

"Like father, like son I see," Harry snickered.

"Easy," Bishop eyed him. "Head on back. She's dying to see you."

"Great," Maddie stepped right into her husband's side; unabashedly snuggling close as her eyes turned flirty. "Go have fun with Bishop, Captain. She kissed him. "It's his birthday. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"Let me hit on you mercilessly later?" He lifted his eyebrows, his lips in that damn smug smile of his.

"Oh absolutely," she nodded, kissing him again before she stepped out of his arms. "Go. Have
fun."

"I love you," he watched her as she walked away; oblivious to the sappy look on his face.

"I know you do daddy," she tossed a wink, watched his hand clutch his heart and then laughed as Bishop drug him off towards his study. With a sigh of her own, she hurried back towards Buckie's room; excited to see both him and his mother.

There was cake.

There was singing.

There was an inordinate amount of toasting and an exuberant amount of drinking. And by the time Maddie and Ella were gearing up to leave, both of their husbands were just past tipsy and very close to drunk.

And Harry—who was handsy on a normal, sober day—couldn’t seem to get his hands from his wife; or his mind or his eyes.

"Let me come home with you," he was kissing at her neck as she pushed at his shoulders.

"No," she shook her head, pulling him from her skin. "It's Bishop's birthday and the party has only really started..." She pulled his gorgeous pout to her lips and kissed him. "Mmmm...Harry?"

"Yes love?"

"Did you steal my lip balm?" Maddie's tongue swept out over her lips as she eyed him.

"I did," he nodded; an exaggerated, heavy bob of his head. "I did. I'm sorry. I just...I needed some and it was right there on the table by the door and...I have to tell you. It's actually really great stuff."

"I know," she laughed at him as his eyes grew wide and serious.

"It makes my lips really soft..." He leaned in to kiss her; wanting her closer.

"And taste like honey..." She sighed against his lips. "You...taste like honey."

"I know," he grinned. "Will you let me come home with you now?"

"Ha...no...Come on, your friends are all here and there's plenty of Scotch." She stepped up to his body, wrapping her arms around his waist as his moved around her, hugging her tight. "Ella and I are going to put Buckie down in the spare room and have tea and relax."

"I love you Madeline," he was surrendering; this had been the plan initially. "I love you so much," his hands slid up to her face, cupping it sweetly in his palms as he held her eyes. "You've made me the happiest..."

"And the drunkest..." Maddie cut in with a sweet snicker.

Harry sighed, his eyes twinkling as he leaned in to kiss her. "You know I would say all of these
things sober..." He kissed the tip of her nose. "In fact I plan on it. Tomorrow."

"I can't wait," Maddie patted his ass and looked up at him. "You play polo in the morning you know."

"I do," he nodded with a grin. "Bishop's been giving me water every other drink so..."

"So thank God for Bishop?" Maddie laughed at the way the two of them took care of each other.

"Absolutely," Bishop's voice called out from around the corner; appearing with Ella and Buckie and a packed bag. "Thank God for Bishop." He smirked as he looked at the two of them. "I would tell you two to get a room but...it's my house and I would really rather you not."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, tipping up on her toes to kiss Harry again. "Okay boys. We're out of here."

"You know," Bishop nuzzled his son and then folded his arms; looking at the three of them with narrowed eyes. "When I suggested we swap spouses for one night, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind," Bishop joked as Harry smacked him on the backside of the head.

"Funny," Maddie sighed. "When I agreed to it, it was exactly what I had in mind."

"Ha!" Ella laughed; leaning in to kiss her own husband. "I love you. Don't burn down the house."

"I promise," Bishop kissed her back. "I will see you in the morning my love....my son..." He kissed the chubby little baby once more.

"Okay Captain," Maddie nodded her head to draw him to her; her fingers pulling at the front of his shirt. "Give me a little more of that honey..."

And as Bishop groaned and covered Buckie's eyes with his hand, Harry leaned in and kissed her; his mouth warm and insistent and open over hers.

"Come home in one piece," she commanded as he bent to kiss her stomach.

"Absolutely," he nodded. "Have a great night." He leaned to kiss Ella, to kiss Buckie and then with a look of pride and a tad bit of regret, he watched as the two women and the happy little baby stepped out of the house and out of their sight.

Bishop moved to stand next to his best friend, watching them go with a wide smile of his own. With a sigh, he nudged Harry and turned to look him over. "You're going to be a father."

Harry laughed; his entire face lighting up as tears filled his eyes. "I am..." He nodded to himself, to Bishop, and then, with the enormity of celebration that burst from every inch of him, he turned towards the party and called out, "I'M GOING TO BE A FATHER!"

As the applause broke out, as more drinks were poured, Harry and Bishop stepped back into the party; into hugs and congratulations and a night of revelry.

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It was already beginning to be clockwork; her waking in the middle of the night for something to drink. She wasn't sure exactly how it was she was still thirsty, given the enormous amount of
water she seemed to be drinking. But she pulled her eyes open anyway and tossed back the blankets. Her throat was dry; feeling a thirst that needed to be quenched; a thirst that would later pull her from bed in the early morning for another clockwork bathroom run.

Her forehead knotted in confusion when she heard the sounds coming from the bathroom, her eyes squinting at the light coming out from under the closed door. As she rose from bed, she heard the shower shut off and she glanced around the room. Harry’s close from that day laid in a pile just outside the bathroom door; his wallet and phone and ring were resting on his dresser. He had come home.

"Harry?" She knocked lightly on the door. "Harry are you home?" Her hand moved to the handle. Turning it slowly, she pushed on the door, knocking again. "Harry?" Her eyes squinted at the bright light as he turned to her; wet with a towel wrapped around his waist, fresh from the shower.

"I'm sorry," his words were quick; his eyes wide as he looked at her. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. I..."

"You came home," she shook her head; confused.

"Yeah," he breathed, running a hand through his wet hair.

"But...I thought you would end up staying at Bishop's..." She looked him over, her lips curling up as she took him in.

"Yeah, I..." He gulped and took a breath; his exhale a bit shaky as he shrugged. "I wanted to be home. I wanted to...shower and brush my teeth and just..." He glanced down at his hands and back up to her. "Just crawl in bed with you."

"Aw," her head dipped to the side.

"But I didn't mean to wake you," he shook his head; his eyes a little off, a little sad as he looked to her.

"You didn't," she smiled, stepping further into the room and reaching around him to the glass on the counter. "I was thirsty."

"Ah," he nodded, watching as she filled the glass. "Do you want me to go down and get ice? Or tea or..."

"No," she smiled softly. "This is fine."

"I would be happy to though," he continued. "If you wanted..."

"I know," she chuckled lightly, her hand resting on his arm to stall him; his skin hot from the shower. "Are you okay?"

"What?" His brow creased as his eyes flashed wide. "Why? What do you mean?"

"I mean...are you okay?" She laughed, her hand smoothing over his skin as she sat down the glass. "It's three in the morning and you're home...taking a shower and...and I don't know, offering to bring me tea and..."

"Cake," he offered, his features softening as he took a deep breath. "I would bring you cake if you
"I know you would," she nodded. "But I don't want cake."

"No?" He smiled, easing up as she moved in closer to him.

"No," she bit her bottom lip, her cheeks flushing just a bit.

"Well, is there anything..." He couldn't help the way his body warmed as she moved into his space. His eyes met hers with one devilishly arched eyebrow. "Is there anything at all that I can get for you? Anything I can do?"

"Hmmmm..." Maddie's lips pressed together, her hands sliding down his chest, down his stomach to the top of the towel draped around his waist. "Maybe." She was so cute as she looked up at him; her hair mussed from sleeping, her cheeks pink and her eyes bright and it was all Harry had not to pull her into the tightest and longest of bear hugs.

In truth he had come home to be near her. The day had been crazy, the night even more so and the only thing that he felt that would anchor it all down was her.

"Maybe?" His grin pulled higher; his brain shaking off the day, pulling him to this moment.

"Are you too tired?" She asked as her fingertips tickled at the soft patch of hair that lead south.

"For you, never," he shook his head.

"Too drunk?" She leaned into him then, her fingers getting a good hold on the towel.

"In fact," Harry's voice dropped as his body responded to her words, her gaze, her intentions. "I'm sobered up."

"Good..." She sighed. "Good. You know...tonight, when I came to bed alone... I laid awake thinking about you and me and this baby..." Both of their smiles pulled higher. "And what I really wanted was to celebrate."

"Yeah?" His voice came out with his breath; sharp and a bit labored.

"Yeah," she nodded. "Now tell me. Are you terribly attached to this towel?" Without taking his eyes from hers, he shook his head. "I think that maybe, if it's okay with you...I've figured out something that I want." With wide, innocent eyes, she looked right up at him, her fingers tight around his towel as she sighed. "What do you say Captain? Can I have you?"

In a blink, something washed over Harry's face; serious and full of a higher brand of want, of lust. A gasp tumbled from Maddie's lips when he moved in on her; with one hand behind her head, he held her to him, his mouth moving hotly over hers. And with his other hand, he reached for the towel and tugged.

The sound that came from her mouth when he moved them both, when he turned her back to the counter and pressed into her—was a moan wrapped up in surprise and draped in desire. And the way he made her body feel in the middle of the night on that bathroom counter was nothing short of amazing. She wasn't sure where his drive came from, where exactly all of this intensity had been resting but when she tugged him into this place of want, he had jumped in head first.
Though it was hot, though it was quick and unexpected, that night on that counter, they made love. When she fell apart in his arms, she swore she saw tears in his eyes and when he finally moved to his end, when he finally let go inside of her, she wasn’t sure he could get any closer to her, wasn’t sure if they could be more wrapped around the other.

It was intense and wonderful; warm and sweet. And it was exactly what she had been craving all day.

It was a big day in the Sussex household; one that had started and ended right there in that bathroom—started and ended with his hands on her body, with their hearts wide open and full of love.
The next morning came quicker than others; for both Harry and Maddie. As he trudged his hungover self back into the shower hoping for a burst of energy, she hurried happily to the spare room to scoop up a rustling Buckie; allowing his mother just a bit more sleep.

"Good morning Buckie Bishop..." She cooed into his ear, pressing her nose and her lips to his soft head and inhaling. "How about Aunt Maddie gives you breakfast this morning?" She didn't wait for any sort of confirmation as he wiggled and stretched in her arms. Reaching for a fresh diaper and some wipes, she carried him downstairs to the kitchen.

As she readied the bottle exactly the way she had seen Ella do it the night before, she laid the peaceful little baby out on the couch and quickly changed his diaper. Zipping up his pajamas, she lifted him up and went to fetch the bottle. Settling into her large, over-sized chair, with this sweet little baby tucked into her arms as she fed him was the best way to wake up.

The absolute best way.

Her week had already been full of such warm, amazing moments. With the discovery of her bump on Monday, followed by the announcement and then the party, the week had been kicked off in only the sweetest of ways. They had polo today and a benefit gala the next and finally on Thursday, they could begin what she hoped would be a long, peaceful weekend.

She bent to kiss Buckie's forehead as he sucked at the bottle excitedly; his tiny little fingers curling around her pinky as she held it in place.

"You know..." Her voice was soft and melodic as she spoke to him. "I could make a joke here about your father passing on his love for the bottle..." Her lips curled higher. "But I suppose that wouldn't be appropriate." Her muffled laugh faded out as she heard a clearing of a throat. Her eyes swung up from the baby in her arms to see her husband just stepping into the room; showered and dressed and looking only half as ragged as he had first thing.

"Don't worry about propriety, love," he bent to kiss her. "Make the joke." His eyes turned animated as he looked down at the baby in her arms. "Good Morning little man...already making an adorably childlike play for my wife?" His fingers stroked his cheeks. "You are just like your father."

"Oh hush," Maddie brushed his hand away, watching as he walked towards the kitchen; his hand rubbing at the back of his neck. "How are you feeling this morning Captain?"

"Tired," he sighed, turning to flash a wide smile in her direction. "And not just because of our midnight romp."

"Midnight?" Maddie snickered. "It was three in the morning." She pulled the nearly empty bottle back from Buckie and lifted him up to burp him. "You never told me...how did the party turn out?"

Her eyes met his and he blinked and then shrugged and turned away from her; in search of energy and refueling. "It was fine." He called back. "Standard Bishop party; Scotch, music..."

"Women," a voice called out from the other side of the room.
"Sorry?" Harry's voice went high as he looked to Ella; rumpled and grinning.

"You said a standard Bishop party," she yawned as she made her way over to Maddie and Buckie. "I just assumed that meant some wild women..." She was smiling as her attention turned completely. "Good morning my favorite little man...did you convince your Aunt Maddie to feed you?"

"More like I convinced him," Maddie grinned as she lifted the baby up to Ella; warmth spreading to the tips of her toes to watch the way her best friend looked at her son—the way he cooed back to her.

"How was the party?" Ella nestled her son close and glanced back to Harry. "Did Bishop behave himself?"

"Of course," Harry called back, returning to his hunt in the kitchen.

"Did he burn down the house?" Ella's lips turned sarcastic.

"It was still standing when I left but I cannot speak for what occurred after that."

"Fair enough," Ella shrugged as the three of them chuckled.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ It was a beautiful day; warm, but not hot; a light breeze and the sun was out. It was a great day to play polo and an even better one to sit on the sidelines and cheer. The season was nearing a close and the fall was almost upon them and it seemed as though everyone was coming out to see off the last bit of summer. It was a crowded field; crowded sideline. Kate and Arthur were there to cheer on William who would be playing on the opposing team as Harry. Zara and Mike and Mia were making an appearance, as were Peter and Autumn and the girls. Maddie felt surrounded by little ones as she made her way to the tent.

She also felt surrounded by watchful eyes. Since Harry's impromptu announcement the day before, the media frenzy had erupted. Reporters, paparazzi, and fans alike were all over the stories about Harry finally becoming a father. They were all vying for the photos that were bound to come; the first real glimpse of Maddie's bump and ultimately the first shot of Harry touching Maddie's bump were high on the list of expectations. Aside from the buzz around her, there was also an influx of congratulations; of the sincerest of well wishes being expressed to the couple. People who had watched Harry grow, watched him speak of his desires to have a family—they were now watching as he was creating just that. And it seemed to have a magical sort of feel to it.

So as Maddie made her way across the green, a few long strides ahead of Harry, she smiled as the heads turned. She offered small waves and a nod of her head as people called out to her; Congratulations! Way to Go! Bravo! And just as she noticed a small gathering of photographers towards the gate snapping away, she slid her sunglasses onto her eyes and turned up the path to the tents.

No sooner had she began towards her family, towards her friends, was she interrupted with the bright, bubbliness that almost made her teeth hurt.

"Maddie!" A mix of surprise and something else flashed into her wide eyes as she stepped into Maddie's line of vision.
"Cassandra," Maddie stalled in her path, a bit taken aback by her sudden materialization. "Wow...you surprised me." Her hand pressed to her chest as she took a breath. "I had no idea you were going to be here today."

"Yeah," she sighed with a wide smile. "The season's almost over, I couldn't miss one of the last chances to see the boys play. You know?"

"I do," Maddie nodded, her jaw tightening as she tried to tell herself to calm down; to take a breath.

Cassandra's smile curled in a way that confused Maddie. "We missed you at the party last night."

"Sorry," Maddie chuckled. "The party?"

"At Bishop's," her lips curled higher.

"Ah yes," Maddie nodded; her eyes narrowing. "I must have left before you arrived."

"Must have," Cassandra shrugged lightly. "What a night though...right?" And just as her eyes glanced up over Maddie's shoulder, just as her lips pressed shut, Maddie heard Harry catching up with them. And then she watched as the woman before her seemed to transform into a girl with a crush. "Harry!" Her voice was too big, too excited.

"Hey," he nodded, barely acknowledging the young woman at all before he turned to Maddie. "Kate is up in the tent and I know they were all waiting for you. Is everything okay over here?" His eyes glanced over to Cassandra in the same quickness it took him to blink.

"Yes," Maddie smiled, her hand running down his arm; finding it charming how he looked out for her, appreciating in this moment his need to make her feel as comfortable as possible. Maddie's hand reached into his as she turned a smile to Cassandra. "If you'll excuse us," she took a step away, pulling Harry with her. "Our family is waiting...and the match is about to start. Enjoy your day."

Cassandra blinked and recovered and nodded her head, her eyes unable to tear too far away from Harry as she took in a breath and called out, "you too!"

And just like that Harry and Maddie were on their way to the tent. Though Maddie was surprised by the quick dismissal on Harry's part, she was thankful for his arm leading her away because the last thing she wanted to do was to spend this day next to a woman who was so clearly, and so unashamedly still hung up on her husband.

"You didn't tell me that Cassandra was at the party..." Maddie smiled up at him.

"No?" His eyes squinted in the sun. "Guess it didn't cross my mind," he shrugged as they stepped up to the tent.

"There she is!" Mike's voice boomed among the crowd as he spotted her. And as the family convened around them; hugs and kisses, congratulations and way-to-announce-that-big-boy, Maddie let all thoughts of the party, of Cassandra, slip from her mind.
As soon as Harry left Maddie in the tent surrounded by family, he moved just outside to the railing and sought out his best friend. Standing right next to him, his voice dropped; his eyes flashing back to the group. "Listen, would you do me a favor?"

"Of course," Bishop answered without a thought; recognizing the tone and the look in his eye. "What do you need?"

"I need you to..." He exhaled, looking down at his shoes before he continued. "I need you to run interference for me."

"Who?"

Harry took a deep breath and looked out over the green. "...Maddie and Cassandra."

"Okay," Bishop blinked; his voice shifting in the slightest as he took that in. "You want to tell me why I'm doing this?"

"Do I need to?" Harry's gaze shifted away from his best friend, out to the crowd.

"No," Bishop shook his head. "I suppose you don't."

There was a moment of slightly strained silence between them before Harry gave in a bit. "She was just...Cassandra...she was kind of all over me at your party; wouldn't leave me alone and Maddie already isn't fond of her and the press is out of control with the announcement and...Jesus. The last thing I want is to add stress to my pregnant wife's day so could you please just keep them apart..."

"Of course," Bishop held up his hands. "Of course. I'll keep them apart."

"Thank you," relief was evident in his eyes; in the deep breath he took. "Thank you. Listen, I need to get out there but I really appreciate this."

"No problem," Bishop shook his head watching as Harry took half a step away from him. "But listen...if you...if you fucked up, I think maybe..." Bishop's words trailed off as he was met with a hard, dark glare from his best friend. "Never mind." He shook his head. "Ease up. I'll keep them apart."

"Thank you," Harry exhaled; looking back at his wife, at his family, his shoulders eased and he offered a small smile to Bishop. "Thank you."

Maddie felt amazing the next night as she drifted around their room readying for the Gala Benefit Dinner they were scheduled to attend. Her hair was done, her makeup finished and she had a little bit of time before she needed to step into her dress and shoes. So she spent it sitting with her legs crossed in the middle of their bed watching her husband put on the many layers of his tux.

"You know..." She felt a little light and giddy as she watched him move about their room. "I find it oddly appealing to watch you dress."

Harry, still wearing just boxers and an undershirt as he leaned over to pull on his socks, looked up to her with an amused expression. "Is that so?"
"It is," she nodded, her eyes dancing as she held his gaze. "Don't get me wrong, the undressing is still a particular favorite of mine but..." She bit her lower lip and shook her head as he reached for his crisp, pressed, white shirt. "Captain..."

"Hey now," he eyed her, holding up a finger with a warning in his voice. "Watch that look. We have to go out. We cannot stay here and...undress and dress each other all night."

"No?" She laughed.

"No," he laughed along with her, sliding one arm into his shirt when his phone buzzed on the dresser. Reaching for it, he glanced at the screen and tossed it back on the dresser; without thought. He pulled his other arm into his shirt and tugged on the front; bringing it to the middle as he began to button. "Though I would love to do just that."

"Hmmm..." Maddie smiled. "You know, Libby and I met today about Carl Phillips' wedding."

"Yeah?" Harry glanced up from his buttons.

"I have to choose a tiara," she nodded, her fingers playing with the fabric of her robe. "And you have to wear your uniform."

"I know," he chuckled. "You going to watch me put that on too?"

"I might," she winked at him as he reached for his buzzing phone again. His brow creased and his eyes narrowed as he tossed it back to the dresser. "Everything okay?" She nodded to the phone.

"Of course," he turned his face back to her. "Tell me love, are you wearing that to the gala tonight?"

"This lovely robe?" She ran her hand down over the slick material with a smirk. "I just might. Think they would still talk about my bump?"

"Oh absolutely," Harry nodded his head and stepped into his pants. "Though my focus might shift slightly higher." He wagged his eyebrows as he looked to her slightly exposed cleavage.

"So charming," Maddie shook her head with a sigh. "You know I was thinking...It shouldn't be too much longer before you get to feel this baby move."

"Really?" His entire face brightened as he tucked and pulled and adjusted his clothing.

"Really," she warmed at his reaction. "The books say any day now..." Her hand ran down over it. "And then we'll find out if it's a boy or a girl and then before we know it..." She looked up at him. "Life as we have grown accustomed to is over."

"Thank God," his eyes were sweet as he moved to her; a light chuckle on his lips as he bent to kiss her. "I can't wait till he's here."

"Me too," she smiled as he stood tall, her finger traveling down his chest as she looked him over.

With a buzz, his phone cut into her wandering naughty thoughts about her husband. "God Damn it," Harry's hand patted hers as he turned to look at the dresser; eyes glaring and jaw tight.

"Seriously, Harry....what is with the phone tonight?" She stretched her arms up over her head as
he moved to pluck it up into his hand. "Do you need to call somebody back or..."

"No," his answer was short as he pushed and held down the power button. "I'll just turn it off," he slid it into his pocket and reached for his tie; his mood shifting just a bit. "Thomas will be with us if anybody needs anything."

"Okay..." Maddie sighed and slipped off the bed; moving over to him. As her hands slid around his waist, she leaned her body into his, staring up at him flirtatiously. "I'm going to go put on my dress...would you like to come watch?"

"Hmmm...." His face softened as he looked down at her, his lips curling up at the corners. "I doubt you would make it into the dress."

"Oh..." She took in a breath and shrugged her shoulders. "Think it would be the most terrible thing if we didn't make it tonight?"

"Ha!" Harry's head tossed back. "You know I'm in but I'm afraid you were raised with a better work ethic...more responsibility..."

"Boo," Maddie pouted playfully, though she knew they were joking. "Okay Captain. I'm going to get dressed. I'll see you soon."

"You will,"

Harry had to blink at the surprising tears in his eyes, had to swallow at the lump that had formed in his throat, had to take a breath to calm his heart. "I love you."

"Oh Captain," she smiled, her head tipping to the side. "I love you too. See you soon." With a flash of a grin and a small wave, she disappeared from his line of vision.

Collecting his breath, his mind—pulling at his focus—Harry returned to getting dressed, trying his damndest to stay in this moment and not to worry about anything else.

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It was like clockwork now, her body rousing her in the middle of the night for a drink or a trip to the restroom; she could set her watch to it. She sighed as she opened her eyes; her ears taking in the patter of rain outside. Though she wasn't surprised to find herself awake in the middle of the night, even after the long, wonderful evening they had just had, she was quite surprised to find herself alone.

"Harry?" She called out into the dark room as she sat up; glancing towards the still dark and open bathroom. "That's...weird..." She pulled the blankets back and looked around as she made her way to the bathroom. He had been tired when they had gone to bed. They had danced and ate and conversed their way around the gala and, after arriving home late, they had both nearly passed out in their bed; exhausted.

Though she was confused, though she had every intention of seeking him out, her body had other plans first. So she headed to the bathroom. After a few minutes and a nice long cold drink of
water, she made her way out of their room and began her search.

It wasn't too difficult to find him; the light in his office gave him away every time. As she stood in the doorway, she looked him over; taking in the set of his shoulders, the way his fingers were pushed into his red mess of hair as he hunched over his phone as he sat at his desk.

"Harry?" She called out him; startling him the tiniest bit as he lifted his face to look at her.

"Jesus..." His hand moved to his heart.

"Are you okay?" She chuckled, stepping into the room as he took a deep breath.

"Yes, God...you scared me," he blinked wildly as he stuffed his phone into his pocket and looked up at her.

"Sorry," she stood before him, her hands moving through his hair, down to the back of his neck. "What are you doing down here?"

"I don't know," he shook his head, his hands reaching out to her; falling softly on her hips as his smile instantly pulled higher. He loved having her there, loved being able to see her and feel her. "I guess I couldn't sleep."

"Something on your mind?" Her fingers ruffled into his hair again, her eyes soft and sweet as she looked down at him.

Swallowing, he looked up at her for a beat, his eyes searching hers before he inhaled and shook his head; looking away. "No...no..." He rose from his chair then, taking her hand into his. "Just woke up and was restless and I didn't want to wake you and...what are you doing up? Everything okay?"

"Yes," she rolled her eyes as he lead her over to the couch. "Bathroom, drink."

"The usual?" He snickered lightly as he sat down. "Want to come sit with me for a bit?" He pulled easily at her hand, lifting his arm up to the back of the couch; welcoming her in.

"I would love to," she sank down next to him; her legs stretched out next to his to prop up on the table in front of them.

"Here we go..." Harry pulled the soft blanket off the back and draped it over the two of them. As Maddie tucked into his side, he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close; her head pressing into the side of his chest.

"This is nice..." She yawned, already feeling the sleep drift back to her; his heart beat in his chest, his steady breathing along with the rain outside lulling her easily back to slumber. "Will you talk to me? Let me hear your voice?"

"Of course," He smiled as his fingers traced up and down her arm. "What would you like me to tell you? A story to put you to sleep?"

"Anything," she shook her head, her eyes pulling closed as she snuggled in. "Anything at all..."

"Well okay then..." He couldn't help but grin wide as he looked down at her; already three quarters of the way back to sleep. His voice adjusted; deep and steady as he began to talk to her.
At first it was nothing of significance; the people he had spoken to that night at the event, his plans for the next day's work. He had an early morning; meetings and a lunch and then more meetings before he would finally be home.

And as her breathing slowed, as her weight grew a bit heavier, his words grew more serious; more poignant.

"I can't believe we're going to be parents Madeline..." His smile pulled high; tired. "It seems almost unreal actually..." He pressed his lips together as he thought back over the week. "When you called me into the bathroom Monday morning to show me...I just..." He shook his head with a soft chuckle and eyes nearing a place where tears would come. "It was really something...to see that the baby was growing, that he's getting bigger and...God Maddie, the changes it's making to you..." He sucked in a breath and held in a laugh when she let out a soft little groan of a response. "You're so beautiful..." His fingers moved to stroke her hair. "They said you would glow...and I thought it would be later but you do...you glow..." He looked her over then, his eyes focusing in on her. "I don't know what I did to deserve this...to deserve your time and your heart and...and the second chances you've given me when I've messed up and Maddie..." He pulled his eyes away from her for a beat, his emotion catching in his throat. "God Maddie. I was so elated on Monday; to see the baby and the bump and...I just threw myself into celebration and..." He turned back to her, his finger moving to stroke her cheek. "Maddie..." He whispered. "I need to tell you something..." His big blue eyes blinked at the emotions building up behind them. "I need to...can you wake up love?" He hated himself for waking her but he couldn't help it. "Madeline...please...I need to talk to you and...I haven't been able to sleep and you need to know....I..." He looked out into his office and took a deep breath. "Maddie....love..."

"Shhhh....." She groaned from her sleepy state; her eyes not moving, her lips barely parting. "I'm tired Captain. The baby...he's tired..." She nudged him as she snuggled closer. "Please let me sleep....we can...talk...tomorrow..." And just like that, she drifted right back to sleep; her mind only mildly awake for the seconds it took her to hush him.

His lips curled into a smile, despite the sadness in his eyes. Turning his face from hers, he bit at his lip, he swallowed the lump in his throat and he took a deep breath. "Okay," he agreed. The last thing he wanted in the world was to upset her, make her more uncomfortable. "Okay."

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When Maddie woke the next day, she was back in her bed; alone. Though she had known he would be gone in the morning, she was surprised of her location. The last thing she remembered was snuggling up to his side in his office. She chuckled at herself; completely missing the part when she came upstairs and got back in bed.

It was a relatively easy morning for her in her home office. She was reading through updates, making plans for future events, and fielding the massive amounts of congratulations that continued to pour in. Notes, messages, and bouquets of flowers had been sent from all corners of the globe. She would never get over the humor that came with world leaders congratulating her and Harry on having unprotected sex. She giggled as she passed their living room, a cup of tea in her hand as she moved back towards her office.

When the phone rang out into the house, she was startled at first; confused to hear the landline ringing. It wasn't something serious; protection hadn't burst in, none of the household staff was at the door. Taking a sip from her cup, she leaned on the couch; reaching to answer.

"Hello?"
"Maddie?" The too bubbly voice responded.

"Yes," Maddie tried to control the sigh that pushed through her lips.

"It's Cassandra." Maddie took a breath and fought the urge to roll her eyes. "Sorry to bother you but there's something I...need to talk to you about; something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

"Sure," Maddie pulled her lips into a smile and shrugged her shoulders. "What did you need to talk about?"

In the two seconds of silence, Maddie could feel a slight dip in her stomach, she could feel the hair on the back of her neck begin to stand; as though her body knew before her mind exactly what was about to happen.

"Harry."

Of course, Maddie cleared her throat and took another breath. "You want to talk about Harry?"

"I do," she was quieter than normal but her voice was steady. "There's something you should know about Harry and..."

"Yeah, listen," Maddie cut in; wanting to head this off before it got anywhere near where Cassandra was headed.

"Harry and I," Cassandra continued on. "There's something you should know about Harry and I."

"I'm sorry," Maddie's chuckle had a bitter tinge to it. "Harry and you?" She couldn't believe it was this again. "Listen, Cassandra, I've heard all the details of your time together as children. I don't think..."

"This isn't about that," Cassandra cut in. "It's about Harry and I...now."

"Excuse me?" Maddie's forehead scrunched together. "Now?"

"Yes," Cassandra took a shaky breath. "I'm guessing he hasn't told you..."

"Told me what?" Maddie's pulse began to pound.

"That we..." She stammered, as though she wasn't certain, as though she were nervous; afraid. "We..."

"We what?" Maddie's eyebrows shot up.

"There's something...going on...between Harry and I."

Maddie's eyes blinked, her heart thudded and then...she laughed. "Listen, Cassandra..."

"You think this is funny?" The woman on the other end of the phone grew tense; angry.

"I think it's hilarious," Maddie nodded her head; her jaw tightening. "That you would pick up the phone and call up the pregnant wife of your childhood crush and...what? What exactly is it that
"I'm trying to tell you..." Cassandra's voice rose for a moment before she gained control, before she calmed down. "I'm trying to...I just thought you should know. Harry...he...he is worried about you and..."

"Stop. Stop talking to me like you know him better than I do," Maddie's eyes grew dark.

"But I do," Cassandra exhaled.

"You have an awful lot of nerve..." Maddie rose to her feet and stood in the middle of their living room as her blood boiled.

"And you don't have a clue!" Cassandra cut her off; something in the tone of her voice silencing Maddie. "We...since I came back, our friendship has reignited and...and we've spent more and more time together and we've grown close."

"Cassandra..."

"And he talks to me," she sounded shaky as she continued. "He does. He confides in me. I know that you two were struggling to get pregnant before I came home. I know you fought before he was deployed; that you were upset that he was leaving, that you had to stop trying..."

"Hold on..." Maddie's heart jumped into her throat as Cassandra began to lay out details from her relationship with Harry; details she hadn't even discussed with Ella.

"I know you were upset when he went away and..." Her voice grew teary. "When he had the accident..."

"Stop," Maddie shook her head; her stomach turning as her brain tried to make sense of what she was hearing.

"He told me you were upset with him; that you hated that he didn't come right home..."

"How..." Maddie's voice was strangled, her throat tight. "How do you know that?"

"He told me," Cassandra whispered. "He told me that you fought when he came home and that you were struggling but then you got pregnant right after Norway and..."

"Stop," Maddie blinked at the tears that came; she knew too much about them. Too much.

"He's confused. He doesn't know what to do..." Cassandra continued. "If you weren't pregnant it might be different but you are and I know he doesn't want to upset you..."

"I don't believe you," Maddie whispered; less convinced than she sounded. "I don't know how you know all of this but I don't believe that he would tell you this, that he would..."

"But he did," Cassandra's voice rose. "How else would I know..."

"I don't know," Maddie shook her head violently. "I don't know how you know these things but it doesn't mean that..."

"I was with him Monday night." The words fell into Maddie's ears with a deafening thud.
Cassandra seized the silence and continued. "At Bishop's house. You left early and he stayed..."

"Listen..." Maddie held up her hand, her strong exterior beginning to crack as her mind reached out over the week.

"He was coming off the high of the announcement and he was drunk and wild and very much the Harry that I remember." Maddie shook her head; trying to push her brain away from everything that had been odd since Monday; the way he had dismissed Cassandra at polo, the way he had shut off his phone to avoid the texts just the night before, the look in his eyes that she hadn't quite made sense of. "And we stayed up late talking and laughing and..."

"No," Maddie shook her head. "I don't believe you." And she wanted more than anything in the world to believe what she was saying. "You're delusional and jealous and lying and..."

"I was with him Monday night Maddie," Cassandra's voice grew tight, cold; angry. "He was drunk and wearing that soft flannel shirt of his and when he kissed me...his lips tasted like Scotch. And honey."

And that did it. If Cassandra wanted to hit home, if she wanted to level Maddie with her words—those were the ones to use. And she couldn't take it any longer; couldn't listen, couldn't fight. She didn't bother to disconnect the phone call, choosing instead to throw the receiver at the wall.

And her heart sank deep in her chest.

It was too much; her words, the thing she knew. It made her chest tight, made her head spin and she wanted nothing more than to crumble into a heap on the floor. But she was forced to move. With tears blurring her vision, she hurried to the bathroom. And for the first time since she had found out she was pregnant, she heaved; emptying the contents of her stomach.

And her heart broke.
From the moment Maddie had stepped out of the bathroom, there had been a war brewing inside of her. Her rational side was trying, desperately to find an explanation that her heart and her stomach were pounding down.

Her mind was spiraling out, trying to make sense of a phone call that simply made no sense.

Cassandra's words kept playing over and over in her head; this sickening chorus that made her body hurt in every pore. Everything she had said; everything she knew. Maddie hated to be caught off guard; hated to be in the dark about something and this, *this* had come from completely out of the blue. She never would have guessed Harry had been talking to Cassandra on the side....for all this time...

Maddie took a deep breath in, letting it out slowly; trying in vain to pull herself back together.

It could be a coincidence, right? It had to be. Some crazy, only-happens-in-fiction explanation for all of this; one that didn't mean her husband had been effectively lying to her for months and months.

With her arms wrapped around her, she moved back through their living room; slow and methodic as she tried to walk it out. As she walked past the phone, busted and dead on the floor, she thought about calling him; calling him and demanding he come right home, that he explain this away; that he be the one to struggle to make sense of it all. But the mere thought of speaking to him, of seeing him, made her heart jump into her throat.

She wasn't sure she could talk to him yet.

Walking through the living room, she made it to the entry way. Moving to sit on the second step, she took a deep breath and stared out into space. She wanted so desperately to understand; to sort it all out.

But she couldn't.

Her eyes welled up instantly, her throat tightening as Cassandra's words rushed through; again and again. She knew so much; too much. It made Maddie's stomach turn as she thought of it; how they had been trying to get pregnant, how they had fought when he was called to duty, how upset she was about him staying...how they worked things out in Norway. Maddie's head fell into her hands as the tears flooded. Had he really been talking to Cassandra all this time? Had he really been sharing these personal, intimate details of their lives with *her*?

It didn't make sense; Maddie shook her head. It made no sense. Because even in the times they had seen Cassandra, he had been less than cordial to her; completely dismissive. Had that been a ruse the whole time? Had he really been masking something that she was too blind to see?

It was too much. It was all just too much to take in; the image of him, of her husband, disclosing these things to her. It was too much for Maddie to wrap her brain around.

And that was long before she even tried to factor in that last bit of information. That was long before she took into account the fact that Cassandra knew what Harry's lips had tasted like on Monday night. Long before she tried to take in the words she had dropped on her
"I was with him Monday night." Maddie shook her head, forcing herself to take a deep breath, had to rest her spinning head between her knees to keep from hurling.

SHE had been with him Monday night. When he had come home at three in the morning and he was standing there in that towel—she had made love with him. And according to Cassandra and her all too accurate knowledge as to the taste of Harry's lips—she had been with him too.

And that was a big deal.

A Big. Fucking. Deal.

Unable to stand it any longer, this worry and anxiety, she pulled her cell phone from her pocket and dialed his number. She couldn't do this without him. She needed him there. She needed answers and FUCK if she wanted to just be able to dismiss this; to ignore Cassandra and go on believing that Harry was hers—only hers.

"You've reached Harry's phone...." Maddie cringed at the way she could hear his smile on the recording. "Leave me a message."

She pressed end and dropped the phone on the stair next to her.

And she hated Cassandra Whitworth. She hated her; not only for the words she had said, but for what she had done.

Because Maddie knew that Harry had a busy schedule that day; meetings stacked on meetings. And she knew that, before today, a missed phone call would have meant nothing. It would have meant that he was still in one of his meetings or that he was finishing up a phone call or that he was on his way home and had left his phone powered off in his chest pocket of his coat. It would have meant any number of perfectly rational things.

But not anymore.

Because regardless of the validity of Cassandra's admissions, regardless of any missing facts behind this whole scenario; Cassandra Whitworth had won. In that one phone call she had managed to plant a heartbeat of doubt where before there had been none.

And just like that Maddie sank into the darkness.

What if it were true? What if every single word were true?

Maybe they had reconnected after Cassandra moved back to London. Harry had told her before that he was loyal—once he cared, he always cared. Even if the relationship ended.

Maybe he had talked to Cassandra.

Maybe he had told her that they were trying to be parents; trying for a baby.

Maybe things had started out innocently enough.

And maybe...she gulped...maybe he had told her about the fight, when he was called up to deploy, maybe he had disclosed that to her.
Maddie had always known Cassandra still had feelings for Harry. Maybe she had seen an opportunity, maybe he had vented to her...

And maybe, just maybe, in those moments when Maddie wasn't as understanding as she liked to be, when she wasn't as easy on him as she should have been, maybe Cassandra had stepped up; stepped in.

Maybe Maddie had missed it. Maybe it had all happened just the way Cassandra said that it had. Maybe Harry had turned to her and maybe on Monday night when he was high from the news, from their celebration, maybe he had...

Maddie shook her head violently; desperately wanting to shake the image from her mind, from her heart, from the realm of possibility.

But she couldn't.

She knew that she should KNOW better; that this was Harry—her Harry—who had followed her to Bendal, who had given her his heart and brought her to London, who had married her. This was the man with whom she was about to have a child; her husband. She knew that she should be waiting for him to explain. She knew that she should give him the benefit of the doubt, the chance to speak. But she couldn't. Her heart ached. Her mind hurt. And her stomach was churning.

Because Cassandra Whitworth knew what her husband's lips tasted like.

And she sank further.

She wanted to drink. She wanted to open up the most expensive bottle of wine they owned and drink it; right there on the stairs, straight from the bottle. She wished she was the kind of person who could break things. She wished she could go on a rampage through the house; breaking every glass and vase and piece of pottery she could find. She wanted to watch something shatter, wanted to relieve the tension that coursed through her muscles.

But she wasn't. She never really had been.

So she sat. There on that second stair from the bottom. And she waited. Right there in the entryway, with her teary eyes focused on the front door; she waited for him. Because good or bad, he was the only one who could help her out of the dark hole in which she felt so deeply entrenched.

She really had no idea just how long she sat there, how long it took before she heard the crunch of gravel outside, the car doors opening and shutting and his unmistakable laugh. The very same one that used to make her body warm.

Maddie wiped at her eyes, trying to sniff away the tears that had become permanent residents. And when she heard the door handle, the push, she took a deep breath, closed her eyes and braced herself. Finally. He was home.

"Madeline..." His voice was light and airy; happy as he called out to her before he had even step foot inside.

Maddie swallowed the lump in her throat, opened her eyes, and there he was. The house had grown dark while she had waited and her eyes had adjusted. But his hadn't. He dropped his bag next to the door, his jacket on top of it as his free hand sought out the light switch.
"Maddie!" He called out as he flipped on the switch and turned around. The second he saw her, he jumped; flinched. "Jesus!" His hand moved over his pounding heart. "Christ Maddie, I didn't see you sitting there and..." His voice dropped off as his eyes took her in; his forehead creasing in instant concern and worry at the look on her face, the tears in her eyes. "Maddie..." He moved into the house quickly; coming right over to her. "What is it? What happened?"

Almost on instinct, he knelt down in front of her and his hand moved out to touch her, to console her; to comfort.

And almost on instinct, on this terrible new reflex, Maddie flinched away from him.

"Don't touch me..." Her voice, having been shut down for most of the day, having been silenced by way of tears, was weak and hoarse and by the scrunched up look on Harry's face, it was clear he hadn't quite heard her.

"Maddie..." His hand moved in and hers caught it before it reached her.

"I said....don't touch me." And though it was peppered with tears, she was clear. And he had heard her.

"What?" His eyes flashed confusion as he took his hand back, his mind shifting into gear as he tried to understand what was happening. "Why? What's happened? Are you okay or..."

"No," she shook her head as the tears came from her eyes; her hands reaching to wipe at her cheeks. "I am not okay." Though Harry stood up, though he took half a step away from her, his focus only intensified.

"Is it the baby?"

"No," she shook her head. "The baby is...fine." Her voice cracked at the end.

"Okay, well, would you tell me what the hell is going on? Because right now I'm incredibly..."

"I got a phone call today," her voice was growing clearer as her anger began to outweigh her tears.

"A phone call?" Harry's eyebrows lifted; not any less confused. Oblivious.

Maddie wiped at her eyes as she rose to her feet. She cleared her throat and looked right at him; forcing herself to stand in front of him, forcing her eyes to lock with his and then, with her head held high, she nodded. "From Cassandra Whitworth."

Had her eyes not been watching him, waiting for his reaction, she might not have noticed the way he flinched, the way his eyes flashed and his Adam's Apple bobbed. It was a fraction of a second and barely noticeable.

But she caught it and it made her heart jump in her chest; made the pit of her stomach clench.

With his arms crossing over his chest, his jaw tightened. "What did she say to you?"

"I think you know what she said to me." Harry's eyes held hers for a blink before he had to look away, his eyes shifting from hers.
"Maddie," he was shaky, she could tell; and it made her want to pummel him. "I don't know what exactly..."

"Yes you do," her teeth were clenched and her voice was rising. "You flinched when I said her name and you can't even look at me right now! You don't know exactly..." She shook her head and then surprised them both when she yelled. "YES YOU DO!"

"Hold on..."

"NO!" She yelled, moving away from him, needing to put physical distance between them. "No! I will not hold on! All I've been doing since she called is HOLDING ON! Waiting for you to get here so I could look in your eyes and see if it was true, if..." She faltered as the tears surged forward. "If all of the things she said were true and..."

"All of the things..." Harry followed her into their living room; his heart pounding wildly in his chest, the sound of his pulse rushing in his ears. "What do you mean all of the things? What did she tell you?"

"She told me everything," Maddie turned to face him; tears in her eyes and her hand over her heart. Harry felt his knees weaken and his stomach turn at the way she was looking at him. "How you reconnected, how you became friends again..."

"Reconnected?" Harry's voice shot high.

"She told me how you confided in her, how you told her..." Maddie shook her head. She hated this. All day she had thought that she wanted to confront him, that she wanted answers. But now that she was faced with it, she didn't. She wanted to run and hide and curl up in a ball. "How you told her about the trouble we had trying for a baby..."

"But..." Harry shook his head; his own mind reeling as Maddie continued.

"She knows so much Harry...so much about me, about us. How could you tell her..." Her voice caught in her throat and she had to take a breath. "How we had to stop, how we fought when we had to stop..."

"But I didn't!" His eyes were wide, his face scattered.

"Don't lie to me!" Maddie yelled, finding her voice. "She knew about the accident. She knew that when you didn't come home to me after the accident, that I was upset! Harry!" Her voice cracked and her eyes welled up as she looked right at him. "She knew I got pregnant after Norway..."

"Maddie, I swear to you..." He moved towards her, his hands held up in surrender, but she was having none of it. Her hand held up and her expression hardened.

"Don't." She shook her head at him. "Don't swear to me. Don't...don't swear anything to me right now."

"Maddie, please," his shoulders were drooped, his eyes pleading and his whole world was collapsing around him.

"And she knows...she knows that on Monday night...your lips tasted just like Scotch. And honey."
And this time as Maddie watched him, she saw his heart break in his chest. She saw his hope fall to the ground. Right along with the remnants of hers.

With a heavy nod and fresh tears, Maddie held his eyes and whispered. "That's what I thought."

And for a moment all was quiet. There was no sound, not even a breath. And then Harry swallowed and blinked and when his eyes met hers, she saw guilt there and her heart sank to her feet; with all faith and possibility following behind.

"Okay, listen..."

"No," Maddie shook her head as she turned to walk away from him. "I don't think I will."

"Maddie," he followed behind her. "It's not what you think."

"Not what I think?" She yelled out, spinning on her heels to face him. "I think she knows exactly what your lips taste like!"

"Please," Harry's voice was sad and desperate. "Please give me the chance to..."

"No," Maddie pushed past him, walking back through the living room. "You have had a chance to tell me! You have had days and weeks and MONTHS!" She screamed and came to a stop; her tears flowing back to the surface as her head fell forward into her hands. "I don't even know how long you've had to tell me that there was something going on, something..."

"No," Harry shook his head, trying to keep himself together; to keep from losing it at the chaos that was unfolding. "I don't know how she knows all of those things but..."

"Please don't lie to me," Maddie's face lifted from her hands and she looked up at him. "Please...please..." She was soft and quiet and so sad that he wanted to kick his own ass. "You told me you were...honest...even if it hurt."

"I am and..."

"Until it really fucking matters!" She burst into anger again. "It matters. Right now. Stop with the nonsense bullshit. I don't want to hear that you don't know! I want to know what the hell happened to us that..."

"She kissed me!" Harry's voice boomed around them, drawing her to silence. "I'm sorry. I...Monday night. At Bishop's. I was drunk and celebrating and I sat next to her on the couch and we were talking and she leaned in and kissed me."

"Yes." Maddie's face grew cold and he flinched at the anger he saw there; the hatred. "She told me that part."

"Did she tell you that I didn't want her to do that? That I was furious? That I pushed her away and stood up? Did she tell you that I told her that was never going to happen, that I was...that I was in love with my wife? Did she tell you that I told her to stay away from me? Did she tell you that I left her there, that she's been warned to stay away?" Harry's eyes were frantic as he watched her. "Did she tell you any of those things?"

"No..." Maddie shook her head, her tears growing eerily still. "But neither did you." And then,
without giving it a second thought, Maddie moved past him and went straight for the front door.

"Wait!" Harry hurried behind her, right on her heels. Just as she pulled the door open, his arm moved around her to push it shut. "Don't leave."

"Don't tell me what to do," she pushed at his arm and reached for the door but he was quick and determined and he shut it again. But she was mad and felt cornered and when she spun around to face him, the rage that was brewing was evident.

"Please don't leave," his eyes were wide and teary and the way he was pleading with her made Maddie's resolve weaken a bit.

"I'm furious with you right now. I'm mad and upset and confused and I feel so...stupid and betrayed and..." She shook her head. "I need to get out."

"Please don't walk out the door," he bit his lower lip as his hands moved to her shoulders. "Please Maddie."

"Don't touch me..." She shook her head as her stance eased only slightly. With tears in his eyes, he pulled his hands from her and held them up in surrender. "I just...I want to break something or hit something or..."

"Hit me," he didn't blink as he spoke. "God, please just....hit me if you want to but please don't walk out the door. Please don't leave me without giving me the chance to explain."

She wasn't sure if it was his words, or the way he spoke them with so much desperation or if it was hormones from her pregnancy. She had no idea why her mind and emotions kept bouncing between anger and sadness but in that moment the anger waned.

And she began to cry.

Her hands moved to her mouth, to her throat as she began to sob with her back against their front door and Harry standing in front of her with a battle in his mind.

Never before had he wanted to hold her more than he did in that exact moment. And never before had he been so clear that that was exactly what she didn't want. So he stood still and he took a breath and when she didn't move to leave, he took a risk.

"I don't know how she knows all of this other stuff..."

"She says you told her," Maddie whispered.

"But I didn't," he shook his head, his hand to his heart. "I didn't tell her those things."

"She said that you confided to her..."

"But I didn't!" He's eyes were wide and fuck if she didn't want to just believe him. "I didn't! Why would I do that, Maddie? You are my wife and you're having my baby and God...Maddie...I'm not even friends with her. Why would I confide in her about such big, private things?"

"Believe me, I have been going over and over that in my mind since she called," Maddie let out a small bitter laugh. "And the answers make me sick."
"I didn't," his voice dropped low.

"She said that you started out as friends and that you...vent ed to her and she was there for you...and that eventually developed into something more and that you were..." Maddie gulped back the lump in her throat. "That you were together on Monday."

"Together?" Harry's face twisted up, his eyes growing dark. "But we weren't. Maddie; listen to me. You have to..."

"Believe you?" She interrupted; her eyebrows shooting up as she searched his face. "I'm supposed to believe you?"

"Yes," he whispered; knowing how absurd that request sounded in the moment. "Your husband, the father of your child, over this crazy woman who means nothing. Yes. You should know that..."

"You want to know what I know?" She cut him off. "I know that on Monday night you were drunk and happy and I was at home and at some point...at some point there was a kiss. That's what I know..." She looked down at her hands. "I know it wasn't my husband who told me about it. It wasn't the father of my child who came home to me and came clean. It was this crazy woman...who means nothing." Maddie placed her hand in the middle of his chest and pushed him back. "And even if that's all that happened, even if it began and ended right there..."

"It did."

"Then why didn't you tell me?" She took a step away from him; back into the house. "You could have come right home to me and told me; Maddie, Cassandra kissed me. I pushed her away and it meant nothing and..." Maddie trailed off, looking away from him. "And then when she called, maybe I wouldn't have been so blindsided." She swallowed and looked back to him. "But you didn't. You...you kept it from me. And you came home that night and...and made love to me..." Her lips pressed closed and tears slipped freely. "And I'm supposed to believe you."

"I know how it looks..."

"It looks like you've been lying to me at least since Monday," she wiped at her cheeks. "And I'm supposed to believe you."

"Maddie..."

"She said that you don't know what to do," as she spoke the words, all of her defenses slipped away. She was sad and vulnerable and lost. "She said that you're trying to figure things out and that if I weren't pregnant..."

"Stop," Harry whispered; tears slipping from his eyes as he shook his head at her. "Please. There is nothing for me to figure out. There is no question. Maddie..." His hands moved to his chest as he pleaded. "I made a mistake on Monday Maddie. I should have come home to you and told you. I thought that it was just...an isolated incident, that she got the point, that she knew...and I didn't want to upset you over something so insignificant. So I decided not to tell you. I know that I should have. And last night when you came down to the office, I was going to. I knew it would only get bigger; after we saw her at polo, after she sent all of those texts last night..."

Maddie's eyes snapped up. "That was her."
"I...yes..." He nodded his head. "That was her."

"God Harry," Maddie groaned.

"I would never do this," his knees bent so his gaze could level with hers. "I would never do this. I would never cheat on you Maddie. I love you. I love you so much and I could never...I would never. You have to know that. I didn't kiss her back. I didn't. The second I realized what was happening, I pushed her away and..."

"I want to believe you," Maddie whispered. "I want to."

"Then do," he hoped and prayed.

Maddie nodded her head and looked down at her hands, her lips curling into a smile that wasn't completely authentic; her eyes getting this far-off, distant look.

"We're supposed to be a team," she sounded so calm; too calm. "You and I; us. We're supposed to be a united front; us against the world..." She let out an exhale of a chuckle. "With everything that goes on around us and all of the craziness and...it's supposed to be you and me; Maddie and Harry. Solid. Together. Unyielding."

"We are all of those things..."

"But we're not," she blinked at the last wayward tear. "Because when you let her know something that I didn't...you let her in. You weakened us."

"Maddie."

"And when you told her these intimate details of our lives,"

"I didn't tell her those things," he was starting to panic. "Please. You can look right now. Here...my phone..." He reached into his pocket and handed it over. "I will log you into my email accounts and you can pull up old phone records and..."

"Harry," she shook her head, holding her hand up; refusing to take his phone from him.

"Please," he moved closer. "Please. Do you want me to call her? Do you want me to try to figure this out? Do you want me to take you there?"

"I don't want to talk to her ever again..."

"What do you want me to do? Tell me and I'll do it. Please..."

"She says..." Maddie's voice grew quiet, her demeanor softening as a great vulnerability was laid before him. "She said you're trying to figure out how to leave me..." Her eyes slid to his, crushing his soul. "Is that true?"

"No," Harry shook his head, blinking back tears that had the ability to turn into sobs. "No. Maddie...no. I don't want to leave you. I have never wanted to leave you. Since the day I met you...please..." He reached for her hand and pulled it into his. And she didn't fight, she let him take it, she let him pull it to his chest; press it above his pounding heart. "I am not trying to figure out how to leave you. I'm not going anywhere." He took in a slow, shuddery breath and asked the question that had the possibility of ending him. "Are you?" He whispered. "Are you leaving me?"
Maddie's fingers curled up under his, as though they were trying to hold onto him, to keep him in her grasp. As her eyes welled up with tears again, as her teeth bit into her lower lip, she let her heart rule her mind on this one. She shook her head. "No." It came out cracked and weak, but it gave him hope. "I'm just...really confused and I'm mad and...and I'm heartbroken."

"I know," his head hung in shame. "I'm sorry. I...I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I should have told you. I...I tried last night but you fell asleep and..." He shook his head. "It doesn't really matter. I didn't tell you. And she did."

"She did." Maddie nodded; Cassandra's words rushing back into her mind. Pulling her hand from his, she wrapped her arms around her chest and swallowed the lump in her throat.

"What can I do?" He asked. "To fix this, to make this right, to...convince you...what can I do? I'll do...anything."

"I don't know," she shook her head. She wasn't trying to be evasive, wasn't trying to punish. She didn't know how to walk this back. If she did, she would tell him, because she hated this. She hated looking at him with this new lens of caution. "What would you do?"

"Sorry?"

"If the shoes were reversed," she held his gaze. "If you had gotten a phone call today from some man." Harry blinked; already hating this hypothetical. "And he told you that he knew how upset I was when you stayed after the accident in Khundu. If he told you that he knew how much you upset me with that decision." Maddie could see his blood begin to boil and she pressed forward. "What if he told you I had been confiding in him for months; about our relationship, about how things were between us. What if he knew things that nobody knew. Things I hadn't even told Ella..."

"Maddie," Harry's jaw was tense; his shoulders tight.

"And then..." She took a breath and held strong. "And then he told you that he knew what I tasted like." She watched as her words hit him; could see the way they twisted at his heart. "You feel that?" She lifted her eyebrows. "That feeling deep in your gut; like you just got punched? Like you're going to be sick?" She blinked at her tears. "That's how I feel right now. That's how I've felt all day. Now tell me....what would you do?"

"I would want to fucking kill him," Harry spoke the harsh truth.

"Yeah," Maddie had a small, tight smile as she nodded.

"And then I would want answers."

"And what if I told you....I don't know..." She shrugged and he got it; his head nodded.

"Maddie..."

"I don't know what to do to fix this, Harry," she shook her head. "I don't know how we take this back, how we erase this. I don't know how I get the images out of my mind!" Her voice rose as her anger swayed. "I don't know. I just...." She laughed a bitter, huff of a sound. "I don't know."

"Okay," he whispered. He had messed up. When he had made the decision to keep the incident
from Monday night from her, he had made a vital, critical mistake. Though he had done it from a place of love, a place of preservation and caring—it had been wrong. He knew that now. Now he had no leg to stand on when he tried to convince her that everything else that Cassandra had told her was false. He had no explanation and she had no faith.

And that was all his fault. So he stood and waited for her to speak, to tell him what happened next.

"I'm...." She wiped her eyes and sniffed as she moved around him towards the stairs. "I think I'm going to go now..."

"Go?" His eyes flashed wild with worry.

"Upstairs," she pointed. "I'm tired and....hungry and....and I want to be alone for a bit."

Harry nodded; accepting whatever she asked for, whatever she wanted. "Can I get you anything or do anything?"

"No," she shook her head. "I think you're done for the night. I think we're done for the night."

"Do you..." He gulped at the emotion that surged forward; as his adrenaline began to wane, the realities were settling in. "Do you want me to stay somewhere else tonight?"

"No," she shook her head. "You don't have to leave. I don't want..." She turned from him to look up the stairs; desperately wanting to stop the tears long enough to get out a complete thought. "I don't want any of this..."

"Maddie..."

"You don't have to go away," she shook her head; not looking back at him. "But I do want to be alone tonight...I just need some time and..."

"Okay," he cut her off; devastated, but compliant. She was going to get whatever she wanted from him that night; even if it meant he camped in the front yard. "I'll stay in another room."

"Thank you," she whispered and then without a glance back, without another word, she started up the stairs.

And Harry stood, rooted to his spot in the entryway, his whole life in scattered remnants around him, and he watched her go.

The second she was out of his line of vision, he folded; his shoulders sank with his heart and he lost the ability to fight off the tears any longer.

He was lost and afraid and scared and sad and guilty and upset and...and the only thing that anchored him, the only thing that had anchored him for years, was on her way up to their bedroom; alone. And completely unsure about him.

And he felt something inside of him crack.

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rest; very little reprieve from what had occurred there that night. He was in the kitchen nursing a cup of black coffee, disheveled and just this side of a mess when she walked in; dressed for her day.

His tired eyes lifted to meet hers and he sat his coffee back on the counter. "Hi..." He breathed; almost afraid to move.

"Good morning," Maddie tried for a smile.

"Can I get you..."

"I'm leaving," she cut him off, his eyes snapping up to her in an instant.

"But..." His heart jumped in his throat.

"Not..." She shook her head. "I'm going away. Just for a couple of days," she was quick to explain; quicker to continue when she saw him open his mouth to protest. "I need to think, Harry. I need to...." She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I want to believe what you said. I need to believe my husband over...her. I need that. But here, in this house, with you....I can't think. I need space and fresh air and..." She squared her shoulders and met his eyes. "I'm going to Highgrove for a little while."

"Highgrove?" His eyebrows lifted; half worried because she was leaving, half relieved she was going there. "But my father and Camilla are out of the country..."

"I know," she nodded. "But my father and Camilla are out of the country..."

"I know," she nodded. "But he told me once that I could go whenever I wanted..."

"Of course."

"And I had Thomas call out to the staff and they said I could go and stay and..." Her head tipped to the side as she softened. "I just need some space Harry and Highgrove...it has plenty of space."

"Okay," he nodded; sad and reeling, but agreeing to her wants. "If that's what you want, then of course you should go. How long will you be?"

"I don't know," she shook her head.

"Okay," he looked down at his hands. "Um...Buckie's Christening is coming up, will you be back for that or..."

"Of course," Maddie sighed. "We're his Godparents, Harry. Of course I'll be back for that."

"Okay," Harry tried for a smile but it came up weak and lopsided. "When are you leaving?"

"Now," she answered. "There's a car out front."

"Okay," he cleared his throat. "Can I call you while you're gone or..."

"I'm not trying to punish you Harry," she took a step forward. "I'm not trying to...." She shook her head. "I just need to go for a bit." She took a breath. "You can call me."

His face brightened and his shoulders eased. That was something. Hearing the knock at the door, they both glanced towards it and then Maddie looked back to him.
"That's me,"

"Yeah."

"Okay..." She took a few steps towards the door, turning back in the doorway to look at him. "I'll see you in a few days."

"I'll look forward to it," Harry smiled. "And if you need anything from me, anything at all..."

"Okay," Maddie nodded. "Good-bye Harry."

"Good-bye," his voice cracked. "I love you Maddie."

She blinked her eyes and took a breath. "I love you too Harry."

And with that, she was gone; leaving Harry, this moment, and their lives on pause—off to find space. And fresh air. And, hopefully, a bit of resolution.

Nothing was over, nothing was resolved and she was, in all affects, walking out the door and leaving him to stew on his own.

But she loved him. And that was something; a big something. Though his stomach still hadn't settled, though his mind was still at work trying to figure this all out, though he very much wanted somebody to pay for what had just unfolded—he was going to take a deep breath and try for calm.

And he was going to wait for his wife to come home.
The first thing Maddie did when she arrived at Highgrove was head outside. After her bags were stowed away in Harry's old room—their room—she pulled on her sunglasses and began her journey around the grounds. It was a beautiful day; rolling clouds, light breeze. As she pulled in breath after breath of fresh air, she could almost feel her mind begin to settle.

She had walked right out the back door and angled off towards the Cottage Garden. After rounding through the roses and taking the long walk down to the Laurel Tunnel, she made a direct route to her favorite place. Moving through the wildflower meadow and into the Sundial Garden, she found it. This lovely, large, old bench that sat right in the middle of a blanket of delphinium; her own personal sanctuary.

This was as close to her father as she could get—and the very fact that it was here, nestled into Charles' property, made it that much more poignant. Both of her fathers surrounded her as she took her seat on the bench, took a deep breath and let it out.

This was exactly what she had envisioned when she had left London that morning. She had known Harry would be shocked, that he might take it poorly, but she needed this. This space, this air, this particular set of surroundings. This was where she could clear her mind of all the chaos that Cassandra had injected into their lives and get back to the core of it all.

Her and Harry.

"Okay Forrester," she took a deep breath. "What the hell is going on?"

Looking out at all the beauty that was laid before her, she took deep breath after deep breath and she let it all begin to settle; let it all begin to work out.

Cassandra had made some serious accusations; laying claim to so much more than a kiss. She had set up a relationship; an intimacy full of secrets and understandings. Maddie had heard clients or friends who had been cheated on say that the emotional stuff had been so much harder to take than the physical. And though deep in her heart, she knew that Harry hadn't done the things he was being accused of—couldn't have done the things he was being accused of—she had felt a sharper kick to the gut at the idea of him telling Cassandra all those details than she had about this one wayward kiss Harry had spoken of.

It had hurt to hear the things Cassandra had said, it had killed her to sit with the uncertainty as she had waited for him to come home. But as mad as she had been at him, as mad as she still was about his omission, she believed him.

Sighing, her head tipped up to the sky, her eyes scanning over the clouds, her lungs drawing in deep breaths. She believed him. With a huff of a chuckle, she looked out over the land. Then what was she doing here? Why had she left?

Because her heart ached. He had still kept something from her, something big, something that had probably fueled this drive in Cassandra to call her up and say the things she said. And she was confused. Though she believed Harry, believed that he hadn't told Cassandra any of those things about them, her mind was having a hard time reconciling it all.

How else would she have known?
Maddie didn't know. And that left her sad and confused—that's why she was there, to handle those feelings, to sort that out.

"And you're going to do that alone?" She asked herself; amused at the situation. "Ah, Maddie..."

She knew better than that, or at least she had. She had spent the night before in their bed alone; her mind working it over and over again. She had battled and battled with herself; was she being naïve by trusting his word? She really didn't think so. But she had known so many people who had ignored blatant evidence in front of them. Did she think that what Cassandra had given her was that? No. But she hated not having an answer; wondered if she ever really would.

She had thought that by leaving the city, by getting out into the middle of nowhere with nothing to cloud her thoughts, she might be able to get down to the basics of it all. So she settled into her seat, looked out at the world that surrounded her and did just that.

It was well into the afternoon before Maddie finally moved. Stretching her arms up over her head and letting out a wide yawn, she made her way back to the house; going the long way through The Woodland Garden, to The Stumpery, past the Temples and over to the Tree House. The sun was beginning to fade into the horizon and her stomach was making her hunger abundantly clear. But first she wanted to do this. She climbed the rungs and moved onto the platform of the treehouse; sitting down and leaning back against the wall. Sighing, she looked out around her and smiled.

"Hey there baby..." Her hand ran over her stomach. "This is where your daddy used to play when he was little..." Maddie's smile pulled higher. "And it's where we ended up on one of our very first dates..." She sighed and rubbed her belly. "And someday you're going to come out here and run in the flowers and play in the house and you're going to be just...surrounded by your grandfathers."

Almost as if it were responding, her stomach growled and Maddie laughed.

"Okay, okay...." She groaned as she moved to her feet, as she climbed out of the house. "We'll get some food little one."

Already feeling leaps and bounds better than she had the night before, or even that morning, she made her way back to the house in search of food and something to drink; and the beautiful library she loved so much.

And that's where she was when her phone rang. Fed and satisfied, she was curled up on a couch with a leather-bound book, when the phone in her pocket sounded out, pulling her from her make-believe world.

When she saw his name on the screen, her heart skipped in her chest; nervous and excited. With a light roll of her eyes, she took a breath, swiped her finger across the screen and answered.

"Hello."

"Hello," on the other end of the line, he was pacing the length of their living room with sweaty palms and hair that was twisted and pulled in every direction as he had debated this exact decision. "You uh...you made it okay?"
"I did," Maddie nodded, putting her finger in the pages and closing the book in her lap. "I've been here for a while now."

"Reading all the books in the library?" Harry joked, not knowing just how close to the truth he was.

"Just one," she smiled, loving so much how easy this was—even after the last twenty-four hours. "I went for a long walk, sat in the delphinium."

"Good," he nodded, biting at his fingernails as he took a breath and closed his eyes. "Maddie, there's something I need to tell you."

As her heart jumped up into her throat, she sat up straight; every cell in her body standing on alert. "Harry," she warned, not sure she could take another hit from him.

"It's nothing...bad," he shook his head, eyes cast to the floor as his hand rubbed at the back of his neck. "I mean, it's nothing that I..."

"Why don't you just tell me," Maddie's voice was short as she cut in; not wanting to beat around the bush anymore.

"Cassandra's called me," his shoulders stressed as he said the words. "I haven't answered once but she's called."

"What?" Maddie's forehead scrunched as she moved on the couch. "She's called you?"

"Seven times," Harry exhaled, pinching his eyes shut as he finished up. "And she's sent a handful of texts."

"And what exactly does she want?" Maddie could feel the venom rise in her throat, the hair on her arms standing.

"I don't know," Harry shook his head. "I haven't spoken to her or answered a text. I didn't want to..." He sighed. "She wants to talk to me. I haven't responded to her at all but...I thought you should know. I thought you would want to know."

"I..." Maddie swallowed back the lump in her throat. In truth, she didn't want to know. She didn't want any of this settling into her mind. But he was trying to be completely honest with her; laying it out in front of her—just as they both knew he should have with the kiss. "Thank you," Maddie whispered. "Thank you for telling me."

"Yeah," Harry let out a breath, turning his eyes upward. "Maddie...I'm so sorry about this."

"I know," she nodded, rising to her feet and leaving her book behind; her peacefulness momentarily thrown by this new revelation. "I know you are. I...this isn't your fault. You don't need to be sorry about this."

"Okay," he chuckled in a humorless puff. "But for everything else..."

"Yeah," she moved to the windows and looked out. "I know."

"Are you okay?" He had to ask; had to put voice to his concern.
"No," she shook her head, light tears springing to her eyes. "I mean...yes but...God Harry..." She sucked in a breath. "I keep trying to sort out my feelings, to understand how I can be mad about you not telling me about Monday and still believe you about everything else...."

"You believe me?" His voice was soft and quiet and so vulnerable that it made Maddie's emotions swirl.

"I..." She blinked and took a deep breath. "Over this woman who means nothing to me? Yes...I believe you."

On the other end of the phone, Harry halted; the sudden rush of joy and relief flooding his systems and shutting them down. His hand pressed to his chest over his heart and he had to fight tears. "I don't know what to say," he whispered.

"I don't either," Maddie shook her head; her mind moving on to this new information as the feelings of upset and anger drifted back in. "I don't either." The way her voice wavered, drew Harry back from euphoria to this moment and he cleared his throat.

"Is there anything I can do? Anything you need from me?"

"No," she smiled at his offer; small and sweet. "But I think I'm going to go now. I'm going to...take a hot bath and have some tea and try to get some sleep."

"Yeah," Harry nodded.

"Thank you for calling Harry."

"Thank you for letting me," he didn't want to let her go, wanted to listen to her talk or breathe for the rest of the night.

"You'll call tomorrow?" She lifted her eyebrows; abandoning her book in the library as she moved down the hall to their room.

"I will," he loved that she asked.

"Goodnight Harry."

"Goodnight Maddie," he bit his lip. "I love you."

"I love you too," she answered; her eyes shining and her chest tight. And with a click he was gone.

But the tension and the stress and...Cassandra—they were not gone. They were very much present and very much at the front of her mind. Even as she slipped into the hot tub, even as she closed her eyes and tried to clear her brain; they were still there, eating at her emotions.

That night Maddie's body had won out over her brain. Despite the scenarios and words that were still running rampant through her mind, her body needed sleep. She had found that since she had started growing a baby, her body would at times simply take over; take whatever it needed in order to provide for the creation and sustainment of this new life. And this night, her body needed
sleep. So not long after her hot bath, not long after her cup of tea, she was sound asleep in her bed; the fresh air drifting in the open window.

She slept in that morning; a few hours later than normal. And when she finally woke, she felt much better. She had a light breakfast and went for a walk around the grounds, taking in the things she had missed the day before. She was trying to gain back the peace of mind she had felt the night before. And to some extent she had. Talking to Harry had done wonders for her; hearing his voice, connecting with him—even over the phone. It had eased the tension she carried. It had helped her take another step forward. And even though she knew that being at Highgrove was the best thing for her, that the air and the space and the surroundings would center her faster than anything else—she missed him.

Feeling a little like she needed something else to focus on for a moment, she decided to head into town. Tetbury had wonderful little shops with great antique finds and delicious places to stop and eat. Because she had a Christening gift to find, it felt more purposeful and less indulgent; less of a detour.

But it was on this errand trip that it really hit home; running from the facts, from the thoughts in her mind was no way to resolve this. And being alone—no matter how cathartic it was proving to be—was no way for her to overcome this bump in the road of her marriage. She needed Harry for that. And never was that more clear than when she found the book.

It was after she had stopped off at a few main spots, after she had enjoyed a light lunch, Maddie had sought out some of her favorite spots in search of a gift for Buckie. It wasn't an easy task; a Bible seemed as though it would be repetitive, a child sized flask was way past inappropriate. But eventually she ended up in the perfect little shop; peering into a case enclosing very early editions of a few prized novels—including a very old copy of Winnie-The-Pooh. Something about its weathered appearance drew her in.

"May I take a look at this please?" She had asked the shopkeeper; a warm, white-haired, older woman who reminded her much of her own grandmother.

"Of course dear," she had nodded, giving Maddie that extra glance that told Maddie she was pretty sure she knew who she was but wasn't going to say anything.

Maddie took the book, bound in beautiful leather, and opened it up; her fingers reverent as they moved through the pages. Scanning the words, her lips moved as she read the quotes to herself; remembering exactly why she had always loved this story.

And that's when it happened.

She turned a page, read a line and nearly lost it.

Maybe it was the pregnancy—she would blame that for as long as she could—maybe it was her lack of sleep, or her oversleeping. Maybe it was the book in her hands, after having been passed through so many before her. Or maybe it was the knowledge that this would be read by two people she loved to somebody so very dear to her. Or maybe it was the idea that someday she could read this story to her own child. Maybe it was the stress from the last couple of days or maybe, just maybe, it was the fact that she was away from Harry at a time when all she wanted was to be with Harry.

She didn't know.
But right there in that beautiful shop in Tetbury, tears pushed past her eyes and slid down her cheeks; even as she smiled, even as she rolled her eyes. The emotions were coming, no matter what she did. So she wiped at her cheeks and took a deep breath and asked the lovely older woman to pack it up. She would take it.

She made one more stop that afternoon, wanting to find a teddy bear to go along with the book, and then she was heading back to Highgrove.

By the time she had arrived, the tears had subsided but the emotions had not. The words she had read had struck something inside of her; something at the core. Even after she had purchased the book and stowed it away, even after the short drive—all she could think about were the words she read, the emotions they evoked, and...Harry.

She missed him.

It was as plain and as simple as that.

He was her husband, the father of the baby she was growing and as much as she needed the fresh air to help settle her mind, she needed him to help mend it all. So she dropped her bags in the entryway and reached into her purse. Enough was enough.

Maddie stared at the phone for a moment; her eyes blinking as her heart thumped in her chest. But it really only took her half a second before she decided. Chuckling at herself, at the unexplained and unwarranted nervousness, she swiped her finger across the screen and dialed. She barely had the phone pressed to her ear before he answered.

"Maddie," he sounded a bit breathless.

"Hi," she smiled at his voice.

"Hi." She could tell he was smiling and she loved that she knew such things. "How are you? Is everything okay?"

"It is," she sighed as she thought back to the shop, to the book. "I went shopping today in Tetbury."

"Oh?"

"Mmm," she nodded. "I had soup and pudding at The Potting Shed," her smile pulled higher just thinking about it; her hand rubbing over her stomach. "And then I took in some of the shops."

"Sounds like a lovely afternoon," Harry would listen to her tales of her day as long as she wanted to keep talking.

"It was," she nodded, beginning to walk the length of the kitchen. "I arranged for a local florist to send Agatha Taylor some flowers."

"Sorry, Agatha Taylor?" Harry asked, recognizing the name but unable to place it.

"They had to move The Well Child Awards this year so that she could have treatment and recover...."

"Ah yes," he nodded as it all clicked together in his mind. "I remember."
"I signed your name," she stopped at the sink, looking out the window at the land that surrounded her. "I hope that's okay."

"Of course it is."

"I found a Christening gift for Buckie..." She felt her emotions swirling again as she remembered.

"You did?" He was relaxing into their conversation; into the normalcy of it.

"An old edition of Winnie The Pooh," she bit at her lip as she pulled in a breath. "It's old and beautifully bound. I found a bear to go along with it..."

"Yeah?" He breathed; waiting for her to continue, listening to her breath—recognizing the thoughtful pause.

"Hey Harry..." She grew soft and quiet as she looked down at her shoes.

"Yes?"

She inhaled and sighed and in a voice that was sweet and vulnerable, she made his heart skip. "Harry...I miss you."

The line went silent for a moment and Harry wondered if she could hear his heart pounding in his chest. He didn't know what to say, what to... "I can be there in two hours." The words slipped from his lips before he could stop them. "I'm sorry. I..."

"Okay," she looked back up through the window.

"Okay?" His voice jumped high in his throat. "You mean..."

"I mean...we should talk, right? We should do this together?" She smiled. "And there's nobody here. It's lovely weather; fresh breeze and...beautiful."

"Are you saying..."

"You should come up." She nodded. "If you want to I mean. You don't have..."

"I'm on my way," he interrupted as his feet began to move up the stairs to their room. "I'll pack and head out within ten minutes."

And she thought about protesting, thought about suggesting he wait till morning, thought about reminding him that she would be coming back to London the next day for the Christening the day after and they could talk then.

She thought about it. But the idea of him being there with her, of his voice and his smile and his warmth and...him—she wanted that so very much. Even if they were fighting, even if it wasn't over.

"Okay," Maddie exhaled, feeling the nervous excitement perk to life. "I'll make something for dinner."

"It'll be like...eight when I get there."
"Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Are you planning on eating before you leave?"

"No," he shook his head vigorously. Do anything other than what was absolutely necessary before he left? Fuck no.

"Then you'll be hungry when you get here."

"Yeah..." He breathed; his heart thumping wildly in his chest. "Are you sure Maddie? You wanted space and air and..."

"I would love it if you were here," she cut him off. "The only way we get through this together is to work through it...together. I..." She swallowed. "I shouldn't have left. I should have stayed..."

"No," he shook his head. "I understood. I understand. You needed..."

"You," she cut in again; a nervous smile on her lips. "I need you."

Harry took in a deep breath and let it out, trying to keep his excitement from going so far overboard it rendered him motionless. "I am on my way."

To Be Continued...
Maddie was sitting in the garden when she heard them arrive. The crunch of the gravel along the drive pulled her eyes from the stars, towards the sound.

"That's odd..." She glanced down at her watch and rose from her spot on the bench. As she left the garden and rounded the path, she caught sight of the Aston Martin parked right in front of the doorway; Harry's detail unloading from the black SUV that had followed behind.

She felt instantly lighter; happier as she took a step towards them. "I'm over here..." The two POs who came with him, turned to look; Jim and Brad.

"Good Evening Ma'am," Jim nodded to her. "He is already inside."

"Sure," Maddie nodded with a small smile. "I would imagine he'll end up out here eventually."

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded again. Offering a wave to Brad who was continuing on inside, Jim smoothed down his jacket and made his way over to Maddie.

"Good Evening Jim," Maddie watched as he walked up to her, a little surprised. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded. "I was wondering if it would be okay if I spoke to you about something for just a moment?"

Maddie blinked and nodded, waving her hand towards the garden. "Of course. What's on your mind?"

"I want you to know that my line of work requires the utmost discretion and privacy," he began to speak in low tones, moving to stand with her on the path in the garden.

"Sure."

"And betraying the trust of my protectee is simply something I would never do; it would put him or her in harm's way, it would make my job more difficult..." He cleared his throat and took a breath and Maddie couldn't help the way her curiosity peaked as he spoke. "So he doesn't know what I'm about to say, but there's something I think is important for you to know."

"Oh?" Her voice came out in a breath; her mind moving into alert mode.

"What happened on Monday night, between The Duke and Ms. Whitworth..." His eyes leveled with hers. "I saw the entire thing."

"Jim..." Maddie shook her head; not wanting to put anyone else into this place where she and Harry were.

"It was completely unsolicited, Ma'am," he continued on anyway. "Unprovoked, unwanted and very quickly, and harshly, rebuffed."

"You don't have to..."
"I know I don't," he agreed quickly. "And I probably shouldn't and maybe under normal circumstances I wouldn't."

"Normal circumstances?" Her forehead wrinkled in confusion.

"There's a difference between a matter of 'personal life' and a matter of 'security'," he explained with ease, with no guilt or issue with what he was saying. "And this, Ms. Whitworth, she's a matter of security. We were keeping a light eye on her before but after the incident on Monday and then with all of the phone calls..." He took a breath and stood a little taller; getting back to business. "I just wanted you to know; I thought you should know. We're monitoring her closely Ma'am," his smile slipped into soft for just a moment. "And this was, in no way, a mutual thing."

"Well..." Maddie took a breath; stunned that he had told her such things, that he had thought to tell her such things. "Thank you Jim."

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded and took a step backward; back towards his job, his duty.

"And you know..." She smiled at him. "He told me the same thing...and I believed him."

"Very well then," he nodded again.

"Thank you for looking out for him, Jim."

"Of course," he smiled in return and then, with one final small nod, he excused himself to return to the house.

Maddie watched him walk away from her, her mind drifting through his words as her eyes settled on her husband's car. He loved driving that car; and she loved watching him drive it. She felt her cheeks warm just a bit as she shook her head; never really able to escape the way her blood pulsed at the thought of him.

With her thoughts stuck somewhere else, somewhere a bit lustful, she moved back into the garden; her smile wide and loose as she walked through the delphinium. And then she heard it; him.

The light shuffle of feet, the subtle clearing of his throat; wanting to draw her attention but not wanting to disturb her. Maddie's eyes snapped up in his direction the second she heard it and her heart jumped into her throat. Damn it, she thought. Even when she was mad, even after the days they had just had, when she saw him, when she saw those eyes and that hair and the broad set of his shoulders—she still felt it.

"Hey," her lips curled up into a smile.

"Hey," he answered; his heart beating crazily in his chest; nervous and excited all at once. "I should have guessed you would be out here..." His hand waved around as he took in a breath and took a tentative step forward.

"Yeah," she sighed. "And you..." She nodded her head towards the car out front. "You're nearly twenty minutes early. Did you fly here?"

"Nearly," he chuckled, moving through the path towards her. "The car," he explained. "It was eager to be let out."

"Sure," Maddie laughed lightly, her body getting warmer and warmer with every step he took.
"And you?"

"You said you wanted me here," he shrugged as he stepped up to her. "Did you think I was going to make a scenic drive out of it?"

"No," she shook her head; slightly breathless. "I suppose not."

"I suppose not," he repeated, smiling down at her as he stopped. Though she had asked for him to come, though she appeared happy to see him, the last time they were together she had demanded more than once that he keep his hands to himself. So that's exactly what he was going to do until told otherwise.

"Fair enough," she nodded; unsure herself as to how to greet him. "Dinner isn't quite ready yet."

"That's okay," Harry smiled. "How much time do we have?"

"About twenty five minutes," she looked down at her watch.

"Perfect," he let out a breath. "There's something I wanted to show you...would that be okay?"

"Sure," Maddie nodded.

"Come back to the house with me?" He lifted his eyebrows, nodding back towards the direction from which he had come.

"Oh-kay..." Though she wanted to stay outside, in the breeze and the starlight, she was more interested in this, so she agreed.

Harry smiled and turned, keeping a slow pace as they walked back inside. He looked down at her as she fell in step with him, his eyes scanning over her; taking her in. "How are you doing? Are you feeling okay?"

"I am," Maddie smiled, her hand rubbing over her little bump. "The baby is great. I think he enjoys the fresh air."

"I'm sure he does," Harry chuckled, reaching out to open the door for her.

"The food certainly hasn't hurt," Maddie grinned as she slipped past him into the house. It was warm and quiet inside; the staff and protection having drifted off.

"Speaking of food," Harry shut the door behind them. "Whatever you're cooking smells wonderful."

"Yeah well, don't get too excited. It's a new recipe from your father's chef...we'll see how it turns out." She turned to face him there in the entryway. "Where are we going?"

"To my father's office," he pointed just down a hallway, nodding for her to lead the way. And she did. With a quizzical look on her face, she moved down the hall and into the office. Harry's work bag and his laptop were sitting out on the long table on the far end. "Right over here..." He gestured and she followed.

"What's this?" Maddie looked down at the papers he had sitting on the table next to the laptop.
"This..." Harry pressed a finger to the pile. "This is a print out of my phone records for the last six months..."

"Harry," her voice grew stern as she shook her head.

"And this...." He leaned over and clicked on his laptop. "These are my email accounts. I thought maybe..."

"No," Maddie shook her head more forcibly; moving away from him, from the table. "I don't want to do this."

"Maddie..."

"No Harry," she turned to face him; her face twisted up, her eyes darker. "I don't want to read through all of this. I don't want to look at your phone records or your email accounts or....none of it." She shook her head and moved towards him. "I believe you. I believe you Harry..." And then she softened; her eyes welling up. "Doing this...looking over the last six months...it's only going to make me...sick."

"But I want you to know that you're not being foolish for..."

"I already know that," she blinked. "I trust you." She laughed as she said it; her mind feeling a bit chaotic. "I trust you. And if you say there was no relationship, there was no communication...."

"There was nothing," he held his hands up wide and empty. "Absolutely nothing."

"Then I believe you."

"I..." He shook his head as he exhaled; long and slow. His hands running through his hair as he tried to grasp it all. "I don't know what to say to that."

Maddie nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat as she moved closer; stepping into the bubble that had been around him, the personal space they had both kept. Her eyes welled up as she reached out and touched him; her hand running up and down his bicep. Harry's eyes flashed wide and his breath stopped. "Listen...I owe you an apology..." She was soft and quiet and sweet as she looked to him.

"Hold on," he shook his head, his brain just a bit slow as it tried to gain control of his heart. "You owe me nothing."

"I should have given you a chance to explain before I jumped," she continued on. "She just...she knew enough to get my blood boiling and to put a tiny bit of doubt there and it just...exploded. Or unraveled as the case may be."

"Maddie," he turned pleading eyes to her, wanting to tell her how ridiculous it was for her to be apologizing in this moment.

"I should have given you the benefit of the doubt first," she nodded, her hand sliding down his arm. "I should have asked you instead of yelling..." She swallowed and took a deep breath. "That would have been the right thing to do. But I reacted and I jumped. And I'm sorry for that..."

"But..." He hated that she was apologizing to him right now.
"But," she echoed, swinging her eyes to his. "But when you made a decision not to tell me about what happened Monday night...you put a dent in us, Harry." And his heart thudded in his chest.

"I know." His voice was low and deep and solemn as he nodded. "I know I did."

"And when I came out here, I really just came so I could separate the two, you know? So that I could be mad at you about Monday but NOT let that impact my trust in you about everything else."

"I don't know how it couldn't," he mumbled; mad at himself.

"It did," she sighed. "That morning it did. That day it did. But it doesn't anymore..." She took a deep breath. "I spent a day walking around the grounds, another in Tetbury...I can separate the two. I have separated the two."

"What can I do?" His eyes softened. "What do you want me to do about either of these then? If you don't want to see this stuff than..."

"I don't want to see that stuff," she shook her head quickly. "I never want to see this stuff."

"Then what?" His eyebrows lifted. "What do I..."

"We," she cut in, squeezing his arm before dropping her hand. "What do we do..."

"What do we do first?" Harry asked. "You told me on the phone that we needed to talk, that we needed to be together to do this and I'm here and I'm yours and I'm ready to do whatever you want me to do so that we can start moving closer to...undented," they both smiled at his choice of words. "So tell me. What do we handle first?"

Maddie took a minute, a moment to think it over, before she took a deep, cleansing breath and smiled. "Dinner. We eat dinner first."

"Dinner?" Harry's lips curved up. "You want to eat dinner first?"

"Mmm," she nodded and took a step towards the door, gesturing for him to follow. "And so does your baby. Come on Harry. Let's eat. We'll talk. I promise...we'll talk. But I'm hungry."

"Okay, okay," he laughed, waving his hand; his heart still cautious but beginning to relax. "Let's get you two some food."

And just like that, they were off to the kitchen, leaving his stack of phone records and open email accounts behind.

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"Okay..." Maddie wiped her hands on her napkin and sat back in her chair, looking across their mostly eaten dinner to her husband; putting the small talk aside. "Do you have any ideas?"

"About?" Harry glanced up at her as he took another bite.

"How..." Maddie shook her head as her eyes looking at her drink for a moment. "How she knew all of that stuff?"
"Ah," Harry blew out a breath as the mood shifted around them. He put down his fork and sat up in his chair. "Well," he wiped his face with his napkin and leaned in, watching her closely as he spoke. "I've been thinking about it over and over and over and over and I swear to you, the only person outside of the family who knows any of that—the accident, the fight—the only person I've told any of that, is Bishop."

"But Bishop would never..." Maddie shook her head.

"No," Harry agreed. "He wouldn't. In fact, I would believe that I told her before I would believe that he told her."

"I wouldn't go that far," Maddie laughed lightly. "But I do get your point. Did the two of you talk about it on Monday night?"

"We did," Harry nodded, his eyes narrowing as he thought it all out again. "But God, Maddie, we were off in his office with the door shut and...it wasn't like I was complaining or...I was happy; delirious. I was going on and on about how perfect my life was...that we had this bump in the road when we were trying and trying and how we couldn't. I told him it all worked out because after I came home, after we got past the argument, you were pregnant right away. It wasn't at all like I was listing issues we had, it was me telling him just how right it was." Harry sucked in a breath and looked away from her for a moment; gathering his thoughts, bringing in his emotions. "How right it is."

"Do you think she heard you?" Her voice was quiet as she let his words settle inside of her.

"I don't know," he shook his head, turning his eyes back to hers. "I really don't. I mean, that's the only option that makes sense; that's the only scenario that I can think of where she would have even had access to that kind of information...but it..." He chuckled bitterly as he looked down at his hands and then back up to her. "It means she had to have had her ear pressed to the door or, I don't know, have been hiding in Bishop's closet or something that makes it all so much more sinister."

"More sinister than calling your pregnant wife and confessing to a made-up affair?" Maddie offered.

"No," Harry met her eyes and shook his head. "Not more sinister than that."

"Yeah..." Maddie let the silence fall over them for a minute; letting it sit. Her fingers twisted at her napkin as she looked up at him; thoughtful and reflective. "You know what's the really horrible part of it all?"

"That I haven't slept for two nights?" Harry tossed out before he thought. "That I watched my wife walk out the door not knowing when I would see her again? That it's put doubt into your mind? That you spent any time at all thinking she was telling the truth..." He sucked in a breath and shook his head; upset at how this had all happened, at his own part in it as well. "That you cried for..." His voice cracked and he turned away from her then, his hand running back into his hair as he took a second, took a breath. "That's not what you were going to say, was it?"

"No," she shook her head, biting at her lip as her eyes welled up. "No...but you're right. All of those things were the really horrible part..." She reached across the table then, her hand resting on his arm as his eyes flashed wide. "I'm sorry Harry."

"Don't apologize to me for this Maddie," he shook his head, letting his hand rest over hers. "I
mean it. Not one single part of this is your fault and if you keep apologizing..." He let off, not sure exactly what he wanted to say.

"I'm still sorry it's happening," her thumb stroked at his skin, bared from his rolled up sleeves.

"I am too," he nodded, his fingers running over her hand; his whole body warmed at her touch. "And..." He nodded to her, wondering what she was going to say before he went off on his own little rant.

"And..." She shook her head slightly, thinking she should just let it go, but then she looked in his eyes and she shrugged. "And we may never really know how...or why or..." She let out a huff of a laugh.

"Yeah," he nodded, his fingers tightening over hers. "Yeah. I know." He took a deep breath and shrugged. "Though. If you wanted...I'm sure we could get Jim to drag her in and..."

"No," Maddie snickered. "Though I love the fantasy," she sighed. "That's not how we're going to do this."

"Fair enough," Harry nodded his agreement, his expression softening just a bit. "Let me know if you change your mind?"

"I will," she inhaled a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "But I think we're going to just have to...let it sit."

"Okay," Harry nodded, his jaw tightening as he agreed; whatever she wanted was what he was going to do.

"Though..." Maddie squeezed his arm. "If I ever get the chance to take her out, you should know I'm going to do it."

"Ha!" Harry let loose just a bit.

"I mean it. Warn your father. And the family attorneys."

"I will," he smiled across the table to her; happy to see her smiling back. And then just as quickly as his smile had taken over his lips, a sadness took over his eyes and his emotions took over his heart. "I'm so sorry Maddie," his voice had a waver to it; his eyes wide and sincere.

"Harry..."

"Not for this," he shook his head. "I'm talking about...wow..." He sniffed and took a second to get his breath back. "I should have told you what happened on Monday." Maddie opened her mouth to speak, but Harry continued. "I should have told you. I should have and I think there were points all week where I was going to tell you but...I don't know." He shook his head again. "I really didn't want to hurt you. I didn't want to put a black mark on our amazing week..." He laughed; a low, bitter sound at the irony of it all. "I know it's wrong. I know that I messed up and God...when you flipped the scenario, when you asked me how it would feel if some man kissed you and..."

His eyes grew dark as his muscles tensed. "I'm sorry I made you feel that way Maddie. That's on me. Even though she kissed me, even though it ended instantly...the dent in us...that's all me. And I am so, so deeply sorry for that."

"I know you are," she whispered, seeing how this sat with him; his tensed shoulders, his sad eyes
that were just this close to tears, the way it seemed as though he was holding himself back from hugging her tight and never letting go. "Harry..."

"I'm so sorry Maddie," his voice cracked and his head dropped down; pulling her hand to his lips. "I swear to you that it will never happen again..."

"I know that," she took a breath, trying to control her own emotions that were swirling inside of her chest.

"And I'll do whatever it takes to make this up to you, to us...to fix this..."

"I know," she whispered.

"And I swear to God..." His lips kissed her hand again before he sat up to look at her, pulling her hand to his heart. "I'll kill anyone who tries to come between us like this again."

"Maybe..." Maddie pressed her palm to his chest, smiling sweetly. "Maybe we don't have to go to such extremes." She could feel his heart, his heat underneath her hand. "Just...just don't keep things from me anymore..." Her eyes locked with his and he nodded. "And when something happens, tell me, bring me in...don't let somebody else know more than me." She smiled. "Does that sound fair?"

"Beyond fair," he nodded, his eyes still sad; his heart rebounding at her grace and her smile. And then he saw her yawn; her mouth twisting and her arms stretching and he found her to be unbelievably adorable. "You're tired."

"I haven't slept well the last two nights either," she blinked as her body settled. "Are we going to be okay?"

"Yes," his answer was quick, reflexive; certain. "Do you think we're going to be okay?"

"Absolutely," she nodded without thought; her mouth opening for another yawn. "Goodness..." She laughed. "I'm sorry. I...ha...I think your child is ready for bed."

"Well then we should probably time out here for the night. Here..." Harry smiled, dropping her hand to reach for their dishes; on his feet and moving to set them in the sink. Maddie waited in the doorway for him, moving towards the stairs as he turned off the light and followed along.

They moved slowly through the house; taking the stairs in that half-asleep state they were wading through. They were quiet and thoughtful and much more at peace than either of them had been for days.

"Hey Harry..." Maddie stopped as they reached the top of the stairs, turning to look at him. "Thank you for coming out."

"Of course," Harry nodded; grateful she had asked. "Any time, you know that."

"Okay," she smiled.

"Okay," he mirrored her grin. "I'll see you in the morning then. Maybe we can go to town for breakfast or I don't know...whatever you want..." He took a step towards the room he had put his stuff in just down the hall from hers. "Good night Maddie. Sleep well."
"Good night..." Maddie watched him for a beat, her eyes narrowed as he moved away from her and then, with no real thought, no real say in the matter, she called out to him. "Hey Harry?"

"Yeah?" He turned back around, his fingers rubbing at the back of his neck, his features softened by the dim light.

And Maddie felt nervous and silly and slightly unnerved as her head cocked to the side, nodding towards her room. "Stay with me?" Her eyebrows lifted and her lip pulled into her teeth and just over ten feet away from her, her husband was floored by the mere idea that she thought he might say no.

Without even looking back to the room, without a thought to any of his things he might need—pajamas, a toothbrush—he took a deep breath and exhaled. "Absolutely."

And he closed the distance between them.

Maddie wasn't sure what amused her more, his nervousness or hers. They laid together in the bed, the moon dusting a soft light over the tip tops of the things in their room and neither of them moved. With her head nestled into her pillow, her eyes were trained on the ceiling and she knew without looking that his were doing the same. She chuckled softly at how silly it felt; laying apart, as though an imaginary line had been drawn between them—married and expecting. But not touching. As if on cue, the baby inside of her fluttered through her stomach.

"Oh!" Maddie smiled in surprise, her hand moving over her stomach.

"You okay?" With his head laying in his hands, he turned his eyes to her.

"Yeah," Maddie nodded, turning her own head to smile at him. "Your child has perfect timing; time for bed and...wide awake..."

"He's moving?" Harry's head lifted up just a bit as he turned to look at her more solidly.

"He is," she nodded, her grin pulling higher as she watched his eyes; watched his reaction to anything baby. He was so happy to be becoming a father. "You know...you haven't touched my belly once since you've been here." Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Why is that?"

"Why?" Harry chuckled, his eyebrows lifting in amusement. "Because the last time I saw you, you screamed at me to keep my hands off of you."

"Ah yes," Maddie sighed, stopping her mind from going backwards at all as she reached out and grabbed his wrist. Pulling one of his hands out from under his head, she drew it straight to her and pressed his hand to her stomach. And she watched his entire face light up there in that dark room as his fingers stretched out and curved around her small bump. "God Captain, I can't wait for you to be able to feel this..." She was happy; warm and light and happy.

And Harry was struggling with all of the emotions that her words, her actions, were brewing up inside of him. "Maddie..." His voice was low and soft. "You called me Captain."

"I did," she turned sweet eyes on him, her hand sliding down over his. With honesty and love and a feeling of letting go, she sighed. "I missed you."
"Oh God," he exhaled. "I missed you too." His hand moved over her stomach, taking in the roundness, checking for anything new. "You know..." He turned his body then, laying on his side to face her, moving his other hand to her stomach as he tucked the other closer to his head. "You never told me what made you decide to call."

"Well," Maddie's cheeks flushed slightly as she remembered; her heart warming. "It was the book."

"The book?" Harry's forehead scrunched up in confusion

Maddie took in a breath and let it out, trying not to feel silly for what she was about to tell him. Holding his hand to her, she turned to face him. "The Winnie-the-Pooh book I bought for Buckie."

"Are you going to elaborate on that or..." He chuckled lightly, not understanding.

Maddie laughed and nodded. "Don't make fun."

"Oh I swear it," he held up his free hand, beyond happy to have her smiling at him, laughing with him; there.

"There's this passage when Piglet walks up to Pooh and says 'Pooh?' and he says 'Yes, Piglet?' and Piglet takes his hand and says 'Nothing. I just wanted to be sure of you..." Maddie's voice cracked as her tears returned. "And that's when I started crying."

"Aw Maddie..."

"I was standing in this bookstore and the tears just...came," she laughed and rolled her eyes. "I'm sure it's because I'm pregnant and hormonal and we've just..." She sighed and wiped at her cheeks, her wide, wet eyes looking into his. "I just wanted to be sure of you again..."

"Oh Maddie, Maddie..." His hands moved to her cheeks then, cupping her face and smudging back tears, even as his own eyes filled up. "You can be sure of me. You can. I swear. You can be sure of..."

"I know," she nodded, her hands moving up to his arms as she smiled through her tears. "I know I can. I just need you here. I hated being without you."

"Baby I'm so sorry that..."

"Stop," she shook her head, her fingers moving to his lips. "Stop apologizing. Just..." Her eyes searched his for a moment and then she moved, leaning in to kiss him.

And her lips answered the prayers he didn't know his were making.

His hands left her cheeks as his entire body reacted in surprise when she moved in closer, her arms wrapping around his neck as she leaned into him; her lips pressing to his over and over and over again.

And then finally he gained control of his mind, got a handle on his pounding heart and realized what was happening around him—within him.

And he moved to her
He was kissing her back. He was pulling her in. He was hugging her tight. He was taking in her
sighs and her smile. He was moving his hands over the curves of her body as she took back the
edges of his. He was thankful for her mercy, for her understanding, for her absolute trust in him.

He was letting her pull his shirt over his head, asking silent permission with tentative fingers to do
the same with hers. And when she giggled and did it for him, he was swearing to himself, to God
that he would die before he let something come between them again.

She wanted to be sure of him again; of them.

And that night, when they pushed pause on what was happening around them, when they
resigned themselves to let go of the unknown at least for the moment...when she let him back into
her bed, back into her arms...when they wiped each others’ tears, when they sighed and laughed
and moaned...when they made love, she was sure.

She had been—before, during, since—and this was how they began to move forward. It wasn’t
exactly over and they weren’t exactly sure what would happen next. But this night they were
loving each other and finally, finally sleeping.
Chapter 161

The rain that pattered against the windows of Highgrove, that drenched the grounds surrounding, lulled Harry from slumber just before the sun tipped over the horizon, long before his wife stirred in his arms. Looking across the short space in the bed between them, taking in her soft profile, the way her steady breathing paired with the rain, he let out a bit of the breath he had been holding. She was deep in that peaceful sort of sleep that brought about the softest sort of snore from her.

The smile that curled at his lips was soft and easy and only the slightest bit sad as his mind flitted to the last few days of their marriage. With a deep breath he rolled onto his back, his eyes peering up at the ceiling. He still felt it—the anxiety, the worry, the hurt that had been passed between them. He still felt it in his chest; tight and full. Scrubbing a hand up over his face, he wondered when and how it would go away. She had forgiven him. She had taken him at his word, had refused to entertain the idea that she should 'check' or verify what he had sworn to her. And she had brought him back into her bed; into her arms.

Emotions swirled in his chest as he thought of the night before; of the way she had pulled his hand to her rounding stomach, the way she had pulled his lips to hers. God, he thought, am I really supposed to be so lucky. His eyes shifted to the side, looking out the window as the sun began to stroke light against the dark sky. The rain wasn't letting up, in fact it looked to be settling in for the day.

And Harry wasn't going back to sleep. He was wide awake; his mind diving deeper into this mess of a mystery he was facing. Maybe Maddie had forgiven him, maybe she had found some sort of serene way to be at peace with where things sat. But he wasn't finding it quite as easy. The lump in his throat, the pressure in his chest, they weren't fading quite as fast.

Carefully, quietly, he pulled the blankets back and slipped from their bed. Tucking the covers back around her, pausing to take in her slight smile and her steady breathe, he pulled on his pants from the night before. Finding a sweater and some socks, he moved out of the room; closing the door softly behind him.

Maddie woke with a smile; she was in one of her favorite places, with her wonderful husband. And the sound of the rain against the windows only made it that much better. She had slept soundly; deeply and well. And as her arms stretched up over her head and she yawned a good morning, her eyes pulled open and she looked for him.

"Harry?" She sat up on her elbows, glancing quickly around the room. Seeing his watch and his wallet on the nightstand, she knew he couldn't have gone far. Her mind began to wander; kicking into gear as she tried to guess where he might be. She slipped from bed and into the bathroom, their child demanding the regular morning ritual—even though it was much later than normal. And when Maddie emerged, she pulled on some warm pajama pants and her robe and set out to find him.

When he had stepped outside onto the grounds, he had only intended for a quick dose of fresh air. He had gone to his father's study and packed up his computer, had tossed the phone records Maddie had refused. He had tried to sort it out; tried to figure a way in which his words, his
thoughts could have been handed over to Cassandra. But the answers weren't there in the study. In fact, they weren't in that house. So he had pulled on his wellies, pulled on a rain coat and stepped outside.

But when the breath of fresh air proved not enough, he decided on a short walk.

And when the short walk to the garden provided no more clarity, he extended his path.

Before long he had trudged to the Walled Garden on the far side of the property; walking the lanes with his hands stuffed in his pockets and his mind miles away.

This was where she found him; where she had finally tracked him down.

"Harry?" Her voice had startled him, something in his mind had let it slip that she was there with him, that she might wake up and wonder where he was.

That part of him snapped back to him as he turned towards her; eyes wide with surprise.

"Maddie..."

"What are you doing all the way out here?" She moved closer; her head covered with an umbrella; her feet covered in wellies.

"Sorry," he called out to her with a shake of his head, trying to jar his mind back to center. She was dressed and warm and considerably dryer than he. "I should have left a note or..."

"It's okay," she smiled as she stepped up to him, her eyes dancing over him as she took him in.

"What are you doing out here? You're soaked."

"I..." His hand lifted to run along his hood, swishing water away as he chuckled. "I don't know. I needed some air?"

"Yeah?" She let out a light laugh, her hand reaching to run up and down his arm. "Are you okay? You've gone quite far for air."

"I'm..." He looked down at his feet, at the mud covered boots he wore and with his hands still stuffed in his pockets, he shrugged. "I don't know."

"You don't know if you're okay?" Her expression shifted to concern, her eyes softening as she looked him over again. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." He sucked in a deep breath and lifted his eyes to hers and in them she saw the same dark clouds that covered the sky. "Maddie..." The way he said her name, the soft sweet whisper from his lips, made her feel sad. "I messed up."

"You messed up?" She repeated, her eyes searching his for clarity.

"When I didn't tell you about Monday," he pressed his lips together in a tight line and looked out beside him, over the greenery and the flowers. "When I kept a secret from you, when I held something private between me and...her." He gulped and looked back to her. "I was wrong to do that..."

"I know," she nodded, a small smile pulling at her lips. "But we've talked about it, we've moved past that and..."
"I haven't," he shook his head, his heart weighing heavy. "I woke up this morning and the first thing I thought of..." He caught himself, smiling with a sigh. "Well the first thing I thought of was your unbelievable snore."

"I don't snore," she was quick to defend, her eyes turning into a playful glare.

"Of course not," he met her gaze with a grin that faded as his mind continued on. "And the second thing I thought of was...this."

"This?"

"This new thing between us, this new place we've gone to. This...mess that makes no sense." He held her gaze, his expression saddened as he thought about it all. "I hate that I've taken us here, Madeline."

"You haven't taken us anywhere, Harry," she tried to counter, but he couldn't be convinced.

"I have," he nodded. "I have. And all I can think about now is...how in the hell do I sort this all out? How do I make this right?"

His eyes were wide as he looked to her, hoping she might have some sort of answer for him that he hadn't found on this walk. Maddie swallowed back her own emotion around it all and shook her head. "I don't know." She smiled sweetly, wanting him to know that she wasn't angry any longer. "You don't have to do...anything to make this right with me." Her eyes welled up just a bit, just enough to tug at his heart. "You and I...we...we're right, Harry." She sniffed and took a breath.

"How do I make it right with me?"

"I don't know," her head tipped to the side, her heart aching at the look on his face, at the way his eyes seemed to drift away from the moment, from them. "Hey..." She reached out to him, her fingers warm on his cold, wet cheeks. "It's okay."

"It's not okay," his response was quick. "It's not okay. What she's done, is not okay.""

"Okay..." Maddie nodded; knowing he was right, having spent days trying to sort this out for herself. "Do you remember when we were first dating? I lived in that little apartment and the world had really just figured out that you had a girlfriend..."

"Ha..." Harry's lips turned up as his mind trekked further back. "I remember."

"It was like there was this build up; Mystery Blonde, Mystery Blonde and then...boom. They knew," Maddie sighed and stepped closer to him, wanting him under the umbrella with her. "They knew and they were just all over me for a while. All of the stories and the pictures and the paps following me around..."

"If you're trying to make me feel better about the ridiculous situations I put you in," his head shook once; his jaw tightening just a bit.

"I'm not," she smiled, her hand running down the front of his coat, over to the side; slipping into his pocket to hold his hand. "This magazine ran a story and some old pictures—all of it hinting at you having an affair, stepping out on the Doctor..." Though Maddie's smile pulled up, Harry's
turned down.

"I'm not sure how this..."

"You had a very clear message for me that day," she cut him off, her warm fingers tangling around his chilly ones. "You...we...don't get to control what people do. There are so many times, so many stories, so many pictures and assumptions and...you can't address them all. You can't jump into the crazy for fear of...for fear of getting caught up in the crazy. All we have is right here. That's it. We stick with each other and we trust and we forgive and we...we don't let other people set the message for us."

"But..." Harry looked down at the ground but she was firm, her fingers pulling at his; his eyes drawing back up to her.

"No buts," she shook her head. "I don't know how she got that information Harry. I really don't. And...I don't know...maybe it would help you to know. But it won't change anything. I know you didn't tell her just as much as I know you weren't with her, as much as I know you would never..." She paused to collect her emotions. "And you know it too. Letting her and her words sit with us any longer...I don't know, it feels like we're letting something else win, like we're letting her continue to be this barrier between us and I don't want that. I don't want her to be able to keep your mind from where it needs to be..."

"Where does it need to be?" His own emotions had reduced his voice to a whisper.

"With me," she answered easily; simply. "Me and this baby and...and somewhere it isn't pouring down rain..." She glanced out around them as they both laughed; the tension easing, the breathing becoming easier. "Come on Captain...walk me back to the house, dry off. Let's have some breakfast and..."

His lips were warm against hers; this soft, sweet heat amidst the chill and the rain that surrounded them. His hands left his pockets to find home against her cheeks, tilting her face to his, drawing her in. When he kissed her like this, in a way that held all of his feelings, all of his wants behind it, Maddie didn't care that the rain that covered him was soaking her clothes.

All she wanted was for it to continue; for this way he wanted her, this loyalty and responsibility he felt to her, to their union, to stay just as strong as it was in that moment. And she wanted him to forgive himself; to let the tension go and release this hold this moment had on his mind. With abandon all her own, she stepped into his space and wrapped her arms around his neck. As her mouth opened under his, inviting him in for more, the umbrella dipped and the patter of rain showered over them.

When Harry pulled back from her, there was a smile on his face; his hair wet but his heart warmer. "Come on Mum..." He kissed her lips as he delivered a soft pat to her ass. "Let's get you inside before you catch cold."

"You know that's not how it works," she smiled up at him, not entirely ready to abandon their embrace, his mouth. Her fingers pulled him back down to her. "Just a little more please..."

With a chuckle and a nod, Harry surrendered to her request; his mouth moving slowly over hers as his arms wrapped her tighter. She was right; in so many ways, with so many words. She was right. This was where he needed to be.
All Maddie had needed to warm her wet body was a change of clothes but Harry was drenched, having woken and gone for a walk without an umbrella. So as Maddie combed back her already washed hair and pulled on a new, dry outfit, Harry climbed into the shower. And when he stepped out, steam pouring into the room behind him, he felt much better than he had walking the grounds alone. He loved that about her; the way she seemed to seek him out when he was wandering in the cold alone—the way she brought him back to center, back to warmth. If he spent too much time thinking about it, he might be reduced to sobs; at just how perfect for him she was. But she had asked him to come back from his far off place and he was intent on doing just that. So he dried himself, wrapping a towel around his waist and pulling another up into his hair.

"Harry?" Maddie's knuckles were soft on the door. "Can I come in?"

"Of course," he chuckled, reaching to wipe off the mirror.

"Mmmm...." She smiled wider when she stepped into the room, momentarily forgetting what she had intended on telling him. "You smell amazing," she bit her bottom lip as she looked him over.

"Thank you," he was amused by the look on her face, the way she responded to him filling him with warmth and the slightest bit of cockiness.

"Yeah..." She exhaled, shaking her head as she focused; unashamed that he caught her looking, caught her flushed cheeks. With a shrug, she met his eyes. "So listen, while you were in the shower, Ella called. Her mother is in town today, for the Christening tomorrow..."

"Oh wow," he chuckled, remembering the last time they had all seen her. "And how is Ella doing?"

"Well, she's okay now. But they are having lunch with her today and then later...they want to have friends over. Buckie's going out to Bishop's father's for the night and Ella thinks she'll need to have a few stiff drinks."

"Ha," Harry laughed as he patted aftershave onto his cheeks. "I'll bet she does. Wait...I thought she wasn't drinking; with nursing the baby and all..."

"Yeah apparently she can drink a few. There's a thing called pump and dump..."

"Pump and dump?" Harry's face twisted up as he turned to look at her. "What the hell?"

"I don't know," Maddie giggled at the expression on his face. "But you can ask Ella if you want."

"I don't know if I do," he shook his head.

"Do you want to go?" Her eyebrows lifted, her voice light. "Have a few drinks with Bishop? Watch Ella who hasn't had a drink for nearly a year, down some Scotch?"

Harry turned to face her, his fingers reaching out to tuck back a crazy twist of her hair. "You tell me." He shrugged. "We do...whatever you want. If you want to stay another night in the country, we do that. If you want a night back at home, we do that. If you want to go to the Bishops..." He held her eyes and smiled. "Whatever you want," Maddie watched him for a moment; debating to herself, going over everything that had happened between them—weighing it out.

"You know what...let's go," she answered with a smile. "It might be nice to do
"Okay," Harry nodded with a grin, leaning to kiss her lips. "But I'm telling Bishop you called him easy."

"Please," Maddie rolled her eyes. "I'll tell him myself."

Maddie wasn't expecting to see her that night; wasn't expecting to ever see her again to be honest. She had this fantasy in her mind that she would somehow shirk away and shrivel into their distant memory. But she should have known better, she should have known that any person who had the gall to call her up and invent such closeness certainly wasn't going to drift away easily.

But she was still surprised to see her that night at Bishop's party.

Maddie was waiting for Bishop to return with refreshed drinks for the two of them. Harry and Ella had snuck outside to share a cigarette, allowing themselves that one slip on this rarest of nights. And Maddie was at peace, happy, in Bishop's living room while she waited.

Until Cassandra Whitworth walked into the room.

Seeing Cassandra move so freely about, seemingly without worry or tension or any of the anxiety that she had flooded their lives with, drew Maddie to the end of a very steep cliff. She could feel the steam rise in her body, flushing her cheeks and clinching her jaw. All she could see were images of Harry shocked and hurt and confused as Maddie flung the accusations Cassandra had saddled her with.

Images of Harry pleading with her to believe him, the pain in his eyes as he saw doubt in hers.

Images of Harry walking in the rain at Highgrove trying to sort it out; trying to rid their lives of this detour.

It was all she could see as she watched this woman—this vile person—walk around the Bishop home as though nothing had happened. As her blood boiled, it washed away any of the rational thoughts she had held onto, any of the wise words of advice she had given to Harry when she had coaxed him out of the rain just that morning. And she wanted, more than really anything in the world at that moment, to slap that wide, toothy, sugarcoated smile right off her face.

"Madeline my darling," Bishop returned to his spot next to her, his eyes looking back and forth between the two drinks in his hands. "I'm nearly one hundred percent that this drink is yours..."

He nodded to himself and held it out to her, his eyes drifting up to look at her face, at the new, dark set in her eyes. "Maddie? Are you okay?"

"Ha..." She bit at the side of her cheek, her head shaking as a bitter rumble of laughter bubbled up in her chest. "No. I'm not okay." She glanced down at the drink he still held onto and back up to him. "Do something for me Bishop?"

"Anything," he answered automatically, thrown by the cold expression on her face.

"Distract the room for about fifteen minutes?"

"What? Why?" His lips turned up but the laughter never came; he was waiting for the other shoe
Maddie's focus had shifted; her eyes travelling across the room as her shoulders squared and her posture straightened. And then, in a deep, dark voice that held more truth than Bishop was comfortable with, she explained. "Because I'm about to kill somebody."

"Ha!" Bishop's laughter was genuine; as was his surprise when she stepped away from him and began across the room; her eyes focused on one thing and one thing only. Cassandra Whitworth. "Oh shit." He snapped from humor to concern very quickly. Setting the drinks aside, he followed behind her, his eyes scanning the crowd for reinforcements—Harry, Ella...somebody.

He caught up with her just as she caught up with Cassandra. She didn't blink, didn't hesitate at all as she slid right into her line of vision. "Would you look at this..." Maddie's voice was dark and sharp; her gaze narrowed. "I will say this. You have quite a bit of nerve."

If Cassandra was nervous or afraid, she didn't show it. In fact, in a moment when most others would give in; shrink away or retreat, she stood tall; meeting Maddie's stare in a way that made Bishop more than slightly nervous. "Excuse me?" She crossed her arms over her chest and didn't budge.

"Showing up here as though nothing's happened," Maddie shook her head. "As though you've done nothing wrong." As Bishop looked between the two women he had no idea what was going on, not the slightest clue as to what was happening but whatever it was, he had never seen his friend like this.

"Listen..." Cassandra began, her tone dismissive as she sighed defiantly.

"No," Maddie shook her head, stepping closer to Cassandra. "I'm done listening to you. I've listened to you more than I ever should and I'm done listening. It's one thing to force a kiss on my drunk husband..." Her eyes grew darker as Bishop's grew wider. "And it's another for you to pick up the phone and call me up, trying to convince me that he's been unfaithful, that he's been involved in this seriously made up bullshit version of a fairy tale you have running in your head..."

Though Cassandra opened her mouth to speak, Maddie was having none of it. "But you don't stop do you? You don't give up, I'll give you that. Because here you are, after all of this trash you've thrown into Harry's life, at his Best Friend's...just walking around like nothing's happened."

"You know if you're worried about what your husband has been up to..." Cassandra's eyes danced combative as she stood tall in front of Maddie and for a split second, Bishop thought maybe Maddie was going to hit her.

"You're done talking about my husband," she cut her off, moving in closer as her hands clenched into fists.

"Okay..." Bishop moved in next to Maddie, ready to step between them if he needed to; as scary as that thought might be. His hand fell onto Maddie's arm, wanting to pull her back from going to a place she wouldn't be able to walk back; a place that opened her up to harm in more than just a physical sense.

"You're done," Maddie repeated, taking a deep breath as she tried to calm herself. "It's time for you to go."

Cassandra's eyes blinked and Maddie could almost see her ego get the best of her. In a lowered, clenched voice, she spoke directly to Maddie. "I don't know who exactly you think you are but..."
"I've been around longer than you and...."

"Cassandra," Bishop cut in between them; verbally and physically. "You heard what she said, it's time for you to leave."

"Bishop?!" Her eyes narrowed as she turned her glare on him with a huff of a laugh. "Really? Bowing to the title, huh? Who knew you were this guy."

She was trying to goad him, trying to appeal to a sense of vanity that Bishop simply didn't have, not when it came to this. "Maddie is family. Now, you can either walk out the door on your own or..."

"Or what?!" She scoffed. "You're going to throw me out?"

"Won't be necessary," Maddie's hand fell on Bishop's arm, much calmer and more collected. "Royal Protection is going to do it for him." She nodded to Brad and Nathan who were moving through the room with their eyes fixed on this particular conversation.

"Fine," Cassandra bit off the word. "I'll go."

"Fantastic," Maddie nodded; ready to watch her walk away. But her husband, stepping up to the group with Ella right behind him, had different plans. Only having just walked in from outside, he had sought out Maddie and couldn't get to her side quick enough; each step he took rising his blood pressure.

"Not so fast." He stood tall next to Maddie; overpoweringly so. "You're not going anywhere. Not until I have some answers."

"Harry?" Cassandra seemed to have lost her voice, her fight, when faced with him.

"Don't pretend you're surprised I'm here," he shook his head, moving in closer to her; his shoulders squared and his attention focused. Though Maddie had never found Harry menacing or frightening in the least, with the way he was looking at Cassandra, she could feel it; the chill, the tension—the all-out detest.

"Harry..." Cassandra started again, thrown by the way he looked at her; her eyes scattered as she glanced around trying to avoid him.

"What exactly did you think was going to happen here? What sort of sick outcome were you hoping for?" He didn't even look up as Nathan and Brad stepped up to the group.

"Look..." She was growing nervous; her words starting to shake. "Can we talk about this in private?"

"No." Harry's voice was final. "We don't talk in private. We have never talked in private..." His voice dropped deeper as he took another step towards her. "Which is exactly why I want to know how in the hell you knew all of this stuff about me...

If he wanted to rattle her, it was working. Maddie saw the tiniest flinch, saw the briefest flash of fear cross her eyes. And for a split second, she felt bad. "Harry..." She reached out to her husband, wanting him to take a step back, wanting him to ease up.

And then she watched as a smile spread across Cassandra's face, something inside of her ignited
by Maddie's voice. "Listen Harry," she was smug and held more than a little bit of crazy in her eyes. "You're blowing things out of proportion..."

"Out of proportion?!"

"It was just...silly and...nothing..."

"No," Harry shook his head, moving in even closer as Maddie's hand let go of him. "It wasn't nothing. It wasn't silly. And if you think that I will ever let this go..." He chuckled in a way that made even Bishop a little nervous. "I will make your life hell. Forget the protective order that's already in place. Forget the quiet ways we handle things," he took another step, his arms crossing over his chest as he looked down at her, his voice dropping to a near whisper as he leaned in. "I'll leak this to the press." Maddie's eyes registered surprise as she looked to her husband. "Your name will be all over the news; your picture. Your parents will hear about it, your boss will hear about it. Hell. I'll do an interview. I'll tell them all about how you've been harassing the pregnant Duchess. You want to see what crazy really looks like Cassandra? When they all know you've been hurting somebody they love?" His lips twisted up in a smile that was scarier than any of his glares. "You want to see what happens when you cross me? You want to see what I'm really capable of? When you go after my wife?"

"I..." She took a step back, she had to; he was getting too close.

"How. Did. You. Know." Harry's eyes grew hard, his jaw tight and for a beat everyone in this small private group held their breath. "Because we both know I didn't tell you." His fingers flexed into a fist that nobody thought he would really use but he had been pushed to his limits and he had had more than enough. "God damn it Cassandra, I swear to God I'll..."

And then she caved; with a rush of an exhale and a teary voice, she caved. "I overheard you!"

"Overheard me?" Harry's steel exterior cracked as he was finally given an answer; as confusing as it might be. The air rushed out of lungs surrounding him and he blinked. "But when?"

"That night," Cassandra's voice was low, growing self-conscious of all of the people around her. "You were talking to Bishop and..."

"Whoa," Bishop spoke up with narrowed eyes and a mixed up expression. "What?"

"We were in his office," Harry's eyes were scattered as his mind processed it all. "With a closed door."

"I..." She gulped and glanced around nervously. "I was in there already, before the two of you came in and when I heard you I..."

"What were you doing in Bishop's office?" Ella spoke up from the back of the group, her pulse pounding so loudly she could hear it in her ears.

"This has nothing to do with you," Cassandra snapped and before Maddie could catch Ella's arm, she was moving towards the woman who was the focus of all of this upheaval.

"Hold on," Bishop was quicker, catching his wife before she reached her. "Nothing here is helped if you go to jail love," he met her eyes and held her tight. He was right; as he usually was so Ella halted.
"I slipped into the bathroom," Cassandra finished her sentence. "I heard everything you said to him."

"Oh my God," Harry's face went white, his mind reeling. "I don't know what to...I don't know..."

"Okay," Maddie stepped forward, looking to Brad and Nathan. "That's enough. It's time to go. You're done here. You're just...you're finished."

And amazingly, she went. She looked up to Harry who had turned his face from hers and then to the Officers and she pivoted on her heel and moved towards the door. Brad and Nathan followed behind; as inconspicuous as they could be when they were ready to jump.

"Oh my God..." Harry's groan was deep and strangled.

"You okay?" Bishop loosened his hold on Ella, looking to his best friend.

"No," Harry shook his head as it dropped, his shoulders slacking as the wreck that was the last few days rolled over him. "I'm not. I..."

"Maddie?" Ella looked to her friend, nearly as white as Harry and just as shaken. "What's going on? Why are you crying? What did she do?"

"I..." Maddie opened her mouth to speak but found nothing. Harry spun around at Ella's words, snapping back from his own spiral to seek Maddie. When his eyes found hers, wide and teary, his heart ached in his chest.

"Maddie..." His hand rested over his heart as he took a step towards her.

"It's fine," she waved her hand, trying to be dismissive, trying to not be upset. "I'm fine." She looked up to him and bit her lip. "I'm sorry I just..." She glanced around and took a step back. "I'm sorry. Will you just excuse me for a minute?" With one hand pressed to her stomach and another to her mouth, Maddie hurried down the hallway; away from the party, away from the group.

"Hey..." Harry knocked softly as he pushed open the door to the spare room where Maddie had disappeared. "Can I come in?"

Maddie sniffed and smiled up at him from her seat on the bed. "Of course you can."

"Are you okay?" He moved slowly over to her, taking a seat next to her on the bed.

"Ha," she laughed as she wiped at her eyes. "Yes. I mean...what are you going to do you know?" She shrugged and took a deep breath, turning to look at him. "At least we know," her voice was soft. "At least we know how she knew everything...and that's more than I thought we would have."

"Yeah," Harry nodded.

"I just thought..." Maddie chuckled lightly. "I don't know. I thought it would make me feel better."

"But?" Harry lifted his eyebrows.
"But it just makes me sick," she shook her head and reached for his hand. "It makes me sick that somebody could do something like this...could follow you around and hide out in bathrooms and take your private thoughts and use them so maliciously. It makes me sick and sad and..." She shook her head again and looked up to him with wide wet eyes. "And I'm just tired..."

"I know," Harry nodded his head; his own sadness weighing down his shoulders. "You know if I could take it away...if I could go back and never say a word to Bishop and never..."

"I know," Maddie smiled over at him, lifting his hand up so she could kiss the top; desperately wanting to rid his forehead of the worry that creased it. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"A secret?" His eyes narrowed. "Sure."

Maddie's eyes twinkled as her voice dropped and she leaned in. "When Ella went after her, I kind of hoped Bishop wouldn't be fast enough to catch her."

"Ha!" Harry's laughter burst from his lips as Maddie giggled. "Yeah...that would have been something no? Sweet little Ella..."

"Sweet?" Maddie snickered.

"Tackling Cassandra in the living room," Harry finished with a shake of his head. "Now that would have been something."

"Yes," Maddie agreed with a sigh. "It would have."

"Can I do anything for you right now?" His focus shifted to his wife, his hand pulling hers into both of his.

"No," Maddie sighed, feeling better than she had when she walked in the door. "I just needed a minute to let it settle."

"And?"

"And..." She took a breath. "God, don't tell Bishop this, but I really wish I could have some Scotch right now. It's been a hell of a night."

"Ha..." Harry's laughter was less boisterous. "It really has. Do you want me to take you home?"

"No," she shook her head. "Not yet. But I do think we need to let them in on at least a little bit of what happened, right?"

"Yes," Harry nodded. "We should tell them everything. I could feel Bishop boring holes in the back of my head."

"Hmm..." Maddie smiled and rose to her feet, pulling at Harry's hand. "Come on Captain, let's put an end to this chapter, shall we?"

"Yes of course," he agreed, rising to his feet but holding still; bringing her back to him. "I love you Madeline," his hands slid up to her face; tucking strands of hair, smoothing over her cheeks. And instead of offering up more heartfelt apologies or going over the reasons for guilt or blame or allowing her a moment to tell him there was no reason for either, Harry bent his head and kissed her as the rain began to patter outside; washing it all away.
This was where he needed to be.
Chapter 162

"Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." The Minister's voice rang warm and solid as he called out to the congregation.

"It is right to give thanks and praise," Maddie—along with Harry and the rest of the congregation—answered the Minister's call.

As Maddie held a quiet, smiling Buckie in her arms with Harry standing just next to her, the Minister continued on. "We thank you, almighty God. For the gift of water to sustain, refresh and cleanse all life. Over water the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through water you led the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. In water your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, The Christ, to lead us from the death of sin to the newness of life."

The church they stood in was small and ancient, the altar at which they stood the very same where Ian Bishop the first, second and third had all been baptized. Maddie smiled down at Buckie, her finger lifting to stroke his little cheek as he squirmed just a bit and the Minister continued.

"We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in joyful obedience to your Son, we baptize into his fellowship those who come to him in faith."

The Minister stepped closer to the baptismal font, smiling at Maddie and Harry as they did the same and turning to look out at the small congregation of Bishop and Ella's friends and family.

"Now sanctify this water that, by the power of your Holy Spirit, they may be cleansed from sin and born again. Renewed in your image, may they walk by the light of faith and continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Lord; to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be all honour and glory, now and forever."

Maddie could hear Harry's voice close to her as they all answered, "Amen."

"Brothers and sisters," the Minister looked to them, out around the church. "I ask you to profess together along with Ian James Bishop the Fourth, the faith of the Church."

Maddie's eyes flashed up to Harry, catching the way he looked at her, the way he watched her with Buckie; the love in his eyes making her cheeks flush. Her eyes shifted back to the baby in her arms as the Minister began.

"Do you believe and trust in God the Father?"

They answered together, "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth."

He nodded, a small move meant to encourage, and asked, "Do you believe and trust in his Son Jesus Christ?"

Adjusting Buckie slightly in her arms, she smiled down and answered along with Harry and the congregation, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at
the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead."

"Do you believe and trust in the Holy Spirit?" The Minister called out.

"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, and forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen."

As the Minister moved over the baptismal font, Maddie leaned in closer, feeling Harry's hand at her back as she held Buckie tight and smiled down at his curious expression. As the Minister brought water up to pour over his little head, he continued. "Ian James Bishop the Fourth, I baptize you in the name of the Father," water trickled over Buckie's forehead, causing his eyes to flash wide. "and of the Son," the second dribble of water made his face scrunch up. "And of the Holy Spirit." The third made him grunt, a loud burst of a sound that drew chuckles from everyone around them.

As Maddie pulled him back and bounced him lightly in her arms, they all answered with smiles, "Amen."

Harry reached around Maddie then, his fingers tickling lightly at Buckie's tummy, making a slight face that drew an instant smile to the little boy. Maddie had to bite at her lip to keep from laughing as the Minister turned his attention to the two of them.

"We have brought Ian James Bishop the Fourth to baptism knowing that Jesus died and rose again for him and trusting in the promise that God hears and answers prayer. We have prayed that in Jesus Christ he will know the forgiveness of his sins and the new life of the Spirit." He smiled down at Buckie. "As he grows up, he will need the help and encouragement of the Christian community so that he may learn to know God in public worship and private prayer, follow Jesus Christ in the life of faith, serve his neighbor after the example of Christ, and in due course come to confirmation." He looked back up to Maddie and Harry, his face slipping slightly more serious. "As part of the Church of Christ, we all have a duty to support him by prayer, example and teaching. As his parents," he looked off to Bishop and Ella. "And godparents, you have the prime responsibility for guiding and helping him in his early years. This is a demanding task for which you will need the help and grace of God. Therefore let us now pray for grace in guiding this child in the way of faith."

Their heads bowed as Buckie cooed.

"Faithful and loving God, bless those who care for this child and grant them your gifts of love, wisdom and faith. Pour upon them your healing and reconciling love, and protect their home from all evil. Fill them with the light of your presence and establish them in the joy of your kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

"Amen," Maddie answered, swallowing back the lump of emotion that was creeping into her throat. There was something about the request for healing and reconciling love that made her awash with feeling.

"God of grace and life, in your love you have given us a place among your people; keep us faithful to our baptism, and prepare us for that glorious day when the whole creation will be made perfect in your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ."

"Amen."

As the hymnal played out into the hallowed halls, Maddie turned back and with tears in her eyes
and smile on her face, she passed the tiny bundle of baby back to Ella. With a kiss to her cheek and then to Bishop's, Maddie moved to stand with Harry, just off to the side. Her eyes slid up to his, catching the same sort of emotion she carried reflected right back in his smile, in his gaze. She felt his hand rub softly, soothingly over her back as their attention trained on their best friends and the baby they all loved.

"As a royal priesthood, let us pray to the Father through Christ who ever lives to intercede for us." The Minister called upon them all to bow their heads. "Reveal your kingdom among the nations; may peace abound and justice flourish. Especially for Ian James Bishop the Fourth. Your name be hallowed."

"Your kingdom come." They answered in unison.

"Send down upon us the gift of the Spirit and renew your church with power from on high. Especially for Ian James Bishop the Fourth. Your name be hallowed."

"Your kingdom come."

"Deliver the oppressed, strengthen the weak, heal and restore your creation. Especially for Ian James Bishop the Fourth. Your name be hallowed."

Maddie could feel her eyes getting teary as she answered, "Your kingdom come."

"Rejoicing in the fellowship of the Church on earth, we join our prayers with all the saints in glory. Your name be hallowed."

"Your kingdom come."

"There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Ian James Bishop the Fourth, by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body."

Harry's hand was warm on her back, reminding her he was there, reminding her of their union, of their rebirth; of their own little miracle as they answered with the congregation. "We welcome you into the fellowship of faith; we are children of the same heavenly Father; we welcome you."

As a smattering of applause rounded the sanctuary, little Buckie squirmed in his mother's arms, letting out a loud, adorable coo; one that brought a tug to Maddie's heart.

As the applause faded, the Minister continued, "We are all one in Christ Jesus. We belong to him through faith, heirs of the promise of the Spirit of peace." He nodded out to the room. "The peace of the Lord be always with you."

"And also with you."

"Let us offer one another a sign of peace."

As those out in the pews turned to their friends and family to do just that, Maddie turned to her husband; the tall, wonderful man who stood at her side. Despite everything that had been handed to them over the last week, she felt closer to him than ever; stronger than ever. Blinking at the tears that seemed to teeter on the edge of overflow, she lifted a smile to him and moved to kiss his cheek. "Peace be with you."

With his hands soft and steady on her arms, he kissed her cheek in return and responded with
probably a little more emotion than one might expect at a Christening. "Peace be with you."

Pulling from each other, they moved to greet Ella and Bishop, bending to kiss Buckie's cheeks, softening further at his wide smile that danced towards cheeky. And then they returned to their spots, watching as the Minister drew it all to a close.

"The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, establish, strengthen and settle you in the faith; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always."

"Amen," there was a lightness to the room, to all of them; a brightness and warmth that seemed to travel among them.

"Go in the light and peace of Christ."

As Harry's hand slid down to squeeze Maddie's fingers, they all answered together, "Thanks be to God."

As the music sang out and the congregation rose to their feet, the proud parents and the bubbly baby began down the aisle together. There would be a reception immediately following; a celebration for the tiniest member of the Bishop family. Maddie and Harry stood still, watching for their cue. And as they began down towards their friends, Maddie's hand tucked into Harry's elbow and his smile pulled high.

Recovering from the hit they had taken from Cassandra was going to require more than just the trip to Highgrove—they had both known that. Though it had begun among the delphinium and the rain and truly even before that, it was something they would have to work at; something that would require more nurturing, more time. Finding out the source of it all, the lies that lay beneath it all certainly helped settle some of the upset. But knowing that there was somebody out there as callous as that, somebody who would make up bold faced lies and try to use them to drive a wedge between them—it made Maddie sick. Even after Cassandra had left the party, even after she and Harry had explained to Bishop and Ella the simplest version of what had happened—even after they had gone home together, it still stuck in Maddie's mind. It had still worn her down, it had shown her this awful, disgusting truth. There were people out in the world who just might be out to get her, out to get him. And those people could come masked as friends.

It was quite unsettling if she gave it too much time, too much thought. So she had woken that morning with a new mindset; a mission. The longer she let this sit in her mind, the longer Cassandra had a say in what happened in her marriage.

And she was one hundred percent finished with that.

She was reclaiming what was hers. Settling into his arms, holding his hand, kissing him whenever the hell she wanted. Yes, they had dents to smooth out—but they were going to be fine. Better than fine. They had fallen and they had risen again.

And as they stepped out of the church that morning, dressed in their finest and smiling wide, they looked—and felt—like a couple in love.

A married couple with struggles and strengths with lots of love and an abundance of joy—and a baby on the way.

With her hand tucked into Harry's, they slid into the car; him right after her and they were on their
You do know that this Godparent thing does not end with just the church," Bishop sighed as he sank into a chair next to his friends. He had shown the last guest out and now it was just them at the house.

"No?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, his arm draped around the back of the couch with Maddie tucked close.

"Not at all," Bishop shook his head, his smile brightening as his wife returned from having put their son down for a nap. "If anything should happen to the two of us, the two of you are the beneficiaries to all our worldly fortunes. Including our son."

"Really?" Maddie looked from Bishop to Ella. "You would leave Buckie with us?"

"Of course," Ella smiled over to her, amused at the surprise. "Did you think it would be my brother?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "I suppose I hadn't really thought of it."

"Do you mind?" Bishop looked between them. "We could always..."

"No," Maddie shook her head forcefully, leaning forward. "We don't mind. We would love to take him...well, not love because that would mean..." She waved her hand between them as Harry snickered. "We would absolutely take care of Buckie if anything happened to you." She glanced up at Harry. "Right?"

"Absolutely," he nodded without a doubt, without a flinch.

"Also," Bishop added with a smirk. "If anything happens to Ella, you get me too."

"Ha," Maddie sat back in her seat, back into Harry's side. "Fine but Harry's in charge of bathing you." She nudged him as they all laughed.

"Fine by me," Harry shrugged, his arm moving off the back of the couch, tucking around her.

"Can't wait," Bishop winked, adding to the laughter among them.

"Jesus," Ella rolled her eyes with a sigh. "You two are ridiculous."

"You love us," Bishop smiled over at her, his own adoration abundantly clear.

"Yeah, well," she sighed and winked at him. "I'm pretty ridiculous too."

"My God," Maddie shook her head as she looked down at her stomach, smiling as she ran her hand over it. Two weeks had passed since Buckie's baptism and she and Harry were nearly back to normal. While Harry was preparing to head into work, she had an easy afternoon planned with Kate and Arthur.
"You okay?" Harry called to her from the shower. He was getting ready to head in to preparation meetings for his new, high profile project—The Invictus Games. He was excited and happy and loving every minute of all of the hours he was putting in to getting them off the ground.

"Yes," she laughed, amused that he had heard her. She wiped at the fog on the mirror. "It's just my belly...I swear it gets bigger every day."

"Really?" She could hear the smile on his lips; the intrigue clear in his voice—even before he pulled open the door, sticking his head out. "Let me see." His hair was soaped and spiked up and the water splashed around him, but he was serious.

"You're getting water everywhere," she shook her head at him, even as she turned to the side, pulling her shirt closer to her body so he could see.

"I'll clean up the water," his smile bared all of his teeth, crinkled the corners of his eyes. "That's my baby in there."

"So I'm told," she snickered. "Now shut the door. Finish your shower. You have somewhere to be."

"God, Madeline," he groaned as he did as he was told, stepping back into the stream of water. "I can't wait to meet our baby."

"Me neither," she sighed, turning back to the mirror, back to getting ready for the happiest little play date she was expecting in a few hours. Biting at her bottom lip, she beamed at the reflection of her stomach in the mirror. "Me neither."

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When the doorbell rang out later that afternoon, Maddie rushed to answer it, her smile pulling even wider when she saw the two people on the other side of it. "Arthur!" She clapped her hands at the site of her chubby, beaming little nephew.

"Maaaaaaaaaaaah!!" He squirmed in his mother's arms as he called out his best rendition of Maddie, happy to see his aunt who eagerly held out her hands.

"Maaaaaaaaaaaaah!!" He squirmed in his mother's arms as he called out his best rendition of Maddie, happy to see his aunt who eagerly held out her hands.

"My God he's getting so big!" Maddie chuckled as she pulled him from Kate. "I bet you give your mum quite the workout don't you big boy?"

"It's the truth," Kate sighed as they moved inside Maddie's living room where freshly poured drinks were waiting. "It's better than lifting and now that he's walking, he's running and I get to chase him down."

"It's a good thing you're cute little man," Maddie laughed as she snuggled into his cheeks, kissing him as he cooed. "And...how have you been doing?" Maddie glanced over at Kate.

"I'm great," Kate nodded, her eyes scanning down over Maddie's stomach. "And you? How's the baby?"

"Oh God," Maddie sighed. "I'm good. The baby is good but it's...it's starting to move so much more, I can feel him flip flop and it's just the strangest sort of thing."

"I know," Kate laughed. "Just wait."
"Ha! So I've heard," Maddie lifted Arthur up in the air, making him giggle and squirm even more. "Okay buddy. You can play now..." With a sigh that was half born of regret, she sat him on the floor and watched as he ran over to his bin of toys she had pulled out in preparation. "Ugh. He's growing up too fast."

"Tell me about it," Kate watched as he pulled out a few toys before finding one he was satisfied with, plopping down on the floor to play with them. "You look good, Maddie. You're feeling good?"

"I'm feeling great," Maddie smiled, her hand rubbing over her growing belly. "I feel...big. And I know I'm only just over sixteen weeks and it's only going to get bigger but...it's just so...out there. Does that make any sense?"

"Absolutely," Kate nodded. "Can I feel?"

"Mmmm," Maddie nodded eagerly, sitting next to Kate on the couch and reaching for her hand. "Though you really can't feel much from the outside."

"No?" Kate settled in anyway, her hand rubbing over Maddie's belly. "Harry hasn't felt him yet?"

"No," Maddie shook her head with a smile. "Though he is seriously dying to. You should see the way he just...focuses completely on the belly sometimes; eyeing it like he can make it happen by sheer willpower."

"Well if anyone could," Kate laughed along with Maddie, sighing as they both relaxed. "When do you two leave for Sweden?"

"Day after tomorrow," Maddie reached for her glass. "We have a final meeting with Thomas about upcoming events tomorrow and then we pack up to go."

"Excited?" Kate reached for her own drink, watching as Arthur swapped out his toys, making crashing sounds as he did.

"Nervous," Maddie shrugged. "It's really the first time since the wedding I've been around so many...royals." Her eyes rolled slightly as she said the word, knowing exactly how ridiculous she sounded.

"You mean aside from Family Christmas?" Kate smirked over her glass.

"Aside from that," Maddie chuckled, enjoying the light back and forth she had always shared with Kate.

"You shouldn't be worried," Kate shook her head. "Everyone is really friendly and it will be a relaxed atmosphere and...you're pregnant! Everyone's going to coo over you and talk about babies. You'll do fine."

"Well thanks for the vote of confidence."

"You got it," she sat her drink down. "So...which tiara did you end up going with? I know you were debating. Did you decide?"

"I did." Maddie smiled, her eyes meeting Kate's with a slight mischievousness to them,
remembering the debate they had weeks ago. "I'm going to wear The Teck Crescent."

"Chicken," Kate's eyes danced as she snickered.

"Please!" Maddie nudged her. "I told you I'm not wearing THAT one."

"But you have that beautiful necklace Harry gave you! It would look perfect with the Lover's Knot."

"Stop it," Maddie rolled her eyes. "I'm never wearing it. I told you then, I'm telling you now. That particular piece of artwork will not end up on my head. You should move past it."

"Never?" Kate's eyebrows lifted.

"No," Maddie shook her head. "It's...Jesus...it has your name in it. You should absolutely be the one to wear it first and...I don't know...I'm not as strong as you. I can't handle the comparisons."

"Well now we both know that's not true," Kate insisted softly, knowing fully well they had both been held up to the Diana Standard; knowing they had both stood tall against the comparisons to their late Mother-In-Law.

"Either way," Maddie smiled. "I feel like that one should be saved for you and I'm not likely to change my mind on this. So there's really no point in arguing."

Kate listened, sought a place of understanding and then, with her beautiful smile, she moved on. "Fair enough. The Teck Crescent is incredibly beautiful."

"It is," Maddie nodded. "And it reminds me of the Strathmore...it reminds me of our own wedding." She grew soft and sweet. "And I really like that."

"Yeah," Kate agreed. "Tell me. You two doing better?"

"We are. Worlds better," Maddie was quick with the reassurance. Kate had been one of the few people she had told about the Cassandra Whitworth ordeal, knowing that she was the only one in her life who understood this wild dynamic, this crazy life they led. "They filed the protective orders nearly immediately. Our numbers have all been changed and as far as I know she hasn't tried to contact either of us."

"Good. Good." Kate's lips pulled tight as her anger and detest for this woman broiled up. "And Harry? Is he still apologizing every chance he gets?"

"No," Maddie smiled wide, her breath easing as she sighed. "That only lasted for a few days. Thank God."

"Not one for the groveling?" Kate let in a small smile.

"No," Maddie shook her head. "Not in this instance anyway. The longer he felt guilty, the longer he felt he owed me those words—the longer that woman was in our marriage and, frankly, she was in my marriage long enough."

"She sure was," Kate lifted her glass to her lips, mumbling into the cup. "That bitch."

"Whoa," Maddie's eyebrows shot up.
"Sorry," Kate apologized instantly, her features softening. "I hate to see people take advantage, I hate to see people come at you and Harry. I hate it when people think they can just..."

"I know," Maddie agreed; understanding completely. "I know."

"Well I'm happy you two are back to normal," Kate sat down her cup. "You'll enjoy the wedding so much more."

"Yes," Maddie sighed, her smile slipping soft as she thought about it. "It will be nice to get away, to see Harry in uniform...not a bad way to spend a weekend."

Kate wrinkled up her nose and shrugged, smirking as she did. "If you're into that sort of thing."

"Oh I am," Maddie laughed. "I definitely am."


As Thomas wrapped up the details of their itinerary for the weekend, he turned to the next page in his folio; Maddie and Harry smiled and did the same. "Now, looking forward past this weekend, you can see the projects you've been working on. Harry, you have the announcement of The Invictus Games and a variety of appearances, along with Madeline, that follow to promote the Games. Madeline, you have meetings at The Delphinium Project and a visit to the Children's Hospital."

"With Dr. Colvin?" Maddie smiled as she remembered her former job, her former life.

"Yes Ma'am," Thomas nodded. "Further out there is a request for the two of you to attend the Christmas benefit at St. Joe's..."

"I'm in if you are," Harry looked to Maddie with a grin.

"Of course," Maddie nodded enthusiastically; anything to help out there.

"Oh..." Thomas's eyes narrowed as he read the next item on the list. "There's been a request for the Duchess at Camp Bastion again this year."

"Really?" Maddie leaned forward.

"No," Harry answered quickly, easily; dismissively.

"Sorry?" Maddie turned to look at him with a soft laugh on her lips.

He glanced up from the paper in front of him, looking to Thomas and then to her. "No." He repeated with a shake of his head. "The request for you to visit Camp Bastion at Christmas..."

"You're just going to go ahead and make that decision for me?" Her eyes narrowed in on him as she sat taller in her chair, something about her posture, her expression daring him to say it again.

Harry caught it, took a deep breath and sat up, turning his body to hers. "Madeline, you'll be eight months pregnant at Christmas. If the doctor's allowed you to fly, I don't think you should be going into the middle of a war zone. Do you?"
"I..." She blinked, swallowing back her intuitive drive to fight back when somebody told her what to do. "No. Not necessarily."

"Not necessarily?" He laughed and softened. "Maddie, love. I know you're headstrong and brave and...you want to take our baby into Bastion?"

"No," she shook her head quickly, his wording making it all sound more simple. "No. You're right. I just...ha..." She took a breath. "Maybe I wanted to be the one to say no."

"Ah," he smiled knowingly, his eyes dancing with amusement. "Well by all means," he waved his hand towards Thomas who sat silently across from them.

With a roll of her eyes and a slight blush to her cheeks, she sighed. "No. Thank you."

"Of course," Thomas nodded, seemingly undeterred by their back and forth. "I'll decline and pass it on to another office." He turned over a page in his own notebook. "Now. There was one last request. It's for next summer but I think you'll both be pleased."

"Next summer?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted. "What is it?"

"Where is it?" Harry was intrigued by the smile on Thomas' face.

"It's the opening of a School and Children's Home..." He slid the info sheet across the table to them. "In Bendal."

They were miles from the city before either of them spoke. After the meeting with Thomas, Harry had helped her into his Range Rover and slipped into the driver's seat; silent and thoughtful. He hadn't said a word as he pulled away from the curb and she hadn't made a peep when he had turned in the opposite direction of their Kensington home.

As they left the city, as the country side began to drift by, Maddie didn't even question it. In fact, she felt relief and peace and when she turned to look at him, her fingers wrapping softly around his forearm as he drove, she could see that he felt it too.

She took a few deep breaths, trying to make sense of all of the emotions swirling in her heart and then, without really looking over to him, she spoke; her lips curling into a reflexive smile as she did. "Bendal."

Harry chuckled; a light, low rumble as he exhaled and glanced over to her. "Bendal."

Maddie's smile pulled higher, her eyes blinking as she drew herself back to present, back from all of the memories. "Are you ready to go back?"

"Honestly?" He lifted his eyebrows and she nodded. "I hadn't even thought of it until he mentioned it but..." His fingers rubbed at his jaw, up over his pursed lips. "I don't know Maddie. I might be."

"I know..." She smiled hazily, her eyes drifting out the window; watching the trees fly by. "It's been such a high and low kind of a place, hasn't it."

"It has," he nodded, reaching out to take her hand in his; pulling it to his lips and keeping it there
even after the kiss he had intended. "But in the end..."

"You love the place," she finished for him, knowing she was right.

"God I really do," he pulled her hand to his chest, lacing his fingers in hers and holding it to him. "A school? A Children's Home?" He shook his head and laughed a little. "We can't pass that up can we?"

"No," Maddie's smile pulled higher, excitement building in her belly. "And you know...it's next summer. That means we'll be taking the baby with us...we'll be taking him...or her to Bendal." Tears swam in her eyes as she envisioned that; her husband, her baby on the red sand she had called home. The red sand that had saved her, had held onto her; had guided her to Harry.

The silence settled over the vehicle again, both of them wandering in thought. The memories they had, separately and together, were strong and crucial to who they had become. For Harry it was a place his mother had been, a place he had been trying to help for most of his adult life, a place he had met Khenda. A place he had said good-bye to her. It was a place that had given him peace and escape and his wife.

And it was a place that had nearly taken her; more than once, in more ways than one.

And for Maddie...it was home. In ways that her other homes could never be—it had been. Everything had changed for her in Bendal. Even before Harry and certainly after him—her life hadn't been the same.

The last time they were there was shrouded in a cloud of sadness; saying good-bye to Khenda.

They had to go back. They were both keenly aware of that, knowing without words that the other was in. And there was something about taking their child with them on this next trip; something renewing and right.

Harry took a deep breath and let it out slowly, glancing over to her—seeing the same sort of resolution in her eyes. "Do you want to tell Thomas? Or shall I?"

"Hmm..." She smiled, warming at his voice, at his conviction; at the way he knew. "You should."

"Okay," he nodded, looking back out the window at the sky turning orange and dark as they drove. "Okay."

As he turned the car around, towards home, Maddie settled back into her seat, keeping his hand tight in hers as her other ran over her stomach. They would be taking their child to her home, to the place that had brought them together. And she knew, without knowing, that this baby—boy or girl—would fall in love with it. Just as his...or her...parents had.

They had a lot ahead of them; the wedding in Sweden, the Invictus Games. Soon they would find out the gender of the baby and even sooner—they hoped—Harry would get to feel the baby move. They had their birthdays and the holidays and all of the preparations that came with their growing family.

But off, on the horizon, they had a return to where this journey had all started; Bendal.
Over the next few weeks of their lives, there were two big milestones in the Sussex family. As their baby continued to grow, their marriage continued to recover and their bond remained strong, steady. And as they descended into Sweden to attend what would become a beautiful, sentimental royal wedding, Maddie wasn’t sure she had felt better than she did in that moment; physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Nestled into the backseat of the car that was taking them from the airport to their hotel for the wedding weekend, Maddie had an easy smile on her face as they passed through the city. It was sunny and warm outside and maybe it was her pregnancy hormones or maybe it was the way her heart seemed to swell sentimental whenever she thought about the wedding, but the city almost seemed to glisten—as though it knew that the weekend was special.

"You know I've never been to Stockholm before," Maddie sighed.

"I did not know that," Harry shook his head, amused at the look on her face as she watched the buildings fly by; intrigued by the architecture and the history. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he powered it up to check for any messages they had missed in the air.

"Well..." She sighed. "Did you know that Stockholm has nearly one hundred museums?" Her voice was light and easy, her eyes trained on the passing buildings. "Making it one of the most museum crowded cities in the world."

"No, I did not know that either," he chuckled with a shake of his head.

"The largest one has over sixteen thousand paintings..."

"Is that so?" He quickly checked for messages, scanning his email inbox with a swipe of his finger and a quick glance.

"And the Museum of Modern Art has work by Picasso and Salvador Dali." Her voice lifted at the end, as though she were impressed by this finding. Stuffing his phone back in his pocket, he turned a smile and his entire focus to her.

"Madeline, are you quoting the brochure to me right now?" His eyebrows lifted as he eyed her, as his fingers reached out for hers.

"Maybe," she turned a grin at him across the backseat, letting him take her hand. "It's beautiful here," she nodded her head towards the window. "Maybe we take a walk around before we leave? Slip into the Museum of Modern Art, take in a Picasso?"

"Maybe," Harry nodded, loving how at ease and happy she was. "We'll see if we can work it in before we go home."

"Perfect," her grin stretched further as they rounded the last corner onto the street in front of the hotel. "Whoa..." Maddie's thoughts pulled quickly away from a leisurely stroll and artwork and immediately focused on what was on display in front of her.

Across the street from the beautiful, elegant hotel they and many other royal guests would be staying in, was quite a sizable group of media members. There were swarms of people and a
whole host of cameras poised at the ready. Her fingers pulled from his as she lifted her sunglasses up onto her head with a grin she couldn't quite help. "You know what's funny?"

"No," Harry shook his head, checking out the crowd that had gathered as their car slowed to a stop, his mind slipping towards protective mode. "What's funny?"

"With all the royalty that's going to be here this weekend—Kings and Queens—" Maddie shrugged. "Nobody is really going to care so much about us."

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back in a loud laugh as the driver and Jim stepped from the car nearly the instant it stopped. "We'll see about that." As he slid his sunglasses on over his eyes, he shook his head, loving that after all of this time, after all of the media blitz she had already faced—she still liked to believe that people might not know her.

"What do you mean by that?" Maddie reached for her purse as her door was pulled open, Arthur having left his own car; waiting to fall in step behind her.

"Just watch," he grinned that wide, smirky smile of his and stepped out into the light Stockholm air. Looking out over the top of the car, he watched and he listened. And the moment his wife stepped into view, he could hear the crowd buzz, he could see the flashes from the cameras.

"Maddie! Maddie!" They screamed. "Harry! Harry!"

It wasn't just members of the international media waiting to catch a glimpse of the numerous royals who were descending on the city. In fact, there were local citizens and loyal fans eager to see their own favorite members of the various royal families invited to this extravagant weekend. And among them were several fans of his wife—just as he had suspected.

"Nobody cares?" Harry's voice was rich with amusement as he rounded the car to Maddie, his hand moving swiftly to the small of her back. "I'm pretty sure I saw an old Team Maddie shirt among the crowd."

"No!" She laughed, her head whipping around to look for herself. He was right—bringing a giggle from Maddie.

"What did I tell you?" He looked to where she looked, both of them offering smiles and quick waves as they began into the hotel; the crowd clamoring for their own pictorial evidence of the moment.

"Well, you never know," she shrugged with a smirk. "We're in Sweden, there's a very good chance they mean the other Maddie."

"Ha...well...there's always that." His hand moved up to her shoulder, firm and loving. "Come on. Let's get moved in before we have to get ready for the dinner tonight."

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"Hey Harry!" Maddie called from the bathroom as she put finishing touches on her makeup for the night. She was nearly ready, only having to step into her dress that hung in their bedroom where Harry had just finished tying his shoes and was reaching for his tuxedo coat. They were on their way to the pre-wedding gala dinner and it was black tie and star studded. And though Maddie was a little nervous, she tried to keep Kate's words and assurances in the back of her mind.
"Yes?" He glanced towards the open door as he pulled on his coat, straightening himself as he did.

"Would you do me a favor?" Her voice tipped sweet as she put the cap on her lip gloss and stepped away from the mirror, checking one more time.

"Of course." He knew that she knew that she didn't need the voice or the look he knew was in her eyes. He'd do anything she asked.

"You know the chocolate that was part of the gift basket they left us?" She could feel the cravings start just thinking about it. "Marabou, I think?"

"Yes," he chuckled as he remembered the way her eyes had lit up when she had tried some.

"Would you put a few pieces in your pocket for later?" She peeked around the door with a bright, sweet smile and wide eyes.

"Yes," he laughed, that was the look. Shaking his head, he moved from the room, right out to the table to do just as she asked.

"Thank you Captain!" She called after him as she stepped out into the bedroom and gathered her dress. Stepping into the beautiful, flowy fabric, she pulled at zippers and adjusted the straps, smoothing over her growing belly.

"You're welcome Mum," he called back, stashing a few small wrapped pieces into his pocket and straightening out his jacket before he returned to their bedroom. "Anything else I can...whoa..." His feet slowed to a stop, his smile fading into a warm, comfortable grin as he took her in. "Madeline..." His hand pressed to his chest, his eyes mooning over.

"You like the dress?" She looked up to him, her skin warming under his gaze.

"I do," he nodded as he moved closer, taking her outstretched hand to help her stand steady as she stepped into her shoes. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," she squeezed his fingers and stood tall. "This little bump gets harder and harder to mask."

"No masking necessary," Harry shook his head, his hands moving over her stomach in awe and reverence.

"It's getting so big," she watched as his hands rounded over her.

"Yes it is," he seemed mesmerized—in love really. "I love it."

"You do know I'm only going to get bigger." She looked up to watch his eyes, to catch his gaze.

"I know," his smile inched higher at the thought.

"And rounder."

"I know," his eyes flashed happy and bright as he looked up from her stomach, catching her watching him. "I know you think I'm feeding you a line but I love your big round belly," he
leaned in to kiss her, his hand resting over their growing baby. "And when there's more, I'm only going to love it more."

"You say that now," she narrowed her eyes playfully, knowing that he knew that she was teasing.

"I do say that now," he nodded, leaning to kiss her again. "Okay Mum...it's about time to..." The sharp knock on the door finished his thoughts for him. "You ready?"

"Is there Marabou chocolate in your pockets?" She took his hand in hers as they began out of the bedroom.

"Absolutely," he nodded, holding tightly to her fingers.

"Then absolutely," she sighed. "I'm ready."

"Mmmm..." Maddie sighed with a heavenly smile as she sank into the soft chair of their hotel suite. "I loooooooooooooooooovve Sweden." She tossed her shoes aside and unwrapped a piece of chocolate as Harry locked their door and moved inside with her.

Smiling down at her as he laid his tuxedo jacket over the back of the couch, he loosened his tie. "I think maybe you looooooooooooooooooove Marabou chocolate."

"Maybe I do."

"Maybe."

"Do you think they would be willing to send up some more?"

"Mmm," he nodded, leaning down to kiss her. "If you tell them you like it, I would imagine they'll send up as much as you want."

"Hmmmmm....." She sighed, her eyes closing as she leaned back.

"Did you have a good time tonight?" He moved to sit on the ottoman in front of her, pulling her feet up into his lap.

"I did," she nodded, opening her eyes to look tiredly at him. "I spent a lot of time talking with Chris O'Neil."

"I saw that," his tone turned playful as he rubbed at the bottom of her feet, tossing a wink up at her. "I thought about reminding him which Maddie was his."

"Oh please," she rolled her eyes with a snicker. "We talked about New York...our favorite places to eat, that sort of thing."

"It's all food with you right now, isn't it."

"It really is," she grinned and wiggled her toes. "It was nice."

"I'm glad," he smiled, shifting his attentions to her other foot. "Also, I'll have you know, I've already received a text from Bishop about your picture."
"My picture?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"The selfie Madeleine took of the two of you..." He reminded her with a smile. "She posted it on twitter with the hashtag 'Two Royal Maddies'."

"Ha!" She clapped her hands together. "That's priceless."

"Your fans love it," he smoothed his hands up her calves. "Bishop included."

"He really has always been my number one fan."

"Number two," Harry's eyes narrowed. "I'm number one."

"Ah yes," she nodded, nudging him with her foot.

"Don't forget it," he moved then, leaning up to kiss her. "Come on Mum. Let's get to bed. Tomorrow's a big day."

With a happy sigh and a blissful smile, Maddie let Harry take her hand and pull her from her chair; taking her to bed with him.

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The wedding of Carl Phillip and Sofia was one that would sit with Maddie forever; the whole day had felt magical and special. From the very beginning, as they were dressing for the wedding, she could feel the slightest bit of fairy-tale haze slipping over their day. She laughed as she acknowledged it in her head, knowing she could never say it out loud. It was silly, she knew, but she sighed and let herself feel it. She had always found weddings to be just the slightest bit enchanting. And this one was going to be no different.

So she sat while Tara pinned up her hair, while she secured the beautiful, sparkling Teck Crescent tiara—so reminiscent of her wedding tiara—to her head. And she slipped into her gorgeous, beaded gown. And when she stepped from the room and caught her husband in the finishing touches of his uniform, she had to stifle a giggle. Maybe this day was a little more of a fairy tale than most.

"I hear you," Harry called out to her without turning to look. "I hear you laughing and I'm not entirely sure why..."

"It's nervous laughter Captain," she moved closer to him, her eyes sweeping appreciatively over his back side. "You're so sexy in that uniform..."

"Ha!" He laughed and turned around, adjusting his sleeves as he moved. When he caught her in his vision, he paused—the same hazy adoring look in his eyes that he had held the night before. With his hand over his heart, he smiled at her and took a breath. "Is it too much if I tell you that you look like a Princess?"

"Hmmm...." Her smile stretched high and wide. "No, it's not too much." Shaking her head, she moved her body closer to his, her hands reaching for his hips as she smiled up at him. "You look mighty handsome yourself."

"Thank you," he tipped his lips to hers. "Though this uniform does have one fatal flaw."
"Oh?" Her eyebrows shot up.

"No pockets," his lips turned to a frown. "No room for chocolate."

"Oh!" Maddie gasped, her eyes flashing wide. "Oh God."

"I know," he chuckled. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," she shook her head with a mix of a frown and a pout. "But you should stop laughing. This is a very real problem."

"I know it is," he leaned to kiss her, reminding himself to be careful of her makeup and her hair. "You know, maybe...if you ask nicely...you might be able to convince Arthur to carry some for you."

"Oh!" Her eyes flashed wide and excited. "I think he just might. You're a genius. He has always been my number one fan." With a swift pat to his ass, she turned and started towards the door.

"No!" Harry called out with a laugh, his head shaking as he reached for his hat and gloves and followed along. "I am your number one fan, Madeline. Me. Your husband. I'm at the top of the list."

The ceremony was beautiful; simple and sweet and romantic and beautiful. More than once, Maddie found herself teary eyed. More than once her husband stroked at her fingers that he held in his hand, smiling sweetly as she blotted at tears. Her normal sentimental self had only been magnified by her pregnancy and as the newlyweds made their way back down the aisle, she was smiling ear to ear, sniffing at her tears. With love in his eyes, Harry leaned in to kiss the side of her head, his hand rubbing warmly up and down her back.

The day had begun with a magical feel—even if it was something that Maddie had dreamed up in her head. The enchanted feeling had passed into the afternoon with the touching vows and the sweet way Sofia and Carl Phillip were with each other. And then the charm flowed right into the evening. After a wonderful meal and a speech from the groom that brought the room to tears, the party began.

Kate had been right; the group was beyond welcoming with her. It was a bit surreal, if she stopped and took a step back to look at it all from the outside. She was swapping pregnancy stories with the Crown Princess of Sweden. She was laughing at hilarious tales from the Queen of the Netherlands. And she was in the beginning discussions with the Crown Princess of Denmark about joining a coalition on women's and girls' rights with several other high ranking royal members. If she took a step back, it seemed unreal; crazy and unbelievable. But as she sat in it, as she smiled and laughed and made mental notes about future projects, it was her life—this amazing, privileged life she lead. And it only added to the enchantment that surrounded her.

But above and beyond all of the magical moments of the day, was this one singular moment that served up the first of the major milestones Maddie and Harry would encounter. Long after dinner had been served, long after the toasts and the drinks and the two pieces of cake that she had eaten without reservation or shame, Harry had taken her hand in his and pulled her to the dance floor. And though her belly had grown and put more of her between them, he was still able to hold her close to him; pulling her tight as they swayed to the music.
"You know what I wish?" She smiled up at him as they moved.

"That you had more chocolate?" He winked down at her.

"Ha!" She laughed. "Well I always wish that."

"Of course," he nodded, gathering her closer. "What do you wish?"

"I wish that we had longer in Sweden," she sighed and nuzzled into his neck. "I wish we could stay just a few more days. I love the fresh air and the easiness..."

"Maybe we can," he shrugged his shoulders slightly. "Maybe we can stay another night?"

"Yeah?"

"Sure," he thought it over. "Maybe we fly back Monday afternoon instead of tomorrow. We can take in one of those museums you were telling me about..."

"A Picasso or a Dali..." She smiled as she remembered.

"Exactly," he chuckled. "I can call Thomas and see what we can do."

"Really?" Her excitement perked up at the notion.

"Absolutely," he nodded as the music slowed to an end. "I can go do it right now if you want me to."

"I would love that," Maddie warmed at the idea of another day in this beautiful town with nothing to do but exactly what they wanted. She followed him off the dance floor happily.

"I'll go do it now," he leaned in to kiss her; first her lips, then her cheek, then her hand before he let go. "I'll be right back."

"Hey Captain?" She called out as he turned from her.

"Yes?" He glanced back.

"When you come back, would you bring me another piece of cake?"

"Ha!" He laughed heartily. "Yes. Absolutely."

"Thank you," she winked at him. "And thank you for not judging me."

"Never," he shook his head. "I'll be right back."

Maddie watched as he turned away, her hands smoothing over her stomach as she relished in the way she felt in that moment; happy and content and so, so blessed. And then she felt it.

"Oh..." Maddie's voice was more of a gasp; a sharp intake of breath that caused Harry's brow to crease as he stopped and looked back at her.

"Are you okay?" Looking at the way her eyes held wide, the way her fingers pressed to her open
mouth, the way her other hand pressed to her stomach, he was back at her side in two long strides; his voice dropping. "Maddie, what is it? Are you..."

"Give me your..." Her words were strangled, the lump in her throat holding them in as she reached out to him. Taking his hand roughly in hers, she took a step toward him and pressed his palm to her stomach.

His eyes looked down at what she was doing, lifting back to her eyes as they seemed to take on a look of high concentration. "Maddie, I...."

"Shhh..." She shook her head, her eyes welling up just a bit as her other hand covered his mouth. "Just wait for a..."

And then it happened. He felt it.

Just under his fingers she had pressed against her, there was a bump; a rolling movement that lifted his fingers and cleared his mind of every single thing but this.

"Is that?" He looked up to her, tears in his eyes and in his throat; his eyebrows lifting in hope and expectation, just on the edge of bliss.

"He's moving," Maddie whispered, biting her lip to keep from crying, even as a smile stretched across her face. "That's our baby moving..."

"Oh my God," Harry was amazed, in awe, as he moved closer, as both of his hands spread out over her belly; oblivious to anything else that was occurring around them. Hell, the building could have burnt to the ground and he would still be standing there staring stupidly at the most amazing thing he had ever done—his wife and their baby. "Oh my God...Maddie..."

When it happened for the second time, his face lit up; eyes bright and shining, his grin wide and full of wonder. Maddie's hand moved from over his, reaching to stroke his cheek. "See...it was only a matter of time before we let you into our little club, Captain."

And just like that, the magic of the weekend grew and crashed like a wave over the two of them surrounding them from every single angle.

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"Harry..." Maddie's voice was soft as she called out to him in the dark room.

"Hmmm?" He didn't move, didn't budge an inch from where he laid by her side.

They had left the wedding reception as soon as it was acceptable to do so, fielding the flashbulbs and calls from the group of people still gathered outside of their hotel. As soon as they had stepped into their room, shoes were cast aside and the tiara was locked away, and Harry's hands were back on her belly—the giddy grin back on his lips.

And there they lay on their bed in the dark, each of them in various stages of undress, neither of them wanting to part from the other for long enough to truly take off their formal wear. Maddie lay on her back with her head propped up on a pillow as Harry lay close next to her, his hand spread out over her stomach, prepared to wait all night for their baby to move again.

And it had—moved again. His patience and determination had been rewarded a handful of times,
each of them bringing an ecstatic expression from him and an adoring sigh from her. It was such a special moment between them, something they had been waiting for and even as the night drew later and later, neither could be bothered to care too much.

"Do you still think it's a girl?" She whispered, watching him as he watched her stomach.

"Wow..." He breathed and shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I don't know. Is it too cliché to say that I just hope it has all of its toes and fingers and is...happy?"

"No," she shook her head, reaching out to stroke his cheek. "I don't think it's too cliché."

"Good," he smiled up at her, his eyes darting away from her stomach for a moment. "Do you? Still think it's a boy?"

"I do," she nodded with a grin. "I don't know what it is..."

"Mother's intuition," he offered. "I've heard it's quite reliable, so you're probably right." He looked back down at her stomach. "Either way, we're going to find out this week, right?"

"We are," she nodded. "Well, as long as the baby is in the right position when they do the ultrasound."

"You hear that little one?" He leaned in closer to her stomach, speaking in the most adorable-father-like voice he could find. "Be sure to get into the right position so we can see...or not see..." His smile turned cheeky as Maddie laughed, her fingers slipping up into his mussed up hair. "Oh!" His eyes flashed wide, his posture straightening up as he felt her stomach bump under his hand. "Look! She heard me!" He pressed his hand tighter to her stomach as the baby inside moved around.

"Ha!" Maddie would find his amazement endlessly amusing. She loved how much he loved this. "It seems as though your child is listening..."

"God Maddie," he exhaled with a shake of his head. "I can't believe this is happening...right here inside of you!"

"You're telling me," she laughed not sure if she wanted to roll her eyes or kiss him senseless. "It's happening inside of me!"

"I know," he looked up to her with humility, a tiny bit of jealousy and an immense amount of pride. "Tell me...what does it feel like to feel it move inside of you like that?"

"Well..." Her eyes narrowed just a bit as she looked down at her belly, smiling as she thought about it. "It feels more normal now that the baby is getting bigger. I can feel it move around and I can kind of tell where it is...situated..." She shrugged. "But at first it was just the strangest thing in the world, like this...flutter. Like there was a fish swimming around in there."

"Ha!" Harry chuckled as his hand smoothed over her. "I bet that was odd."

"Yes," she nodded and moved her hand to cup his cheek. "I'm so glad you can feel it now Captain."

"Me too," he sighed blissfully, turning to kiss her palm. "Me too. Now...tell me Mum..." His hand left her belly, pulling her fingers into his. "Is there anything I can do for you right now? Anything
I can bring you or..."

"Well," her eyes turned mischievous, her smile tipped smirky. "I think...I think I saw some chocolate on the stand by the door and..."

"Ha!" Harry clapped his hands together and sat up on his knees. "I'm on it." Leaning to kiss her lips, he swept down to her belly, his hands resting over her. "This is your father...don't move until I get back. Your mum needs chocolate and right now we do whatever mum asks..."

"Right now?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows playfully.

"Always," Harry laughed and leaned to kiss her belly before sliding from the bed. "I'll be right back."

"I'll be right here," she sighed back into the pillow.

"Perfect," Harry smiled at her and for the life of him—he meant it. This moment, this night, his life...it was perfect.

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The second major milestone came a week later during a private doctor's visit in the afternoon of a dreary London day. Everything about the day had been normal; mundane. An easy breakfast, a light day in the office, and then they left together for the appointment. It was routine; simple. Maddie's blood work was fine, her progress fantastic and when they took a look at the baby—everything was just where it was supposed to be.

It was simple and easy and ordinary.

Except it wasn't.

As they stepped out of the doctor's office and made way to their waiting car, they both struggled with their ability to maintain a calm, collected face. They both fought with their instinct to jump and laugh and shout. In fact, they could barely look at each other as they slipped into the backseat—each fighting to keep their features relaxed.

Because they were nothing close to relaxed. They were halfway through the pregnancy and their baby was doing magnificently. They were giddy and delirious and blissful and it took every single thing they had in them to keep it together.

Because they knew. Their little, squirming baby had listened to Harry and had been in the exact position needed to find out.

The car doors closed and the car pulled into motion and Harry couldn't take it any longer.

With her fingers held tightly in his, he turned to look at her, love and adoration seeping from his smile, permanent in his eyes. "Maddie..." He whispered. "A daughter?"

Biting at her lip, swallowing at her emotions, her eyes welled up and she nodded, bliss filling every corner of her face as she turned to meet his eyes. "A daughter."
"Okay Captain, what will it be?" Maddie sat up in her seat as Harry pulled the car down the drive to Highgrove. "Are we going to tell them or not?"

"Tell them?" He glanced over at her with a smile.

"Niece or nephew, granddaughter or grandson..." Maddie waved one hand towards the house as she patted her belly with the other. Kate, Will, and Arthur had already arrived earlier that day. Charles and Camilla would be joining them that evening. They were spending a long weekend in the country before a long stretch of work began; the launch of The Invictus Games on Monday, the Cambridges trip to New York the next weekend, and Remembrance Day events the week after that.

"Ah," he nodded, reaching over to smooth his hand over their growing baby. "I don't know. Do you want it to be a secret?"

"No," she shook her head with a grin. "I'm not very good at keeping secrets."

"Ha!" He laughed. "History has shown otherwise darling."

Maddie laughed along with him. "I don't have a particular leaning one way or another. We can tell them if you want. We can not tell them if you want. Totally up to you."

As the car slowed to a stop, they turned to look at each other for a moment while Harry thought it over. Shrugging, he leaned in to kiss her. "I'm going to say no...for now. Can I reserve the right to change my mind?"

"Always," Maddie kissed him once more before reaching for the door handle, ready to spend the weekend in the country with the family; excited to see the grounds green and growing—eager to see Arthur toddle around the lawn that was holding up even in October.

"Finally!" Will's voice called out from down the walk as he spotted them; his hand shielding his eyes from the sun. "We've been waiting for you two forever!"

"Forever?" Harry called back with a smirk. "You've been waiting forever?"

"Not me," Will laughed as he joined them on the gravel drive. "And not for you," he grinned at his brother for a moment before turning to Maddie. "Madeline," he leaned to kiss her cheeks, to hug her hello.

"William," she smiled as she greeted him. "Where's my favorite little man?"

"Just coming out now," he nodded and pointed towards the house as Kate stepped out with Arthur walking next to her holding onto her finger with his chubby little hand.

"Arthur!" Maddie clapped her hands, bending down to his level as his face brightened.

"Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" He called back, bringing out laughter from his group of adoring fans.
"I think he's always going to love you more," Harry sighed heavily as he rounded the car to his wife.

"Until he's a teenager and learns of your wild ways," Maddie winked at him as she lifted the little guy up into her arms. "And how are you doing today Mr. Arthur?"

"He's been a little rascally," Kate smiled. "He's ready to run wild and free in the mud around the garden. And how are you? How's the baby doing?"

"Baby is doing great," Maddie kissed Arthur's cheeks as the foursome began down the walk.

"Is he still moving a ton?" Kate pulled her sunglasses onto her eyes.

"She." Without thinking, without pause, Harry corrected her. "She is moving a ton and I finally get to feel it and..." Noticing the way the group stopped, the way Maddie's eyes widened as she looked at him, he caught it. "Shit."

"She?" Kate blinked, looking from Harry to Maddie. "She? She! Is it a girl?"

"I..." Maddie's cheeks flushed as she shook her head at her husband.

"Come on Maddie!" Kate implored her with a small, sweet stomp of her foot. "I told you! You have to tell me!"

"Fine," Maddie sighed into a wide, warm smile. "It's a girl."

"Oh my God!" Kate's hands flew to her mouth, her eyes big and bright as she laughed. "It's a girl! Maddie..." Her expression grew soft, her hands sliding down to her chest as though she were trying to keep her emotions in. "You're going to have a little baby girl."

"I am," Maddie blinked at her own tears, at her own bubbling emotions as she nodded her head.

"Congratulations," Will's smile was wide as he leaned in to kiss her cheeks before turning a smug smirk to his brother. "Well, well, well."

"I know," Harry shook his head, standing tall and proud in spite of all the grief he knew was coming his way—being a father of a daughter in this brood of boys.

"A girl?" Will lifted his eyebrows, his arms crossing over his chest. "Seems like the fates have a sense of humor."

"Say what you want," Harry shrugged. "In less than five months, I'm going to have a daughter." His voice wavered as he said it.

"Did you hear that little man?" Kate leaned in to her son as she hugged Maddie. "You're going to have a baby girl cousin."

"Yes you are," Maddie kissed his cheeks. "Yes you are."

"Have you told him yet?" Will looked from his brother to Maddie.

"Who?" Maddie's eyebrows drew together.
"Our father," his eyes met Harry's and Maddie caught the quiet exchange.

"No," she smiled, watching them closely. "Why?"

"Because..." Will took a breath. "There were a few times in our lives when he would have gladly exchanged both of us..."

"Oh several times," Harry offered with a snicker.

"For a little girl." William finished. "He's going to be...happy?" He looked to Harry.

"Over the moon," Harry smiled. "He's going to be over the moon."

And he was exactly that. When Harry let out the news, Charles was around his wife and hugging Maddie close, his smile probably the widest Maddie had ever seen it; cheeks pink and round, eyes dancing with delight. She loved seeing Charles like that—completely, unabashedly happy. And then, with Maddie's shoulders held warm under his hands, he confessed the same thing his son's had earlier in the garden.

"Don't get me wrong, I love my boys," his voice was low as though he were speaking only to Maddie, though everyone was listening. "I would do anything for either of them..."

"Of course," Maddie chuckled, seeing the amusement on Harry's face as he looked to his brother—knowing what was coming.

"And I couldn't be a prouder father. They've both turned out remarkably well given all that was tossed at them." Maddie felt a tug in her heart.

"Yes they have," she agreed with him easily, seeing the pride in his eyes, the love in his voice as he spoke of them.

"But I would be lying if I said that there weren't times—many, many times—when I wished that we..." He looked down at his fingers as his mind drifted through the past. "That we had been able to have a daughter as well." With a soft smile, Maddie waited with him as he thought it all over, as he pulled back to present. His eyes lifted to hers with such a sweetness it made her heart swell. "And when you two joined the family...first Catherine and then you..." He looked over Maddie's shoulder to his other daughter-in-law who was watching with her own warm smile. "Having two such wonderful, extraordinary women join our family, it made my old heart content and whole and...happy." Bending to kiss the top of her hand, he took a breath. "And now a granddaughter?" His face lit up as he grinned. "A sweet, perfect little baby girl? To balance out our wonderful little Arthur?" He looked to his grandson, then to his wife who was beaming and then back to Maddie. "I don't know what to say. I'm speechless...and full of emotion." His voice caught in his throat just a bit. "Thank you so much Madeline. I don't know what to say..." His arms wrapped tightly around her and Maddie felt tears press to her eyes as she hugged him back.

"Thank her?" Harry spoke up, bringing his sarcastic tone to lighten the mood in the room. "Perhaps you should thank me, Hmm? My understanding of the reproductive process is..."

"The reproductive process?" Will snickered as he shook his head at his brother.

"Is that it's the father's...contribution...that determines the gender of the baby," he winked at
Maddie as his hand moved over his father's back to his shoulder. "So if you want to thank somebody for the little girl...I'm just saying..."

"Yes, yes, Henry," Charles laughed, low and warm, as he released Maddie and turned to his son. "Well done." He kissed his cheek as the others laughed. "Come here, let me hug you for the enormous amount of work you're doing to grow this child."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed loud and wide, meeting Kate's eyes in a shared moment.

"Well done son," Charles hugged his youngest son tightly. Despite the humor rounding the room, he was immensely proud and beyond happy.

"Thank you," Harry laughed as he hugged his father back, watching his wife as she took them both in, as she smiled wide and easy; content.

"A daughter," Will's voice was low as he sat in the chair across from his brother on the patio outside their father's country home. Everyone had long ago gone to bed and the two of them still sat outside drinking the last of their brews, smoking the last of their cigars even as they were bundled up in the chilled weather. "You're going to have a daughter."

"I know," Harry's eyes sparkled in the soft, faint light from the moon. Puffing out a breath of smoke from his cigar, he leaned back in his chair. "A daughter."

"You know that was my biggest fear," Will confessed as he crossed his legs, one foot resting on the other knee. "Having a daughter."

"What?" Harry's forehead scrunched up. "Why?"

"I don't know," Will shook his head, bringing his own cigar back to his lips for a draw. "The comparisons I suppose."

"To mum?" Harry lifted his eyebrows as he relaxed even further into the chair.

"That," Will nodded with a light shrug. "And to Kate, to Gran, to...everyone," he sighed and let the corners of his lips twist upward. "It was easier for us than it was for Bea or Eugenie. Even with...all of it...it's easier for us than it is for the girls. You know that."

"Yeah," Harry nodded, his mind drifting off as he thought about his brother's words, judging their weight, their severity. "You're trying to scare me?"

"No," Will was quick with a shake of his head, leaning to reach for his drink on the table. "I'm saying...it was a fear for me. Not for you?" He was asking, curious about where his brother's mind was.

It took him a few seconds before he could answer, a few moments of thought, before his smile stretched higher and in his characteristic smirk and innate rebellious nature, he shrugged. "Not for me."

"Ha!" Will's head tossed back in a loud, bark of a laugh. "Is that because she's half you?"

"Nah," Harry shook his head. "It's because she's half Maddie."
Will's eyes snapped up to meet Harry's, holding for a moment before he shook his head and took a long drink. "Smooth."

"Smooth?" Harry laughed. "I have no reason to be smooth for you big brother. I mean every word." He took in a puff from his cigar and blew it out. "Maddie is strong and confident and...fuck. She's bloody brilliant. If our daughter has any of that...she'll turn out just fine." Harry thought for a second, his lips turning down in a frown. "And gorgeous." His forehead pinched as he looked up to his brother. "Damn it."

"Thinking about your daughter out there with...the likes of you?" Will snickered as he waved his hand towards his brother.

"Yes." Harry knew he was ridiculous to feel tense, but he felt it anyway.

"And with men like your friends," Will offered with lifted eyebrows.

"My friends..." Harry's voice fell off as his eyes flashed wide. "Bishop."

"There it is," Will pointed. "Terrified."

"I..."

"Don't worry," Will shook his head, leaning forward as he sat his drink down. "We'll teach Arthur how to shoot, how to throw a punch."

"Arthur?" Harry blinked, his eyes wide awake as he watched her move off to the bathroom with a knowing smile. She was quiet as she returned, sliding back into the bed next to him and tucking in close.

"Good Morning Captain," she whispered into the crook of his neck as he drew her to him.

"Good Morning," he whispered back, kissing the top of her head as he hugged her tight.

"What are you doing up already?" Her toes wiggled into the warm space between his legs, seeking heat.

"I couldn't sleep," his hand ran smooth and warm up her arm, over her shoulder and around her back. "My mind has been going a little crazy in here."

"Yeah?" Maddie smiled sweetly. "Thinking about the launch on Monday?"

"No," he shook his head, chuckling as his mind shifted for a moment. "That's all ready to go, there are other people working on that. I just have to make a speech. That's all."

"That's not all you're doing," she laughed into a sigh. "But okay. Tell me then what were you
"thinking about daddy?" She rubbed her finger over his creased brow. "You want to tell me about it? Maybe I can help."

"Yes," he nodded, pulling her hand from his forehead to his lips for a kiss. "I do want to tell you all about it. But there's someplace I want to take you first...is that okay?" He turned her hand over to kiss her palm. "Come for a walk with me?"

"Right now?" Maddie glanced over at the clock, outside at the dawning day. "I'm in my pajamas and I would need to get dressed and..."

"In our pajamas," Harry cut her off, hugging her close for a second before pulling away. "Come on. Let's throw on some wellies and coats and go. I promise it won't be long, or far. And there will be no one but us. We'll be fine in pajamas."

"But..." Maddie tried to snuggle closer. "It's so much warmer in this bed."

"It is," he laughed, leaning to kiss her. "I promise to bring you back to it. And to warm you up. But there's something I want to show you. What do you say? Come with me?"

"Okay Captain..." She sighed dramatically but held her smile. "I'll come with you."

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As their boots crunched the gravel underneath them and their coats pulled tight to keep them from the chill, Maddie walked alongside her husband as he told her about his conversation with Will the night before.

"This is what you lost sleep over? Worrying that someday our daughter might hook up with somebody like you and Bishop?"

"Don't say hook up." He held up a finger, his eyes narrowing as he shook his head.

"Harry," she laughed at him as she followed his lead. "You're worried about your daughter finding a man like you?"

"Or Bishop," he nodded emphatically. "Yes."

Maddie looked up at him for a beat, her eyes blinking as she watched him and then with conviction and confidence she shrugged and sighed. "Well I should hope so."

"What?" His eyes snapped to look at her. "No, I don't think you understand."

"And Bishop?" she tucked her hand into the crook of his arm as they turned and headed to the side. "While this scenario is ridiculously in the future...if our daughter should bring home a man like her daddy, like the man I married, I would be...elated."

"But..."

"And Bishop?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted. "Do you know a man who is more loyal? Who has a bigger heart? Who would let nothing stand in the way of the happiness of his family?" Harry's eyes were wide with confusion as she continued. "You don't Harry. You don't. And gosh, I would think you would want somebody like that for our daughter."
"I...." Harry shook his head. "I think I lost track of my point..."

"Good," Maddie snickered. "It was a stupid point."

"Hey!" He pulled back in surprise.

"It was!" She laughed, tugging him back. "I can't believe you would think that I would agree with you about what bad men you and Bishop are."

"We weren't always like this," he defended. "There were many, many women who were before you and Ella who aren't quite as enamored as you seem to be."

"I know that Captain," she turned to kiss his arm. "But our child will have my brains and your street smarts...she'll be fine." Maddie let out a long breath. "Besides. Maybe she'll end up liking women. Then you won't have to worry about men like you and Bishop. It'll be women like me...and Kate and..."

"Oh!" Harry perked up in excitement. "Oh! Good one. Okay. Okay..." He took a breath. "Yes. I actually like that much better. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she laughed, shaking her head. "Now do you want to tell me where we're going?"

"Ah, yes," he nodded, patting her hand. "Actually...wait." He stopped completely, turning to face her. "Ella."

"What?" Maddie's forehead knotted. "Ella? What are you..."

"Women like you or Kate or...Ella..." His eyes grew larger. "You know I love her but..."

"Are we back to our daughter again?" Maddie crossed her arms over her chest. "Really Harry?"

"Ella married Bishop!" He waved his hand. "And they had a baby! A baby they created at Buckhouse!"

"Okay," Maddie stepped towards him slowly, cautiously; patting his arm softly. "You do know you've lost your mind just a little bit. Right? You understand how insane you sound?"

"You say that now."

"I know that now. Worrying about our daughter who isn't even born yet and Buckie who is a baby." She rolled her eyes. "More than a little insane Captain. Is this what woke you up early? Is this why we're out here walking?"

"No," he shook his head, taking a few deep breaths as he calmed himself, as he brought himself back to the purpose of this hike. "It started out about Buckie but ended up being about something else entirely."

"Maybe you tell me what..." She reached for his hand and smiled sweetly, ready to move on to other things.

"Okay," he nodded, snapping back to her. Bending to kiss her fingers in his hand, he pulled her with him towards the treehouse. "Just...over...here..." They took a few more strides and drew to a
stop. "This tree..." He pointed to a tall English Oak as Maddie stepped into his side. "I wanted to talk to you about this tree."

"You..." Maddie looked to the tall tree next to them. "You want to talk to me about this tree?"

"See, now you kind of want to return to the Buckie discussion, don't you," Harry smirked, that gleam in his eye flickering.

"No," she shook her head with a smile. "But I do want you to explain what you mean."

"Fair enough," Harry nodded. "The night we told my father you were pregnant, he brought me out here. We smoked cigars and he told me about this tree...and this one right here," Harry patted another not far off. "He told me about how he and my mother planted each one of them after Will and I were born. That one is Will's and this one..." Harry's hand returned to the tall trunk. "This one is mine."

"Ahhhh..." Maddie nodded in understanding, warming at the sentiment. "That's actually a really sweet story."

"It is," Harry agreed easily. "He had a speech that went with it. We talked about my mother, we talked a bit about fatherhood..." He trailed off for a blink and then turned his wide smile back to Maddie. "So this morning as I was lying in bed waiting for you to wake, I was thinking about these trees and how...I don't know..." He glanced down, just a tad bit sheepish as he thought it over. "I think I would like to do something like this too...when our children are born."

"You want to plant a tree for our daughter," Maddie felt her heart swelling in her chest.

"I do," he nodded. "It doesn't have to be an English Oak. It can be something else...something more American if you like..." He chuckled as she rolled her eyes. "But I like the idea...very much."

"I do too."

"Yeah?"

"Of course," she reached out to rub his arm. "You know me...I'm a farmer's daughter, I'm an enormous fan of what your father's put together here. I would love to plant a tree here for our daughter. Do you think he would mind though?"

"Oh no," Harry shook his head. "Not here."

"Not here?"

"No." And then she saw it; that smile, those eyes. Something was up.

"Harry..." She eyed him as he moved to stand directly in front of her, crouching so that his eyes were level with hers.

"I think it's time we bought our own place in the country."

"What?" Maddie's eyes turned up to him in slight surprise, laughter on her lips.

"We've talked about it before," he continued on. "We talked about it before the baby, we talked
about it not too long ago during our birthdays..." He shrugged and moved in closer, his hands on her arms pulling her to him as his voice lowered with hushed excitement. "Think about it Maddie. A country home of our own. We can plant whatever you like...any tree, any flower. We can plant acres of delphinium. Hell, we can plant corn if you want to."

"Oh yeah? You want to be a farmer?" She smiled at his sweetness.

"I want to have a place where we go to leave the city, where we control the color of paint on the walls...a place that wasn't the same place I went through my awkward teenage years. I want a place where we can plant trees for all of our children..." He reached out to stroke a finger down her cheek. "And if you want me to be a farmer, I will be."

Maddie snickered, turning her lips to kiss his hand. "You know I love it here at Highgrove."

"I know you do," he nodded, his hands moving up and down her arms. "And it just so happens I know the owner and I'm sure he would be more than elated to lend you some tips on gardening and landscaping..."

"I'm sure he would," Maddie moved into his space into his arms, wrapping her own around his waist. "I would love a place in the country Harry."

"Yeah?"

"Yes," she nodded, leaning up on her toes to kiss him. "You don't have to work hard to convince me of this one. I'm in."

"Really?" She watched as even through the excitement, he grew a bit soft, a tad sentimental.

"Yes," she kissed him again, snuggling in closer. "Of course. Let's do it."

"So when we get back to the house, I can call up the realtor the family works with and ask him to get together a list?"

"When we get back, you should call up the realtor the family works with and ask him to get together a list." Maddie's eyes were bright and her smile firm; she was just as excited as he was.

"Yes!" His hands moved into the air in victory—maybe she wasn't quite as excited as him. Maddie laughed as he hugged her tight. "Can we go see one or two today or tomorrow?"

"If he can put something together that fast," Maddie nodded, turning to kiss his cheek.

"God I love you," his lips turned to catch hers.

"Good," she smiled against his mouth. "Now, can we head back to the house? I'm freezing and I need to call my mother and let her in on the big secret."

"Yes! Yes of course. Come on," he took her hand and pulled her with him. "Also..." He wrapped a warm, protective arm around her shoulders. "Did you notice that my tree is bigger than Will's?"

"Ha!" Maddie's laughter rang out into the space around them. "Yes Captain. I noticed."
"Well?" Harry waited until they were alone on the back patio of the immaculate home they had just toured before he asked. Standing next to her as she looked out over the expansive back yard, his fingers played lightly with hers and he whispered. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful," she responded quickly. And it was—it was enormous and completely updated and it sat on a sprawling acreage with trees and even a bit of water running along the edge. As soon as Harry had called, the realtor had set up a showing for them the next morning. And here they were.

"It is beautiful," Harry agreed, one corner of his mouth turning up as his eyes slid to the side, watching her out of the corner. And he waited. He knew she had more to say, he could feel it in the way she stood, in the air between them. So he waited right there next to her.

"It's..." She bit her bottom lip and took a breath, turning towards him as she broke whatever trance she had slipped into. "It's too..." Her nose scrunched up as she tried to think of the right word. "Modern?"

"Modern?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, amused at the look on her face.

"It's just...completely updated, Harry." Her voice dropped low as she moved in closer to him like she was sharing a secret. "The bathrooms looked like something from the Jetsons and the kitchen....I didn't even know where the refrigerator was..."

Harry laughed, loud and wide, as he clapped his hands together. "So we're going to keep looking."

"Yes," she smiled up at him with apologetic eyes. "I'm sorry. I know he brought us out on short notice and..."

"No, no," Harry held up a hand as he shook his head. "No apologies. None. We don't need to do that." With a hand on her back, he gestured back towards the house. "But we should tell him what we do and don't like so that next time..."

"A little less Jetsons?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"A little less Jetsons," Harry nodded and reached for the door, holding it open as she stepped inside.

"Okay," Maddie agreed. "Hey...on our way back to Highgrove, do you think we can stop in Tetbury for dessert?" Her hand patted her belly as her smile turned flirty.

"Yes," Harry shook his head with a chuckle. "We can absolutely stop for dessert darling. Anything you want."

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"Better?" Harry smiled at his wife as they stepped from the restaurant out into the sun.

"Much," she nodded, pulling her sunglasses to her eyes. They had stopped and had a light lunch and a not-so-light dessert. Feeling satisfied and relaxed, she linked her fingers through Harry's as they made their way down the walkway.

"So what's next Mum?" He drew her closer to his side, his shaded eyes glancing around them for any sign of photographers. "Want to head back to Highgrove for the afternoon? Back to London?
"Norway for another look at the lights?"

"Ha," Maddie laughed lightly, leaning into his arm. "I don't know. Maybe we can look through a few shops? Walk off some of that dessert?"

"Sure," he shrugged his shoulders and Maddie loved how at ease and relaxed he was; even as the launch awaited him the next morning and she was sure there was quite a bit skirting around in his head.

"Just a couple," she promised but he wasn't put out. Truthfully, he couldn't think of much else they had to do that day than relax and take it easy. The week would bring with it plenty for them to do. So he held onto her hand and followed along as she pulled him through a few shops; looking things over, picking up a few items that sparked her attention. And then as they wound their way through the back of one store, Maddie was sorting through a few children's books when something caught her eye.

"Oh my God," she whispered, her fingers pressing to her lips as she nudged Harry. "Look." She pointed as inconspicuously as she could.

"Hmm?" He turned to look where she was looking and he saw it. There was a table with stacks of baby onesies—all colors, all kinds. But the one his wife was pointing at was a soft pink with pearly, cream lettering that read 'Made in England'.

"Harry..." Her voice was soft and sweet and full of that deep emotional feeling that came when she thought of the baby growing inside of her. Her fingers were gentle with it as she pulled it up from the table. As it unfolded, a small ruffle of tulle lined the backside and as Maddie giggled, even Harry had to admit it was pretty damn cute—even as he rolled his eyes. "It's adorable."

"It is," he agreed with a nod of his head.

"I think I want this," she whispered, glancing around the store as she said it, looking at the handful of people shopping there with them.

"Yeah?" Harry lifted his eyebrows. "Does it bother you at all that she might not have been made in England?"

"Ha," Maddie pressed her fingers tighter to her lips to keep from laughing. "There's just as good a chance that she was made here...even better if we're honest.

"Okay," Harry's voice dropped lower. "Does it bother you at all that this is very clearly meant for...a she?" His eyes darted out around them and then back to her and she knew exactly what he was saying. He was talking about the people who would witness them buying it; certainly the clerk and potentially the four or so people shopping. He was talking about how fast news often spread—faster than fire in some cases.

Maddie held his gaze for a second, looking down at the soft pink fabric, her thumb stroking over the material as her lips curled into a small smile. "What if it doesn't?" She whispered, feeling silly as her eyes welled up. "What if it doesn't bother me at all?"

Harry's smile pulled high, his eyes dancing as they stayed locked with hers, as his smug confidence took over his face. And then with a small nod and a shrug, he arched an eyebrow and tossed the decision over to her. "This is all you love."
"Okay..." Her voice was barely a whisper, really just a breath as her mind ran it all over in her head. It was bigger than this onesie—this moment. It was bigger than the soft pink fabric and the cute play on words and the adorable row of tulle on the bottom. This was her turning over this secret that was theirs. Or this was her relieving them both of the burden of keeping it quite for the next few months.

Or. She looked up at her husband, her sweet, loving husband who was ready to go whichever direction she wanted and she felt her emotions well up again. Or this was about two expectant parents buying something sweet and funny for the baby they were over the moon about, the daughter they couldn't wait to meet.

She laughed lightly at their lives; at how a simple moment could be something so monumental, at how sometimes they blew things out of proportion. "Okay..." She took a deep breath, leaned in to kiss his lips and then, without blinking, she pulled the onesie into her hands and marched right up to the counter with Harry right behind her.

The cashier rang them up, did a double take as Harry paid and smiled nervously as Maddie took the bag and thanked her—and then she watched as the young couple, the famous faces, stepped hand-in-hand out of the store and back into their day.

She wasn't the only one who saw them that day and eventually a few tweets would drop, a grainy photo would be released and the secret was out. Though Maddie and Harry would find it quite humorous when the stories that ran were absolutely certain they were having a boy—not one of them believing either of them would ever do something so open, instead choosing to believe that they were trying to throw them off.

Maddie sat off to the side watching with enormous pride as her husband stood in camo in front of the brilliant black and yellow logo that would soon become internationally recognizable. It was Monday and Harry was launching his brainchild, The Invictus Games. Though she knew he was nervous, could see him twisting together his fingers and biting at the tiniest corner of his lips, she could also see the excitement in his eyes; she could hear it in his voice.

"Yes. This is a challenging timeline. But thanks to Sir Keith Mills who said that he had nothing going on this year, that he'd be more than happy to get the band back together again..." Maddie chuckled along with the crowd as Harry explained how the same group that had been responsible for the hugely successful Olympics had agreed to come back to the table to support and organize the Invictus Games. It was going to be a quick turnaround. They were launching in late September with plans to compete in February. Five months—and both of Harry's babies would come to fruition. Maddie's hand drifted over her stomach as Harry continued. "Why do we need it? To demonstrate the power of sport. To inspire recovery. To support rehabilitation. To demonstrate life beyond disability. It really is as simple as that." She could feel herself tear up, could feel her emotions welling up in her chest as her husband brought life to this beautiful idea. "This is part of a broader legacy. The games are a means to an end." Harry spoke with pride and clarity as the cameras snapped away, as the video rolled, as the world learned of The Invictus Games.

When he finished his speech, they stood for photographs, they shook hands and smiled and when they slipped into the car that would take them home, Harry let out a long, slow, deep breath and Maddie reached for his hand—both of them knowing just how much work was about to unfold.

And Maddie could feel the pride she had for him, the admiration she carried, growing and growing and she couldn't wait to see this become a reality.
"Maddie..." Harry's voice was nearly sing-song as he called out to her from his end of the couch. "Madeline..." He nudged her on the other end with his toe, his legs stretched out towards her just as hers were stretched out towards him.

"Give me a minute Captain," her eyes lifted up from the pad of paper in front of her with a teasing glare. She tapped the pen in her hand to the tip of her nose as she thought.

"But it's been five..." He let the pad of paper he held in his fingers fall to his chest as his head tipped back in a dramatic moan. "And I'm dying over here."

With a snicker she shook her head and looked at the names she had listed on the piece of paper. "I only have three. The goal was five. I'm going to need a minute to think of two more and..."

"No, no. Come on," he held his notepad out to her, waving for her to give him the one she held in her hands. "We can do it with three."

"Easy Handsy," she swatted at his hand, holding hers out of reach as he laughed. "How many do you have?"

"Six." He didn't even bat an eye.

"Six!" Her eyes widened and her eyebrows rose. "You were only supposed to do five!"

"Yes well..." He tried for a moment to think of a reason, an excuse. But he had none. His lips pulled up into his standard grin, his eyes dancing as he looked across to her.

"Jesus," Maddie rolled her eyes and pinched his big toe that wiggled next to her. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Right now or..." His eyebrows wagged suggestively bringing laughter from his wife. "Come on love. This isn't a concrete, unchangeable list it's just...a start. A brainstorm, a beginning point. Let me see what you have."

"Fine," Maddie sighed and leaned forward, holding her pad out to him. They had spent the day at the launch of Invictus, shaking hands and meeting people and that night after dinner, they had snuggled up on opposite ends of the couch as Harry rubbed her well-worked feet. And their conversation had naturally drifted to their daughter. When Maddie had suggested the brainstorm some names, Harry had been quick to retrieve paper and pen and now here they were, exchanging lists.

"Thank you very much," Harry snatched hers up quickly and held his to her, leaning back with a grin as she took it and settled back as well.

With her pen twirling in her fingers and her bottom lip tucked between her teeth, she began to read.

With every name she read, with every stroke of his penmanship, she felt the emotions inside of her bubble and rise; they were naming their child, their daughter. It was huge and heavy and she felt silly as tears blurred her vision.
"Harry..." Her voice cracked as she looked up from his list.

"Yeah?" He glanced up to her, catching her tears. "Hey...what is it?" He put the pad aside and reached for her foot, pulling it back into his lap. "This isn't really because I have six is it? You can cross one out if it's really a big deal and..."

"Ha! Crap..." She laughed as she wiped at her eyes, his words having their exact intended effect. "I'm sorry. I just...I started reading your names and it...we told everyone this weekend, we bought the onesie and we...we're writing down names and it just suddenly felt so real and it was overwhelming. Just for a second."

"Aw baby," he laughed lightly, rubbing at her foot as he moved a little closer. "It is real. And it is emotional and...that little baby girl in there needs a name but we have time to think about it, time to decide."

"I know," she nodded, loving him so much—the way he knew how to handle her like this.

"And if you don't want to do this now, yet, then we don't have to..."

"No, no," she shook her head, sniffing at the last of the tears. "I want to do this now. I do. Okay..." She took in a deep breath and looked back down at the list, her lips curving into a smile. "I like number two."

"Yeah?" He sighed as he leaned back, grinning as he reached for her pad. "I'm a fan of number three."

"Really?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows. "I had a hard time with that one..." She shrugged her shoulders. "I had a hard time with all of them actually. None of my names sounded....you know..." She waved her hand at him.

"You know?" Harry snickered, his gaze narrowing. "What do you mean?"

"I mean...I mean...regal enough."

"Regal enough?" A puff of laughter pushed through his lips. "Who do you think we're naming here?"

"The fifth in line to the throne," Maddie didn't bat an eye. "Who do you think we're naming here?"

Harry held her gaze for a moment, held his tongue for a beat before he took a breath and his smile softened. "That's a fair point but..."

"I know it is," she cut in with lifted eyebrows.

"But," he continued, one finger raised as if to make a point. "But she's also our daughter and the likelihood of her ever reaching said throne is just...not good," he shook his head.

"Well that's a fair point."

"I know," he winked in that smug way that he had—the one that made her want to pinch his cheeks as she kissed his mouth.
"But even still, do we need to pick a family name?"

"Not really," he shrugged. "Look at Zara...Eugenie...Savannah...those aren't family names, nor are they very regal..."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, taking it in, her mind working it over. "I have another question for you."

"Perfect," he wiggled his fingers. "Bring it on."

"Alright," she shifted around a bit, stretching her legs further. "How many names does our baby have to have?"

"Sorry?"

"Henry Charles Albert David," she pointed at him before blinking and pointing to herself. "Madeline Jae. You have four. I have two. How many does the baby need to have?"

"Ah," he understood. "Need to? Just one. Or a symbol of some sort if we're going unconventional."

"For real Harry," Maddie poked him with her toe. "Does the baby need four?"

"No," Harry laughed with a shake of his head, grabbing for her foot. "She doesn't need four."

"Two?"

"Two would be nice. Maybe three."

"See," she smiled sweetly, her shoulders easing. "That's all I needed to know...how many names we're working with."

"Well there you go," Harry grinned across their tangled legs at her. "We could just go with the three you were able to come up with and call it a day."

"Ha. Ha. Ha." She rolled her eyes, ready to come back with something snarky and glib, but their daughter had other ideas. "Oh!" Maddie's eyes flew wide open and her hand moved to her stomach. "Harry!" She looked to him with an excited smile.

"She's moving, isn't she." But before she could answer his non-question, he had tossed aside the pad of paper in his hand and had moved closer, her legs moving around him as his arm stretched out—their fingers tangled together as they waited patiently for her to move again.

And when she did, she had two proud, beaming parents there to feel it.
"I would like the record to show that I am not happy about this," Harry called out to Maddie from where he sat back against their headboard, his legs stretched out in front of him as he watched her pack.

"Oh yeah?" Maddie glanced over to him as she zipped up her travel bag and sat it on the chair next to the door. "Which record is that? Do you keep an official record of such things?" Her luggage had been packed the night before and was waiting at the bottom of the stairs to be loaded when the car showed up any minute now.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he lifted up a scarf that she had laid out on the bed. "You're making fun." He ran the fabric through his fingers as she pulled on her shoes.

"A little bit," she grinned, reaching for the scarf and snatching it from his fingers. "Do you want the record to also show that you were pouting like a small child because your wife had to leave you for two days?"

"Two days!" He exclaimed.

"One night," she giggled, wrapping the scarf around her neck and pulling her hair out from underneath.

"One long night," his lips turned down for a moment. "And you're taking our child with you."

"Aww..." She sighed, moving onto her knees on the bed next to him. "You're going to miss your daughter."

"I'm going to miss my family," he turned wide, puppy-dog eyes up to her, his hands reaching out for her growing stomach.

"We're going to miss you too," she ran her hand through his hair, sliding down his cheek to his jaw. Her fingers lifted his chin, her thumb swiping across his bottom lip. "But I'm going to accompany your father to Wales because Camilla's back is out and the doctor ordered her to bed rest."

"I know," he sighed, turning his face to kiss her hand, lightening up with a small smile. "I'm just going to miss you."

"You're going to be so busy with Invictus meetings, you won't even know we're gone," she smiled as he ran his hand over her belly.

"I'm going to know you're gone," he leaned in to kiss her bump, giving in and easing up. "But I promise not to throw a fit when the car arrives."

"Ha!" Maddie's head leaned back in laughter. "That's big of you."

"I try," he shrugged, his hand moving up into her hair. "Come here and kiss me," his fingers wrapped around the back of her neck, bringing her lips down to meet his; an easy feat that was met with zero resistance.
"Mmm..." Maddie smiled against his lips, wishing she had time to open her mouth over his, wishing she had time to draw this out. "Harry..." She warned when his tongue teased at her lips. "I don't have time..." She shook her head when his hand brought her closer.

"I can be fast," he wagged his eyebrows suggestively even as he pulled back; knowing she was right.

"Tempting," she sighed, straightening up and moving from the bed as her fingers traced over her hot lips. "I'm going to miss you too."

"I bet," he chuckled, moving off the bed himself, smoothing his hand over his tie as he rounded over to her side.

"I am," her eyes peeked up at him through lowered lashes, her voice dropping suggestively. "Maybe when I get home we can..." She bit her bottom lip and grinned.

"Madeline," he groaned, his body reacting to that look, to her voice. His hands reached out for her, bringing her closer.

"And when we do...I don't want you to be anything close to...fast..." She drew in a breath as she looked him over, her pregnancy hormones igniting her desire for him.

"You have no idea how much I want you right now," he shook his head.

"Please," she met his dark, smoldering gaze with one of her own. "My...needs...have multiplied by a magnitude since I've been pregnant."

"Don't I know it," his hands ran up over her back and slowly back down.

"I haven't heard any complaints," she slipped just a little closer.

"And you won't," he shook his head, his fingers tightening around her, pushing her body to his.

"Harry..." She warned, her hands reaching out to his chest, running down over his stomach, her mind scrambling to figure out exactly how much time she had before the cars were there. But she was too late. Just as she was starting to give in, the telltale knock on the door came. "It's time to go," she looked up at her husband with regret before she took a breath and stepped completely away from him. "And you have to go to work."

"I hate work," he grumbled, trying to control his urges, trying to get back to calm. "And I hate Wales."

"Ha!" She laughed, turning away from him and reaching for her bag; collecting her scattered mind and dirty thoughts. "Don't let anyone else hear you say that."

"I don't care who hears me," he chuckled and hurried over to her. "Here. Let me get this." Taking the bag from her hand, he followed her from the room and down the stairs where he begrudgingly hugged her and kissed her good-bye; watching her slip into the car that would take her to pick up his father before he shut the door and tried to shift his attention back to Invictus.

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"Oh my goodness!" Maddie's eyes grew wide when she and Charles emerged from their
afternoon event. Having spent much of their first day in Wales indoors, surrounded by people and warmth, they had completely missed what had been happening outside. The steady rain that had greeted them when they arrived had shifted and turned to snow, a big, heavy, wet snow that fell over the land like a blanket.

"Oh wow," Charles stopped next to her, his eyes looking up at the sky as the flakes continued to fall; his smile warming his face as he looked back to Maddie. "Hold on my dear," his hand reached out for her, stopping her from taking another step forward.

As Maddie realized maybe her shoes weren't the best for sure footing in the deepening snow, her father-in-law offered his arm to her; sweet and gentlemanly. "Thank you," she grinned as she tucked her hand into his elbow. Holding onto each other, they navigated through the small patches of ice and the flurries of snow. And she knew they were quite the sight, guessing accurately that cameras were snapping.

His assistant Mark was right behind them with an umbrella in an ill-fated attempt at blocking them from the weather, Libby just next to him carrying his folders as the foursome made their way to the awaiting car. As they slid into the backseat, adjusting in the dry warmth it provided, the smiles were bright and their cheeks were pink and they waved to the people still waiting as they pulled away from the event and off towards the hotel.

"Had they forecasted such a thing?" Charles spoke to Mark who sat across from him, his large hands brushing snow from the leg of his pants.

"No Sir," Mark shook his head. "They had anticipated rain, but nothing of this kind of snow."

Tearing her eyes from the winter wonderland outside her window, Maddie looked across to Libby. "Did we pack more suitable shoes for this evening's dinner?"

"Yes Ma'am," Libby nodded with a small smile which Maddie easily returned.

"Thank you." Of course Libby had packed for every possible scenario. In fact, Maddie would have bet money that, on the off chance she wanted to go swimming, Libby might be able to find a bathing suit she had stashed, 'just in case.' Turning her eyes back to the flurries, Maddie settled back into her seat. They had a long evening ahead of them and she was already feeling a little sleepy. With a smile she reminded herself to eat a little bit before they went back out, to remember to have some water. And then she watched as the streets, and the snow, flew by.

The snow hadn't let up at all when they went into the evening, a gala dinner event. And by the time they had come out, the inches had accumulated and the lighthearted amusement of their driver and protective detail had given way to concern and planning for a safe trip to the hotel. It took them longer than they would have liked but the streets were not good, bordering on bad, and by the time the cars reached their destination, Maddie could see the stress on their faces.

Tired and spent from the long day, Maddie didn't argue when Charles suggested they retire to their own rooms for the night. She told him goodnight, hugged him close and then continued down the hallway just a little bit more to her own suite. Kicking her shoes off to the side, she made her way back to her room, sighing as she shut the door behind her and reached for the back zipper of her dress. As she shrugged out of it, she draped it over the back of a chair and continued undressing. Finding her warm pajamas, she slipped into them and finished readying for bed; washing her face, brushing her teeth. Only after she was done did she pull her silenced phone from her clutch and
swipe at the screen.

"Of course," she smiled happily, climbing into the big bed and pulling the blankets around her. There was one voicemail from Harry, three text messages. With a giggle, she pulled up his phone number and dialed, deciding to push aside the messages and go straight to the source.

"Madeline," he let out a breath as he answered his phone. "I've been waiting for you to call for hours!"

"Hours?" Maddie snickered, leaning back against the big, fluffy pillows. "I've been working all night, you know that."

"I do," he agreed. "I also know that there's a blizzard over your head."

"You've seen the weather forecast?"

"I've seen the pictures of my lovely, pregnant wife traipsing through snow drifts!"

"Okay," Maddie laughed, ready to reel him in. "First, I was walking slowing, not traipsing. And if you noticed, your father had ahold of me and just in case he didn't, Mark and Libby were there to back him up—with Arthur there to back them up." She took a breath and smiled. "And it was a few inches of snow. Hardly a drift...at least not then."

"Not then?" He seemed to soften up a bit, letting up on his need for over-protection.

"There's a bit more snow now," Maddie offered, hoping he couldn't hear the smirk on her lips.

"Madeline..."

"Henry..." She matched his tone, rolling her eyes as she did. "You do know I'm only pregnant, not suffering from some kind of disorder that's turned me into fine china."

"Yes I know. But..."

"And you do remember from where I hail?"

"From where you hail?" Her word choice threw him off his single-minded mission for a moment. "Look. Just because you're from Colorado where it snows occasionally doesn't mean..."

"Captain," her voice dropped as she tried a different approach. "Hey baby..."

"I..." He stalled. It had worked. "What?"

"Are you really this worried about me walking through the snow?" She smiled, finding the whole thing amusing and...sweet. "Or is there a chance that you just...miss me a little bit?"

With a groan and a sigh, she could hear Harry catching himself, giving in. "God I really do," His admission made her heart swell.

"I miss you too," she gave in a bit, smiling into the room. "Why don't you tell me about your day? How were all of your meetings?"

"Long," he chuckled. "But productive. Did you know that we've sold out all of the events?"
"Really?" Maddie was impressed and proud. "That's amazing Harry."

"It's surprising." There he was, still humble, still shocked.

"No," Maddie shook her head. "It's not surprising. This is a wonderful event; brilliant really. And God, remember the tweet you sent out a few months ago? That must have spurred quite an interest." She could feel the pride building in her chest. "I'm so proud of the work you're doing Harry. I really am. I hope you know that."

"Now see," his voice was low. "This isn't fair. You can't say those things when you aren't close enough to kiss me."

"I'll see you tomorrow. You can kiss me then."

"Good," he grinned, letting the peaceful, contented silence settle between them. "In all seriousness though...it really is snowing there isn't it."

"Yes," Maddie nodded, her eyes glancing towards the window. "There were several more inches after the event this evening than there were before. And it's not letting up. I think we're in for quite a surprise in the morning."

"Yeah," Harry sighed. "You'll be careful, right? Walking and such?"

"Walking?" She snickered. "Yes Harry. I'll be careful walking. Though you do know this baby...she's pretty protected."

"I know she is," his voice dropped low and warm as he thought about his wife and his soon-to-be daughter. "But her mother's not."

"Ah," Maddie's lips curled higher. "You're worried about her mother."

"I'm always worried about her mother."

"Don't be," Maddie shook her head, her hand smoothing down over her stomach as the baby began to move about. "Her mother is fine. She skied across the North Pole, remember."

"I do," he sighed. "I do."

"Hey Captain..." Maddie called to him. "Your daughter is moving. I think she knows we're talking about her."

Harry groaned and sighed, hating that he wasn't with her. "You know, eventually we're going to have to pick a name."

"I know," Maddie sucked in a breath, her eyebrows lifting. "You have any?"

"Ha!" He shook his head. "No. My mind is so wrapped up in Invictus, I can barely think straight...unless you want to name her Invictus?"

"I don't," Maddie laughed. "We'll think of something. We still have a few months."

"Only a few months," he countered.
"Sure," Maddie yawned. "Okay daddy. I think it's time for me to sleep. Your father and I have a breakfast meeting and then the thing at the Art Museum and then..."

"You're headed home to me."

"I am," she could hear the happiness in his voice and it made her warm, and it made her miss him.

"Okay," he sighed. "Go to sleep. I love you and I'll see you tomorrow."

"I love you too Captain," Maddie nestled into her pillow. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

With a swipe of her finger and a stab of regret, Maddie ended the call. And then with Harry's voice in her ears and his smile in her memory, Maddie slipped off to sleep.

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Maddie woke the next morning to find that the snow had in no way diminished overnight. In fact, she was pretty certain there was at least a foot of snow covering the ground. It was all over the news while she dressed for breakfast; the anchors shocked and amazed at the sudden snow, at how much there was. And there were pictures of her and Charles smiling and holding onto each other as they left their events the day before. Libby had already been by, letting her know that the events were still on for the day and to warn her that the public turn out might not be as expected.

Maddie had to chuckle to herself sometimes, when she sat back and thought of it all. Of course she didn't expect the public turn out to be high, in fact she thought it should probably be non-existent. The snow had buried the city and the temperatures were stretching low. She knew she wouldn't have bundled up to make the trip to see her.

But much to her surprise, there were many who would—many who did. At both events, the breakfast and the Art Museum, there were throngs of people waiting, bundled up in snow gear, to catch a glimpse of Charles and Maddie, to offer greetings and flowers and warm wishes. Though there was a part of Maddie that thought them just the tiny bit crazy, she and Charles decided to take a little extra time at the rope lines, shaking hands and collecting gifts—it was the least they could do given what some of them must have gone through to get there. Though the snow continued and the day stayed cold, they both slipped back into the car towards their hotel with pink cheeks and wide smiles.

And then Mark broke the news to them.

"Sir," he looked up to Charles with an apologetic smile. "We're not going to be able to return to London this afternoon."

"What?" Charles ran his hands down the front of his coat. "Why not?"

"The roads are impassable," he was frank with them both. "The snow is blowing and the ice has built up. There was an accident that's closed off part of the roadway." He took a breath and shrugged. "The forecasters say the snow should stop tonight and they should be able to get a handle on it in the morning. But right now, it seems to be safest for all of us to stay put for one more night."
"Okay," Charles nodded thoughtfully, looking over to his daughter-in-law. "Does that sound alright with you?"

Maddie smiled, her eyes widening in surprise that he asked her. "Of course," she nodded. "If it's safer to stay another night, of course."

"Okay then," Charles turned a nod back to Mark. "Will you make the phone calls and let everyone know that's the plan?"

"Yes sir," Mark nodded, pulling a phone from his pocket, his eyes darting over to Maddie. "Ma'am, would you like me to call the Duke's office as well?"

"Ha," Maddie chuckled with humor in her eyes. "Better you than me." She muttered under her breath before she passed a smile to all of them. "No thank you Mark. I'll call him when we reach the hotel."

"Something tells me my son is not going to be pleased?" Charles smiled, understanding more than the others.

"No," Maddie shook her head with another chuckle. "He misses me."

"Of course he does," he nodded, patting her hand. "Tell me dear, after we return and settle in, and you call Henry, would you like to join me for dinner in my suite?"

"I would love that," Maddie's face lit up, her fingers squeezing his. "That would be a wonderful way to spend the evening."

"Perfect," Charles nodded, pleased to be able to enjoy her company.

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"Tell me now, how did he take it?" Charles held amusement in his eyes as he and Maddie sat down in the living area of his suite as their dinner was delivered and set up.

"Harry?" Maddie smiled, knowing exactly what he meant. "There was a fair amount of moaning and groaning," the two of them chuckled. "But he understood."

"Of course he did," Charles nodded. "He wants you to be safe."

"He does," she agreed, thoughts of Harry pulling her grin higher. "I actually think he's just afraid he's going to miss something—with the baby."

"He's very excited to be a father," Charles' heart warmed as he said the words. "He's wanted to be one for so long."

"I know," Maddie sighed happily. "He's going to be an amazing father."

"I couldn't agree more."

"What was he like? As a baby, I mean...what was baby Harry like?"

"Ah," Charles' eyes drifted, his smile widening as he remembered. "He was a wonderful baby actually. He had this...mess of red hair that grew to suit him very well. And he was..." He cleared
his throat and Maddie watched and waited for him to continue. "He was very pleasant tempered; slept well early on, not a lot of crying."

"That's good to know," Maddie began to rub her stomach, almost on reflex.

"He played well with nearly everyone. As he grew a little older, I remember him being just...incredibly funny," he chuckled as he looked up to Maddie. "Always trying to make William laugh or make his mother smile..." Maddie could see the way the emotions swept over his face. "He was a wonderful baby, truly a blessing to our family."

"That's very sweet to hear," her voice was soft, quiet, as she watched him. "Oh!" Surprised by a bump in her belly, her eyes flew wide and her smile tipped up. "Oh wow..." She ran her hand over the area.

"Is everything alright?" Charles asked her, mild concern tinting his features.

"Oh of course," Maddie was quick to nod. "The baby, she's...she's moving."

"Is she?" His eyes drifted to where her hand rest on her belly.

"Mmm Hmm," Maddie nodded, mulling over her next words for just a moment before she went for it. "Would you like to feel?" She lifted her eyebrows as she looked over to him. "She's moving quite a bit and if you put your hand here...you would be able to feel her move."

"Really?" Despite his best efforts, his excitement took hold of him.

"Yes," Maddie nodded again, moving next to him on the couch before he could say another word. "Here...give me your hand."

"Are you..." He felt a little nervous as she took his hand in hers. "Are you sure that would be appropriate?"

"Yes," Maddie chuckled, pulling his hand towards the spot on her belly where her daughter kept moving. "I would let my father feel," she squeezed his fingers before moving them to her stomach. "But you are the only Papa this baby girl is going to have....here...just wait a moment..." Maddie pressed his hand to her and waited.

And when it happened, when her daughter shifted in her belly and bumped against his hand, his entire face lit up and his eyes flew first down to where his hand rested and then up to her eyes. And she could see all the love and adoration he already held for this baby that wasn't quite here yet.

"See..." Maddie smiled brightly, her eyes tearing up just a little. "You can feel her move."

"My God," he shook his head, amazed. "You really can."

"She always moves this time of night," Maddie spoke softly. "It's a little routine of hers."

"She's preparing you for when she's here," Charles explained with his fatherly wisdom. "Waking you up in the night and all."

"I suppose so," Maddie couldn't help the way she felt being with him there; his hand pressed to her belly as he handed down memories of Harry and words of knowledge.
"Do you have a name for her yet?" He straightened up in his chair, rubbing her lightly before he pulled back his hand. "A name you're sharing?"

"No," Maddie shook her head, leaning back against the couch. "We don't have a name for her yet. Why? Do you have any suggestions?"

"No, no," he chuckled. "That's so far from my place..." He held up a hand. "Though I do remember it being...difficult...to name the boys."

"Was it?" Maddie folded her hands in her lap.

"Mmm," Charles nodded, his mind drifting back. "Though I'm sure the two of you will have no issue choosing a name."

"Ha..." Maddie laughed lightly. "Well last night he suggested we name her Invictus."

"Invictus Sussex," his eyes were alive with humor as he repeated it. "Promise me something?"

"Sure."

"You won't name her that."

"Ha!" Maddie clapped her hands together. "No, no. We won't. I promise."

"Madeline!" Harry's voice called out into the warm house as he returned from a long day. The morning had dawned, the snow had been cleared and Maddie and Charles had finally returned to London. Harry had received the confirmation text in the middle of a long list of meetings and it had taken all he had not to skip out on the rest of the afternoon and hurry home to her.

But when he finally returned to their home, he was welcomed by the soft sound of music and a wonderful smell drifting from the kitchen. With a smile he dropped his bag next to the door and pulled off his coat as the door shut behind him. They were getting closer to the end of the year, closer to the games—closer to meeting his daughter.

Pulling at the tie around his neck, he followed his nose and his instincts through the house in search of his wife. When he stopped in the doorway to the kitchen, he found her peeking into the oven at something she must have baked; flour covered utensils were scattered on the counter around her bright pink mixer that had come when she had moved in with him. Leaning against the doorframe, his grin widened, his fingers working over the sleeves of his shirt. He waited until she closed the oven before he cleared his throat, drawing her eyes in his direction.

"Captain," she breathed, her lips curling high as she took him in. "You're home."

"I am," he nodded, pushing away from the doorframe and moving towards her. "And you're finally back from Wales."

"I am," she bit at her bottom lip, excited to see him after their two days—and two nights—apart. As his arms moved around her waist to hug her to him, she tipped up on her toes to kiss him hello; her arms wrapping easily around his neck.
"Mmmmm..." Harry grinned against her lips, beyond thrilled to have her back with him. His hand slid around to her belly, warm and soft—as if he were welcoming home the baby too. "How are you?"

"Hungry," she bit her lip as she laughed, her eyes glancing sideways to the oven.

"Ah," He laughed, his head nodding as he leaned to kiss her again. "What is it you're baking?"

"Cookies," she answered, her eyes focused on his mouth. "But that's not what I meant."

"What did you..." His expression shifted as he caught on, as he caught the look in her eyes, the twist to her smile.

"Are you terribly tired?" Her eyebrows lifted hopefully.

"No," he shook his head, his hands moving up her back, his fingers smoothing over her as he gathered her nearer.

"Good." The way she sighed in relief made Harry only want her more. "In two minutes the cookies will be done. Do you think maybe we can..."

She didn't have to finish that question, he had the answer ready to go. With an easy nod, his lips returned to hers and Maddie settled into his husband's arms. For two minutes he kissed and stroked and teased her as she pressed against him, giving as good as she got. And when the timer rang out, she pulled the cookies from the oven as he turned it off and they hurried up the stairs, laughing as they shed their clothes.

"Well it sounds to me like you enjoyed your extra night in Wales," Harry smiled down at his wife, cuddled up next to his side in their bed.

"I enjoyed my time with your father," her grin was wide, her eyes bright, and her body relaxed and satisfied. "We talked about you as a baby and he asked if we had named her..."

"Ha," Harry chuckled, his hands running over her still naked, still flushed skin. "Did he have any suggestions?"

"No, no," she shook her head. "He's leaving that up to us."

"Dangerous," Harry smirked.

"I know," she laughed along with him, sighing as she nuzzled in closer. "I want something that's strong and something that's sweet and something...unique? But also something that ties her to you and this family and..." Her mind drifted off a bit.

"Well I still say we leave Henrietta on the table," his smile was adorable as he shrugged.

"Of course you do," she rolled her eyes, turning in his arms as she leaned to kiss his chest. "I just feel like..." Her bottom lip pulled into her teeth as her mind worked, running through the lists they had made, the people they knew, the influences they hoped for. And then, right there in his arms, her eyes grew big and she sat up. "Oh my God." She was up and out of their bed without a second thought, without another word, leaving Harry wide-eyed and empty-armed as he watched
her hurry across their room.

"Maddie?" He called after her, confused.

"Hold on!" She called back, hurrying over to her purse, searching for her notebook.

"But where are you going?" He laughed, sitting up and leaning his elbows on his knees. "What are you doing?"

"I'll be right back! I have an idea and I need..." He watched her rustle through her bag. "Aha!" She held up her notebook and a pen.

"You're so beautiful sometimes," he spoke mostly to himself, shaking his head as she crawled back in bed, flipping through to the ongoing list of names. "You okay?" He smiled at her as she moved back to the head of the bed with him.

"I'm better than okay," she nodded with a wide grin. "In fact, I think I have a perfect name."

"For Baby Girl Sussex?" Harry's eyebrows shot up, intrigued.

"No, for Bishop when he...

"Easy," he warned with a smirk, eyes glancing down to the pad of paper. "So...are you going to show me or..."

"I am," she nodded. "I just...I hope you at least think about it for a minute."

"I promise," he held his hand up in the air and then out to her.

"Very well. Here..." She turned the pad over to him and watched.

She watched as he focused. She watched as his eyes bounced, reading the name she had just scrawled on the paper and then she watched as his wide blue eyes lifted to meet hers; sweetness and love pouring out to her.

"Really?" He whispered. "You really want to...

"It's a lovely name," she whispered in return. "And it's sweet and powerful and...I think it would suit her well and...do you hate it?"

"No," he shook his head and put down the pad of paper, moving closer to her. "In fact, I think maybe you're going to win the prize."

"Oh yeah!" She clapped her hands together. "I love winning prizes!"

"Ha!" He laughed along as he pulled her back into his arms. "I know you do Mummy. I know you do." His lips moving to her neck.

"Does that mean we have a name?" Maddie's head tipped back as he kissed her skin.

"I think it does," he nodded, kissing up to her jaw.

"Don't we need to ask..."
"I'll ask," his voice was low and husky in her ear.

"But...we don't have a second or a third or..."

"We have time," he pulled back to look at her, his hands moving to cup her face. "We'll come up with the others later..." His eyes grew darker as his hands slid down her body, drawing her to him, moving to kiss her. "Now come here."

"Am I about to collect my prize?" Maddie's eyes were shining as she grinned up at him, letting him move her back into their bed.

"Yes love," he nodded, stretching them both out. "You are about to collect your prize."

With a giggle and a sigh, Maddie clapped her hands and opened herself up to him; his mouth, his body. They had chosen a name for their baby girl; one that invoked all kinds of wonderful sentiments. And as they slipped back into their bed, back into each other, they enjoyed their own little celebration.
Chapter 166

Arriving at Sandringham the day before Christmas Eve felt a bit like a dream, or a scene from a movie. The sky was overcast with snow falling in random spurts from the thick clouds. Though the chill inched towards bitter outside, their car was warm and cozy and Maddie—nearly thirty-three weeks pregnant—had cuddled up to her husband's shoulder and dozed for the last half of the trip.

As the gravel drive crunched under their tires, Harry nudged her gently; squeezing her hand in his, kissing the top of her head as he woke her.

"Captain..." She groaned, wishing she could stay tucked into him for just a little bit longer.

"We're nearly there Maddie," he chuckled, kissing her again. "The family is waiting to see you and this enormous belly of..."

"Enormous!" She sat straight up, her eyes flying open as she turned on him. "Excuse you?"

"Good morning darling," he leaned in to kiss her.

"No way," she shook her head, the palm of her hand meeting his mischievous smile, halting him in his path. "No kisses for you."

"Aw, come on," his head tilted to the side, his voice muffled against his hand. "You know you're the most beautiful woman in the entire world..."

"I have no idea what you just said Henry Charles," her eyes narrowed though her lips curled into a smile—because she had heard what he had said. "But you had better watch yourself." Her fingers slipped from his mouth as her eyes turned out to the beautiful, historic home. "Enormous," she muttered.

With a chuckle, Harry followed her gaze. "I wonder if everyone's here already."

"I think Mike, Zara, and Mia are coming up in the morning," Maddie smiled. "They are stopping at his parents' place tonight."

"Sure," Harry nodded.

"You know, this is my second year here," she turned back to him as the car pulled up front, slowing to a stop.

I do know that," he smiled across the car at her, his fingers moving to her stomach.

"It doesn't lose its punch though, does it?" She nodded her head towards the house. "It still stands so impressive."

"It does," he nodded. "At least this year we have something much happier to look forward to than last."

Maddie's eyes held more emotion as she nodded, remembering. "Yes we do." Taking a deep breath to steady her memories from last year of Harry's impending deployment, she reached for his hand resting on her belly. Pulling it up into hers, she met his eyes and with a soft, serious gaze, she smiled. "Don't you call me enormous again Captain."
Harry had been right about one thing, the family was waiting for them to arrive and every single one of them was thrilled to see Maddie and her growing belly. Stepping into the entryway, they were swept up in greetings; hugs and kisses, wide eyes and big smiles, and a round of curtsies and bowed heads when their grandparents joined them.

Taking tea and scotch in the salon with the fireplace warming the air, Maddie sat tucked up next to Harry as baby-fever seemed to take over all of their minds. It all began when Charles was telling Maddie a story of Harry as a baby. That story quickly morphed into another and another and then it was Andrew talking about William and Harry's reactions when the girls were born.

And before she knew it, the sky had turned dark outside and the laughter had continued inside; particularly when gran began telling baby stories of Charles, Anne, Andrew, and Edward. Maddie loved the way the room listened to her as she spoke; hanging onto her words, mesmerized by her voice. With Harry's arm around her shoulders and their daughter shifting around inside of her, Maddie felt warm and content and complete. And the Christmas spirit was alive and well inside Sandringham House.

Christmas Eve brought with it a great many things; the arrival of the Tindalls—the last of the group to make it. There was the much lauded football match starring Harry and William and entirely too much mud. But Maddie put on her wellies and a warm coat and she stood at the sidelines, clapping and cheering and laughing at the brotherly antics the two boys brought to the field with them.

When the game ended and the well-wishing faded, Harry wrapped a sweat arm around his beaming wife and walked her back to the car; moving with a slowness that spoke of wanting to prolong this easiness with her.

"I saw you cheering for me," his smile was smug as he looked down at her.

"I always cheer for you," she grinned up at him, her arm wrapping around his waist.

"I also saw you laughing at me," his eyes danced with amusement.

"Oh I always do that too," she laughed, watching him closely as he shook his head. He moved in on her then, his arms trying to draw her into his mud and sweat covered chest. "Harry!" She squealed as she squirmed out of his arms, away from his reach; the both of them laughing as the onlookers were treated to a glimpse into their real relationship. Light, easy; full of humor and laughter and a lot of love.

Just before it was time to dress for dinner, Charles had quite cheerfully, and easily, persuaded Maddie to join him on a walk over the property.

"I don't know," Harry shook his head with a smirk, his eyes shifting down to her round belly. "I've heard that long walks can bring babies..." He teased. "And we still have at least another seven or eight weeks."

"No worries Daddy," Maddie leaned in to kiss his cheek. "This little girl will be just fine." And because he wasn't really arguing with her, he sighed dramatically and kissed her once before she left him in the study with his brother and his cousins.
Bundled up to brave the chilled December air, Maddie and Charles set off on a walk. Though the air was cold, the sun was still out and had cast a deep golden hue over nearly everything in their line of sight. With a walking stick in one hand, he leant his arm to Maddie. Gladly tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow, she followed along; relishing the fresh air and enjoying the bits of information he would bestow upon her as they passed by the grand house, the amazing grounds.

They had passed the halfway mark of their walk, had turned back towards the house, when he took a deep breath and broached the subject that had been on his mind since their trip to Wales not so long ago.

"You know," his voice was low and warm. "I have some...items...I would like to give to you."

"Items?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted with her eyes as she looked up to him. "What sort of items?"

"Well," he smiled, his eyes and his mind drifting back just a bit. "They were Diana's."

Maddie felt her breath catch in her lungs at the mention of Harry's mother. She wasn't quite sure if she and Charles had spent much time at all over the years talking about Harry's mother. She and Harry certainly had; she and Kate, even she and Will. But not really Charles. "You have something of Diana's that you want to give to me?"

"Yes," the affection he still held for this woman was abundantly clear; in his poise, in his expression, in the way he spoke of her. "She had a few things she had saved from her childhood that she had hoped to be able to pass onto a baby girl—had she and I had one."

He took another breath as he remembered. "As you know, we never had our little girl." Maddie nodded along, afraid that her voice might break the warmth between them. "I know that William and Catherine are done having children and since you're having a little girl..." His eyes shone, lighting up his entire face as he smiled down at her. "I think it's only appropriate that they go to you and Henry and...Little Invictus Sussex, is it?"

Even with the tears in her eyes and the pent up lump of emotion in her throat, she managed a laugh. "We have come up with something a little more appropriate I think."

"Very well," he nodded. "Would it be alright with you if I had some boxes sent over? For my granddaughter? For Diana's granddaughter?"

"Oh wow..." Maddie blinked at the tears that welled. "Yes. Of course. I think...I think Harry will be incredibly touched." She wiped at her eyes and leaned her head into his arm, tightening her hold on him. "As am I."

"Wonderful," Charles whispered, patting her fingers with his hand. "Wonderful."

As the family made their way towards the gate on Christmas morning, Harry held tight to Maddie's hand, clearly feeling a swelled sense of protectiveness over his pregnant wife. Maddie had to smile at the look on his face, at the slight strain in his jaw; knowing he wasn't thrilled about the snow or the ice or the enormous crowds they could already hear on the other side of the gate. As she had grown more and more round with her pregnancy, he had grown more and more protective—even on this holiday morning. But he had been very sweet about it and he was easily backed down when she asked, so she let him keep her hand and she stayed close to his side as the gates opened.

As they stepped into view of the crowds, Maddie could hear the murmur of excitement travel
around them. Just as the image of Sandringham wouldn't lose its magic with her, this walk to church on Christmas morning wouldn't lose its impact.

"Happy Christmas!" People would call; old and young, male and female. There were people who had come every year for as long as they could remember and there were people who had come for the first time this year; wanting to see if Arthur would make an appearance, wanting to see the pregnant Duchess.

Staying tight to Harry's side, Maddie waved and smiled and nodded good morning as they made their quick journey to the church; knowing that their return back to the house would be longer, giving her more of an opportunity to properly greet the throngs of people waiting for their few seconds with somebody in the royal family.

As they stepped through the doorway of the church, she could hear Harry let out the breath he was holding. Her chuckle was warm as she leaned in to kiss his cheek. "We made it just fine, Daddy," she whispered into his ear, bringing a wide smile to his lips.

"Come along mum," turning a kiss to her cheek, his arm moved around her, bringing his hand to her back as they stepped further in and took their seats.

It was always the music that took Maddie down; it was always the music that brought up her emotions and flooded her soul with feeling. The year before she had sat in these same wooden pews contemplating the eminent departure of her husband, the high risk surroundings he would be living in, the chance that he might not come home. But this year, the emotions were something entirely different. This year she had her husband next to her; home and healthy. This year she could feel their daughter moving inside of her. This year she was looking forward to expanding their family and welcoming this wonderful new chapter of their journey together.

With tears in her eyes, she leaned into Harry's side, holding tight to his hand for a moment before she slid his palm over her stomach. His face turned to her in an instant, his eyes pulling wide and wet as his smile warmed his face. As they sang out with the music, with the family surrounding them, Harry's hand stayed on Maddie's belly as their little girl bumped and turned and they stayed connected—their growing little family.

Following their Christmas at Sandringham, Maddie and Harry left for the States. Knowing that flying commercial wasn't going to be an easy thing to do with Maddie as pregnant as she was, they boarded a private jet set for Colorado.

Their time with Maddie's family was an absolute whirlwind. From the moment they walked in the door and Hannah caught sight of a very pregnant Maddie. She was giddy to see them both, hugging Harry tight before her attentions turned to her daughter and her soon-to-be granddaughter.

Heading into the mountains with her cousins as they did every year, the two of them were more than content to share the attention with the baby moving inside of Maddie. Everyone wanted a chance to feel her bump and turn; Hannah, Jenna, even Kyle waited patiently for his turn to feel the newest addition to their family.

On New Year's Eve, Maddie was treated to a surprise baby shower. It was small—just family—and it was coed—of course the boys were there. And it was full of wonderfully sentimental gifts. Instead of the standard gifts of clothes and strollers and other baby care items, the cousins had gone a different angle.
Each person gifted Maddie and her daughter with a copy of their favorite children's book. And in an extra special show of love, they let her know that they had gathered together another copy of each book and shipped them off to the library she had started in Bendal.

Harry was touched and Maddie was moved to tears; it was all so wonderful and it only served to highlight this great big, momentous change that was about to occur.

But that night, before the celebrations turned to the more wild in nature, Hannah took Maddie aside and gave her a gift that brought tears to both of their eyes.

"It’s a quilt..." Maddie pulled it from the box, her smile soft as she looked it over. She scanned over the colors, her fingers running over the fabric and then she realized. "Mom..."

"It's made from some of your father's old shirts," Hannah's voice wavered as she said it, even though she had promised herself she wouldn't get emotional.

"Oh my God..." Maddie's eyes welled up instantly, her hands spreading the quilt out over her lap. "Mom...this is..." A hand pressed to her chest as she looked up to her mother. "I don't know what to say, this is so much..."

"I thought she should have something that was your father's," Hannah smiled, running her hand over the piece she had been working on for months.

"It's so beautiful and so..." Maddie had to swallow back sobs, had to blink back tears. "Such a perfect gift. Thank you. So much." She moved to hug her mother then, both of them allowing tears to slip from their eyes; the handmade quilt, full of sentiment, warm between them.

That's what these holidays had been; sentimental. From her discussion with Charles at Sandringham to her moment with her mother in the mountains of Colorado. Their world was so full of sentiment, it was almost overwhelming. If she hadn't had Harry there along the way to anchor her, she may have just been swallowed up by it. But he had been there; in the pew of the church, at her side on the walk back to the house, collecting flowers and charming the crowd. And he was there later that night, well after the clock struck midnight and rang in the New Year. He was there with his tipsy humor and his easy nature, making her laugh and sigh and fall for him all over again.

Maddie had slipped into her pajamas and crawled into their bed while he finished getting ready for bed. Nearly drunk, and definitely tipsy, Harry tottered around the room as he stripped down his clothes, making Maddie grin and roll her eyes; amused and enamored.

As she felt the flip flops in her stomach, she ran her hands over her belly and sighed. "I don't think it bodes well for us that your daughter seems to be wide awake at midnight..." Maddie chuckled as she adjusted in their bed. "And doing acrobatics, no less."

"Oh my darling..." Harry's voice always sounded deeper and richer when he was this near drunk. "Are you keeping your mum awake my sweet?" Maddie grinned as she watched her husband climb onto the bed next to her, his head moving to speak to her belly as his hand smoothed over it. "My tiny little girl," he cooed. "It's time for you to go to sleep..." Laying down and nestling closer, he took a breath and began to sing; soft and low and huskily tipsy. "Sleep, baby, sleep...thy father tends the sheep..."

"You know how to tend sheep?" Maddie snickered, her fingers running through his hair as his head rested on her chest.

"Shush love, I'm singing a lullaby to our daughter..." He waved his hand up at her before it
smoothed back over her belly. "Sleep, baby, sleep...they father tends the sheep...they mother shakes the branches small...whence happy dreams in showers fall..." He leaned to kiss her stomach. "Sleep, baby, sleep..."

"Harry..." Maddie could feel her emotions stirring as he continued to sing.

"Sleep, baby, sleep...they sky is full of sheep..." He stifled a yawn and his voice dipped lower. "The stars the lambs of heaven are, from whom the shepherd moon doth care..." Maddie could hear his emotions shaking his voice just a bit. "Sleep, baby, sleep..."

"Harry," she smiled, her fingers moving down to his neck and back up. "That was beautiful."

"You're beautiful," his reply was instant and sincere. His hand rubbed over her stomach once more before he turned to face her; lying on his stomach next to her and smiling down at her with this amazing light in his eyes. "You're so beautiful," his fingers reached to tuck away her hair, to smooth over her nose, her jawline.

"Harry," she warned, her eyes narrowing just slightly.

"You are," he leaned to kiss her softly. "The most beautiful woman in the world; unbelievably gorgeous..." His fingers traced down her neck, over her rounded chest, resting over her heart. "And that's just on the inside."

"Look at you," she grinned, her skin flushing under his gaze, warming under his hands. "Pulling out all the stops tonight Captain?"

"Don't tease," he shook his head, dipping to kiss her where his fingers laid. "You are a phenomenal woman my darling..." He kissed her again, his lips working a slow, sweet trail up her chest to her neck. "Again and again, you've made me the happiest man in the world..." He kissed up to her jaw. "And now you're going to give me a baby..." His hands slid down her body, rounding over her stomach in a way that drew a sharp breath from her lungs. "I love you so much Madeline..."

"I love you too Daddy..." Her hands moved into his hair as his lips moved up to kiss her; long and deep and slow. "Harry..." She moaned into his mouth, her desire for him sparking as his hands moved back up to her chest. "I want you..." She was so clear, so sure.

Harry's lips left hers in a grin, moving into the bed with her quickly, with determination. Giggling as her husband moved in beside her, sighing as he tucked their bodies against each other, she knew he was going to give her what she wanted.

The love making was slow and easy and sweet, given just how pregnant she was. But it was no less full of passion and want. They had just closed out a year full of big hits; good and bad. And after times that could have torn them apart, they felt more together than ever. So as they held each other tight, as they moved together, they were thankful the ties that bound them and they were oh so ready for what the year ahead of them held.

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Saying good-bye to her mother was rough for Maddie, her emotions still very much heightened. But knowing she would be in London in four weeks to be there for the last few of Maddie's pregnancy—that made it a little easier.

As they returned home, their attentions were focused. As Maddie took the lead on finalizing the nursery, her birth plan, the name for their daughter, Harry took the lead on Invictus. As he took meeting after meeting after meeting, he began to second guess his push to have this timed so
closely to the arrival of his first child. But knowing the games would be over two weeks before she was born, giving him time to get ready, gave him peace of mind.

Maddie's last public event before Invictus was at the introduction of the British Team. In front of Tower Bridge and among quite the crowd, she stood off to the side of the podium as her husband took centerstage with his smile and his wit. And when the wind whipped away his notes, Maddie's heeled foot saved them; quick to step on the flying paper.

"Thanks love," Harry grinned up at her as he bent to take them from under her shoe. "You're a lifesaver," he rose to stand next to her, forgetting the cameras for a split second when he leaned in to press a kiss to her cheek, when his hand patted her stomach.

"You're welcome," she returned his smile and watched, with pride filled eyes, as he returned to his post and began again; scolding the wind as he did.

They had so much ahead of them, so much to look forward to, and as she watched him introduce this team, as she watched him take this big step before the world descended on London for the games, she had never been more proud of her husband; of her family.
Chapter 167

Chapter Notes

A/N: This Chapter follows the first Invictus Games (The Inaugural, the Original) that was held in London. It follows the order of events, etc. I hope you enjoy it.

The Invictus Games

"Harry..." Maddie moved through the quiet house, not bothering to turn on lights; knowing exactly where to find him. "Harry, Harry, Harry..." She whispered his name with a smile as she went down the stairs, the hallway, finally stopping at the door to his office. She could see the lights on through the cracked door and she didn't even bother knocking before she stepped inside.

He was at his desk, the small worn ball clenched in his hands as he read over what she could only guess was his speech for the next evening. Hearing her, he looked up from his notes and smiled; sheepish and tired. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Don't be sorry Captain," she shook her head, her hand rubbing over her stomach, having grown larger and tighter over the last few weeks. "I'm not sleeping much these days anyway," she moved over to him, her hands rubbing his shoulders. "Though I wish you would. Today was a big day; meeting the teams, driving through all that mud..."

"I know," his head hung as she massaged at the tension in his neck, a chuckle pushing through his lips as he remembered their day.

"It was really nice of all of the teams to give me mini team shirts for our baby," Maddie couldn't help the slight tug of emotion she had had every single time she had been presented with one.

"It was," he agreed, his face resting in the pillow of his arms as she continued to rub at his neck.

"Are you reading your speech again?" She leaned in to get a closer look.

"The opening ceremonies are tomorrow," he grumbled into a sigh. "I want to make sure it's absolutely right."

"Well I thought your speech tonight at the Welcome Reception was wonderful," she tweaked his ear, drawing a chuckle from him. "Even the shot you took at the noisy Americans."

"I thanked them too," he lifted his head up, turning a smile to her; pulling her hand from his neck around to his lips for a kiss. "You caught that part, no?"

"I did," she smoother her thumb over his lips. "I'm sure that tomorrow night will go just as well as tonight did."

"There will be more people watching tomorrow night," he reminded her as a flash of worry crossed his face.
"It's true," she agreed with a nod.

"Including your mother and my family and...our friends..." He bit at his bottom lip, his nerves taking hold for just a moment.

"All of that is true..." She pulled his lip from his teeth. "But I'll be there with you," she cupped his chin in her hand. "I'll be right behind you, right next to your father, willing you all of my strength."

"That's a lot of strength," he shook his head, leaning in to kiss her stomach. "You should be sleeping love."

"I can't," she sighed, her hands moving into his hair, pulled messy from his stressed fingers. "My back is aching and my stomach is all...huge and I just feel...hot." Her nose crinkled up as she said it.

"Well," he took a deep breath, straightening up in his chair. "If you would like, I could come up and give you a back rub..." He thought for a second and shrugged. "And we can open the windows...let in some cold air."

"What about the huge stomach?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, loving how quick he was to try to rid her of her ailments.

"Well, there's only one way out of that my darling...and that's still weeks away," he rubbed her belly. "She's not quite done cooking yet."

"No she's not," Maddie shook her head and shrugged. "I think I'm going to take a hot bath, try to relax."

"Can I get you anything? Tea or water or..."

"No, no," she leaned in to kiss him. "Do what you need to do, Captain. But come to bed...I miss you."

"You miss my massages," he snickered.

"I really do," she sighed, pulling away from him with a smirk. "Don't stay up too late daddy. You need your rest."

"I'll be up soon," he watched with a smile as she turned and left him there in his office; his heart full of warmth. Waiting until she had slipped completely from the room, his eyes shifted back to his speech, a deep groan on his lips.

Opening Day of the Invictus Games would end up being a chaotic blur—a wonderful, amazing, pride-filled—chaotic blur. Harry left the house hours earlier than Maddie did that morning, kissing her good-bye before he hurried to meetings and last minute run-throughs. And though she knew that this was his project and, though she knew that he had a handle on it, she wished nothing more that morning than to be able to run out and join him.

But that wasn't in the cards. She had hours to go, and a few appearances at the game sites before she would be able to meet up with her husband for the grand Opening Ceremony.

After a brunch with her mother, she dressed and went to work; stopping at a Team Great Britain training before going to Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park to watch as the pieces came together. She shook hands, met handfuls of people and was able to see this idea that Harry had been nurturing
come to a reality. As the evening crept upon them, Maddie entrusted her mother to the Bishops for the night and she went to change again before being reunited with Harry.

"My God, you're beautiful," he whispered in her ear as he leaned to kiss her.

"I was just thinking the same thing about you Captain," she kissed him back. "This is phenomenal Harry," her eyes were full of awe as she looked up at him. "It's absolutely amazing. I'm very proud of you daddy."

"Aw, don't do that," his voice dropped lower as he shook his head. "I still have to go out there and deliver a speech."

"You have this," she squeezed his arm reassuringly. "And I'll be right behind you."

And that's exactly where she was; sitting behind him, next to Charles and Camilla, Will and Kate, as he was called to task. With Hannah in the crowd with their friends and his wife and family behind him, Prince Henry of Wales—Captain Harry took a shaky breath and stepped into the spotlight.

Maddie's heart swelled with pride as the applause rang out, as the service men and women rose to their feet, their calls of thanks and excitement echoing around her. Tears welled in her eyes as her husband stood tall at the podium, resisting his inner urge to hide as he prepared to begin this amazing fete he had built. She knew he was nervous, knew that there was a moment of stage-fright that almost always washed over him. But she also knew that his love for this cause, for these people, was so much greater than that.

"Whoever's idea it was to put me here was..." His self-deprecating charm made a quick appearance before he gathered his mind and began. "Over the past eight years, I've witnessed the whole cycle of life-changing injury..."

Maddie, along with their friends, their family—along with this enormous crowd—listened intently to this speech he had labored over during late nights and early mornings. They watched as he spoke with ease about this beloved topic, this area so very near and dear to his heart. They felt the emotions that came with something such as this; recovery, resiliency, perseverance. As he thanked the families, as the thanked the competing nations, as he thanked the men and women who were the center focus of it all—they all watched as he opened up this remarkable series of events, this life-changing four days.

Harry; tall and proud. Harry; nervous and excited. Harry, with that brilliant smile and those dancing eyes, took a deep breath and let out the last bit of his nerves.

"Welcome to The Games. Welcome to Invictus."

And so it began.

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With Day One came a host of athletic events. Harry went to the morning events with his brother while Maddie went to her doctor's appointment. Though Harry had been conflicted about missing it, she had assured him it was simply standard and nothing special. And her mother was going with her, so she would be fine.

And she was. At thirty-eight weeks pregnant, everything looked just as it should.

"She's still good?" He had asked the second she joined him at the games, his hands reaching out to her stomach on reflex.
"She's great," Maddie had nodded, running her hands over his arms. "She's just as content as can be; nothing's moved, nothing's dilated. We're still on track." She ran through a quick checklist, noticing the amused smirk on her mother's face.

"Fantastic," he had let out a breath before they moved to their seats, sitting with Will and Kate and Hannah as they watched the running competitions. Harry had a wonderful time there in the stands that day, bringing Maddie up to speed on what she had missed, pointing out to Hannah the men he had travelled with to the North Pole, and those he knew on a more personal nature.

And when Dave Henson raced first to the finish in the 200 meter, Harry and Maddie and their entire row were on their feet, screaming and cheering and ultimately applauding at his victory. Making a split decision in the moment, Harry grabbed Maddie's hand and took to the field, more than eager to congratulate his friend on the win.

And though Harry was one of the boys to Dave Henson, a regular old bloke, Maddie was still very much a Duchess to him. So in celebration of his win, he hugged Harry under the draped Union Jack, but when Maddie stepped up to offer her congratulations, his head bowed properly and his lips kissed the top of her hand. And even as Harry snickered and poked quiet fun at a man he considered his friend, Dave refrained from poking back; sharing a grin with Maddie as she shook her head and leaned to kiss his cheek.

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Day Two of the Invictus Games felt much more official than the first had. While watching the Archery competitions, they held court with Crown Prince Frederick of Denmark. He praised Harry for putting together the competition, impressed with how quickly it had come together. And then, a father of four himself, he asked about the baby. Maddie took the opportunity to collect advice and guidance; parenthood, raising children in the world they all lived in. And he was more than happy to let her in on a few secrets he had learned.

Following the Archery events, she and Harry had a bit of down time before their next event. So they walked around the games; meeting athletes, surprising guests and families. They took photos, they accepted congratulations for the games and for their baby. And they made international news as photo after photo hit the internet and the nightly news; pregnant, glowing Maddie walking next to Harry who was simply beaming with the excitement of all that surrounded him.

They even ran into Wendy, one of the women who had been on Maddie's North Pole excursion. Harry insisted she let them buy her a drink, wanting to sit with her and hear tales of the trip again, wanting to find out how she was enjoying the games. After a drink and lots of laughter, they had to excuse themselves to make it over to the Wheelchair Basketball games. Sitting next to Dr. Jill Biden, Maddie allowed herself a moment of cheering for her home country, even as Harry shook his head at her; his smirk amused.

That night when they returned home, they both had sore feet and tired bodies. Though Harry had warned her that a day at his side at the Games might not be the best idea for her, she had insisted. And that night, as she sank into the hot bath he had drawn for her before he slipped into the shower—she insisted it had been worth it.

And it had. Seeing Harry's ideas and plans come to fruition had been wonderful. Seeing the service men and women enjoying their time, seeing the high they got from competing, it had all been worth it. And seeing the look on Harry's face, how happy and pleased and full of pride he was—she would have spent hours more on her feet than she already had.

"We're very proud of you daddy," she called out to him as he washed off the day.
With soap in his hair and a tired smile on his face, he leaned from the shower and nodded to her. "How's that baby in there?"

"She's great," Maddie ran her hand over her stomach. "She's moving around quite a bit. And you know..." She bit her lip and lifted smiling eyes up to him. "I think she might be a little hungry."

"Ha!" Harry laughed, stepping back in the shower and shutting the door. "Tell me what you want Mum...and it's all yours."

"Can I just say..." Hannah's voice was soft in Maddie's ear as they sat next to each other watching the indoor rowing. Since Harry was at practice for that Day Three's Wheelchair Rugby exhibition, Maddie was stepping in to enjoy this event and hand out medals at the end.

"Hmm?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows and leaned closer.

"These men and women are incredibly impressive," she nodded her head towards the action. "I mean...they are missing entire limbs Madeline." She shook her head.

"I know," Maddie grinned. She was right; it was unbelievably impressive. "I'm continually amazed by the things I've seen people recover from, the things I've seen them do."

"It's really something else," Hannah smiled. "This is such a great thing for Harry to have done."

"I know," Maddie agreed; quickly and easily.

"You must be very proud of him."

"I am," Maddie met her mother's eyes with tears in her own. "I'm very, very proud of him."

"Aw honey," Hannah grew soft, her hand rubbing up and down her daughter's back. "I didn't mean to make you emotional."

"It's okay," Maddie laughed. "I haven't been sleeping well and I'm just on overload with hormones I think."

"Not sleeping well?" Hannah lifted her eyebrows.

"Yeah," Maddie ran her hand over her stretched belly. "You know...backaches, tight belly...you know, things that happen when you're ten months pregnant."

"I do know," Hannah laughed with a nod, her mind working to remember that far back. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, no," Maddie shook her head, patting her mother's knee. "You're already doing it." She leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Now you stay here...I'm going to go hand out some awards and then I'll be back." With her head held high and an easy smile on her face, Maddie made her way to the floor, amidst applause, to hand out medals to the competitors.

The Road Cycling event was the one event that the planners, Harry included, had been worried about when they had scheduled the Games. It was by nature an outdoor event and not one that could as easily be moved inside. But the weather had held out to mildly warm and the competition had commenced with a few warm jackets and more than a few warm smiles.
After finishing practice with his wheelchair rugby team, Harry had joined Maddie at the Games and was on hand to present medals to the competitors. As the event began, he left Maddie with the Bishops in the stands while he went to speak with some of the athletes and trainers; charming and charismatic as always.

"My goodness Maddie," Ella spoke behind an easy smile, her eyes glancing down to Maddie's belly.

"Don't even say a word about how enormous I am," Maddie warned her best friend.

"I would never," Ella chuckled, holding up a hand in surrender and promise. "I've been there, remember?"

"How is little Buckie doing?" Maddie's smile pulled higher as she thought of him.

"He's doing really well," Ella sighed. "He's quite the little chatterbox..."

"Like his mother," Bishop added in with a wink to his wife.

"Though he obviously doesn't have any kind of real mastery of the language quite yet," Ella add.

"Like his father?" Maddie inserted, tossing a smirk in Bishop's direction.

"You know, if there weren't cameras everywhere..." Bishop warned Maddie with a teasing tone and the three of them laughed. Maddie was happy that she was able to spend some time with them, even in the midst of all that was going on; they helped balance her out.

"Anyway," Ella refocused her attention. "How have you been feeling? You doing okay? I know you're getting close..."

"I am getting close," Maddie nodded, her hand rubbing over her belly. "I'm feeling good, decent —mostly."

"Mostly?" Ella's eyebrows lifted, her eyes focusing in on Maddie's. "Something wrong?"

"No, no, no," Maddie shook her head quickly, sensing her friend's nursing radar flying up. "No. I'm fine. I was up late last night and we ate pizza at like two in the morning and...you know there's this person squishing my organs..." She sighed and smiled; happy but a little tired. "I'm just a little achy. But I will feel better after a good night's sleep, you know?"

"I do," Ella eased up, her arm moving around Maddie's shoulders. "You know if you want to put your sunglasses on and rest your head on my shoulder, you could take a little nap. Nobody would be the wiser."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed. "That would be something, wouldn't it."

"It would."

"I'll be fine," Maddie sighed. "We just have the wheelchair rugby exhibition tonight and then we're going to bed early...at least I am." She snickered, her eyes looking down to where her husband stood, laughing along with some of the Australian team. "He'll probably be up all night."

"He's worried about the speech at Closing Ceremonies?" Bishop guessed, nodding his head towards his best friend.

"Little bit," Maddie admitted. "I'm sure he'll be spending the night in his office." As she watched
Harry chatting it up, she studied him for signs of fatigue or over-exertion. But there were none. He was just as bright and cheerful and peppy as he ever was. He was loving this. She could see it in every corner of his smile, every twinkle in his eye. This was a big moment for him and she was so beyond proud that she was there to see it unfold, to watch him watch it all come together.

She wouldn't have missed this for anything in the world.

As the day wore on, the buzz about the rugby match had become infectious. Of course the media was eating it up, elated to be able to capture the Prince in his element; competing. The tickets had sold out and a crowd was expected—not to mention the camera crews who were set to film and broadcast the event.

About an hour before the game was set to start, Maddie and her now-growing entourage made their way to the venue. Bishop and Ella were staying to watch and they would be joined by Hannah, Will and Kate, Autumn and Peter, and of course Mike and Zara were playing—truly unable to miss being a part of such a thing.

"Maddie!" Autumn's eyes were as wide as her smile as she took her in. "Oh my goodness. How are you? How's the baby?" She leaned in to hug her, to kiss her cheeks.

Maddie took a breath and smiled in return, happy to have Autumn there. "I'm good. Tired and...you know...excited," she exhaled and patted her stomach. "And the baby is...gosh...she's...she's great."

"Good," Autumn beamed. "I'm really happy to hear that. Harry must just be...dying to meet her."

"Ha!" Maddie felt her emotions slip just a bit as she looked out at the court where the players were gathering. "You know I think he really is." Gulping back the lump that formed in her throat, she was finding it more and more difficult to control her feelings. She loved him so much and—in that tight shirt—she found him undeniably sexy. As though he could sense her eyes on him, Harry glanced up in her direction; waving as he saw them all.

Waving back, she offered him a smile and something in that smile brought him to her. Taking the stairs quickly, Harry hurried up to say hello to everyone; kissing cheeks, welcoming friends and family to the event. And when he turned to Maddie, he couldn't help but run his hand over her stomach. He didn't care so much that the pictures that were snapped would make it on the internet in minutes.

"How are you doing?" His voice dropped lower as he moved closer to her, trying for a moment between them, even among the thousands who were beginning to pour in.

"I'm okay," she nodded, biting at her bottom lip with a nervous smile that made Harry's head tip to the side, his eyes questioning her before he did.

"Are you sure?" He studied her eyes, trying to get a read on what she wasn't saying.

"Of course," her lip pulled from her teeth as her smile moved higher. "I'm just...tired."

"Yeah, I know," he nodded. "Your stomach still upset from eating so late?"

"A little bit," she shrugged. "But what can you do?" Taking a deep breath, she redirected their focus. "I'm really excited to see you play."

"Ha!" His laughter burst out. "I'm sure you are. Mike's been tossing threats all over down there."
"Well you be safe and have a great time."

"Always," he agreed, watching her for a beat before he clapped his hands together. "Okay. I should get back. We're going to run through a few things before the match starts. You going to be okay up here?"

"Yes," she rolled her eyes. "Do you see all the friends and family I have?" She waved her hands around her.

"I do," he nodded. "Okay love. I'll be done in about two hours. Then I'll take you home and rub your feet and give you a bath and...whatever you like. Deal?"

"Deal." She agreed, watching him say good-bye to the group, watching him take half a step away from her before she was reaching out to pull him back. "Hey Harry..."

"Yeah?" He turned around, eyebrows lifted.

"I..." She gulped back her emotions, blinked at the tears in her eyes; wishing she could control her feelings for just a moment. "I love you. I just want you to...I love you. And I'm terribly proud of you tonight. Always. I'm proud of you always...but particularly tonight."

"Aw baby, I love you too," despite everything around him, all that was happening, he softened; moving in to kiss her. His lips brushed over hers, sweet and soft and warm before he pulled away. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Perfect," she beamed up at him, squeezing his hand. "Perfect. And I'll see you in two hours."

"Yes you will," he winked, squeezed her hand in return and then, with one last wave, he was heading back to the court; ready to play. And Maddie, taking a deep breath and glancing up at the clock, took her seat between her mother and her best friend and she turned her focus to her husband and all this night had in store for them.

They were thirty minutes into the rugby game, still battling out the third quarter when it happened. Harry had been playing hard; laughing and sweating and even pouting playfully when he was sent out for a penalty. Everybody in that venue had managed to fall for his charm that night and everybody in that room could feel the excitement and liveliness that nearly vibrated off the court. The competitors were enjoying themselves and the spectators were more than entertained.

If somebody had asked Harry about it later, he would say that he should have known something was up when he heard the whistle. A quick burst of a sound that drew players' eyes to the sidelines. His coach was signaling him over; something he had done once or twice when working through the rotation. It was no big deal—in fact it was routine. So he began to wheel himself off to the side, groaning dramatically as he joked about being sent to timeout. And then he saw it—or more correctly, him.

As he crossed the line of play and the game continued behind him as if nothing had happened, Harry looked up at his longtime assistant. "What is it?"

"Can I talk to you for a moment?" His face was well trained; steady and silent as he nodded Harry to the side.

"Right now?" Harry's eyebrows shot up.
"Yes sir," Thomas took a step further away and Harry had no choice but to follow. Thomas smiled, a well-trained smile, as he motioned for Harry to come to him.

And he did. Trusting this man he had worked with for years and years, he left the chair and walked off to the side with him. Harry watched as Thomas took a deep, shaky breath, he watched as he stepped right up to him.

Reaching out for Harry's shoulders, Thomas held onto him as he leaned in to whisper in his ear; wanting him, and only him, to hear what he was about to tell him.

"I need you to keep a calm face right now."

"What is it?" Harry blinked, resisting the urge to turn and look for his wife.

"Calm face, Captain," Thomas warned once more before he sucked in a breath, his fingers tightening on his arms. "The Duchess is in the car out front..."

"What?" Harry made a move to pull back from Thomas, but he held tight; needing him right there.

"I'm going to stand here for another five minutes, I'm going to watch the game and laugh and make it seem like you'll be right back..." He swallowed. "And you are going to walk off this court and go out the tunnel just over my left shoulder. Jim is there waiting for you. He'll take you to the car."

"What the hell..." Harry could feel his heart beating in his throat.

"She's in labor Sir," Thomas couldn't help the smile that danced on his face as he said it. "You're going to have a baby."

There was a split second when everything around him froze; the game, the crowd, the camera flashes, the music, the commentators—his own senses. A split second for his mind and his heart to catch up to the words he had just heard.

He was going to have a baby. A baby.

His eyes blinked and his chest tightened and were it not for Thomas's hands on his shoulders, his legs may have just given out.

Were it not for Thomas's voice in his ear, soft and reminding, "Breathe," he may have just forgotten.

"She's..." Harry's voice caught in his throat, his emotions right at surface level; barely contained.

"She's just out the door in the car," Thomas repeated, squeezing his shoulders reassuringly. "I'll stay right here but you should go Sir."

As his senses returned, he became keenly aware of just how exposed he was at that moment; all of the people, all of the media. There were so many opportunities for this to become a chaotic frenzy. His eyes glanced up to the crowd and then over to the tunnel. It was time to go.

"Thank you," Harry cleared his throat as he reached out to pat Thomas's shoulder. And then with a smile, he said a little louder, "I'll be right back." With a nod to the coach and a small wave to the official, he stepped around Thomas—careful not to look at him, knowing that just might make him crack.

It took every single ounce of willpower he had not to sprint across the court, not to break out in a
full run towards that tunnel. But he summoned his wits and he moved with ease; trying his best not to bring too much attention to him, to the fact that he was leaving.

But as soon as he stepped into the privacy that the tunnel provided, as soon as he saw Jim standing ready to bolt, he let loose of his control and his smile lit up his entire face.

"Anything I can do for you this evening, Sir?" Jim was grinning too.

"You could get that crazy smile off of your face and take me to my wife," Harry tried to be stern but failed miserably as Jim nodded and started towards the exit.

Both men were quick with their steps; purposeful and driven. And when they stepped out into the night, the car was right out front—right where Thomas said it would be. And Harry couldn't get there fast enough; trotting ahead, his eyes scanning around to see if anyone was watching—not wanting to blow their exit but not caring enough to slow it down.

He needed to see his wife—more than he needed anything else in the world.

The door was pulled open and he was inside in a flash; the door shutting behind him a second before the car was in motion.

And there she was; his wife. With her hair pulled back in a ponytail and a sheepish smile on her face, she shrugged her shoulders and swallowed back her nerves.

"I'm so sorry Harry..." Her voice wavered, her eyes welling up.

"What?!" Harry blinked against his confusion. "Sorry? Madeline..."

"The game," she waved her hand towards the venue that was now in the distance behind them. "You were right in the middle of a game, in the middle of Invictus! You're running these games and you're playing and you're busy! And you..."

With absolute purpose Harry took her face in his hands. With a quick shake of his head and zero regret, he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. "Shhh...love. Don't apologize. Don't..."

He kissed her again, warming her body, pushing away her apologies.

As the car raced through the streets of London, as his heart raced in his chest, he kissed her; long and slow and full of this wonderful new emotion that came with this specific moment in his life.

This moment when he was about to become a father, when she was about to become a mother. This moment when nothing—absolutely nothing—else mattered.
"Okay," Harry pulled back from her, his hands sliding softly down over her shoulders, her arms. "Okay. You're having contractions..." His lips curved up in a smile as he took her hand. "Are you doing okay? How are they? Are they..."

His question was cut off by the sharp pangs of the answer. Maddie's breath sucked into her lungs and he watched as a wave washed over her. As her eyes pressed closed and her head leaned back on the chair, her fingers tightened around his. "Speaking of contractions..." She spoke from the corner of her strained smile.

"My God Maddie," he whispered, his eyes wide as he watched her. "How can I help? Tell me what to do and I'll..."

"Shhh..." Her fingers lifted to his lips, pressing softly and silencing him instantly. She reached for his hand and took another breath.

"We're less than a minute out," Arthur spoke quietly to them over the seat.

"Good," Maddie smiled, her eyes still closed. "Cause these are starting to hurt..." She took in another long breath, letting it out slowly before she opened her eyes and looked over at Harry. "It's okay..." Her hand moved to stroke his cheek. "This is what's supposed to happen."

"Okay." He turned to kiss her palm, nodding his head as he tried to calm his innate desire to rid her of pain. "What do I do? Who can I call?" He was trying to catch up, trying to recall the plan that had been put into place for this, his eyes darting to look out the window; gauging how close they were to the hospital.

"No one," she shook her head, taking in a breath. "Everything's in place. The plan is...working."

"Everything's in place?" He blinked at her answer, still unable to comprehend it all.

"Mmm," she nodded with a sweet smile, proud at the way they had been able to do it. "We tried to be as inconspicuous as possible with everyone sitting right there." She cleared her throat. "After the end of the second quarter, Bishop left with my mother. He was going to take her to the house for my bag and then they were going to meet us at the hospital," her eyes glanced out the window. "They're probably already there."

"Wait..." Harry's forehead knotted in confusion. "The end of the second quarter? But..."

"Will and Kate stayed behind," she continued on, wanting to give him the details before he latched on to that bit of information. "Hoping the attention on them would distract so that people wouldn't notice..." Maddie smiled and held onto his hand. "Will said he would call your father as soon as you walked off the court. Once you send Thomas the message that we're inside, they'll head over too."

"Hold on," he let out a puff of a laugh as he processed all she was telling him. "How long has this been going on? How long have you known this was happening?"

"Harry..." She smiled sweetly, her voice dropping in a way that drew his curiosity.

"How long? How often?" His fingers stroked over the back of her hand.

"They're about seven minutes apart," she took a breath. "I've been having them for a couple of
hours and..."

"A couple of hours?!!" His eyes flew wide as he glanced down at her stomach. "You've been having contractions for a couple of hours and you just now sent Thomas to find me?! You should have told me! We could have left and..."

"But the game and..."

"The game!" His voice rose as a laugh burst from his lips. "Madeline! You pull me from the game! What if you had had her there! We would have had to call her Invictus then! You can't just..."

"Stop," she whispered. "We're having a baby and I waited until the time was right to pull you...And you're here now..."

"But..." He tried once more.

With great purpose, she took his face in her hands. With an amused smirk on her face and loving eyes, she pressed her lips to his and she kissed away his words, his arguments, his nervousness.

"Madeline," he mumbled against her lips, the car slowing to a stop outside of the hospital.

"We're here," she pulled away from him then, suppressing a laugh as her door pulled open.  "Come on Captain. You can yell at me inside."

"I'm not..." He tried to disagree, tried to make it right, but she was faster than him. The second she stepped from the car, his protective senses perked up and he made quick work of getting through his open door and around to her side.

All eyes were alert as the two of them moved from the car. With Harry's hand at her back and their protection officers standing tall around them, Maddie was escorted into the hospital where they were immediately greeted by a nurse.

"Your Royal Highness," she smiled at the couple, dipping into a quick curtsey that made Maddie chuckle to herself.

"Good evening," Maddie held her hand out. "I'm Maddie and this..." She nudged Harry lightly. "This is my husband Harry. He's a bit out of sorts, if you know what I mean."

"Oh is that so?" Harry's eyes swung over to hers.

"Mmm," Maddie nodded and turned back to the nurse.

"It's good to meet you Ma'am," the nurse watched the exchange, amused at their back and forth even in this moment. "My name is Nicki. I would be happy to escort you up to your room."

"Fantastic," Maddie nodded, her hand smoothing over her stomach as though she knew another contractions would be coming soon.

"Would you like to take a seat in the wheelchair, Ma'am?" She gestured to the chair to her right.

"No thank you," Maddie shook her head. "I think I would rather walk."

"Of course," Nicki pushed the chair to the side. "Right this way. We have this corridor cleared." She gestured to her left and Maddie and her own little entourage followed along as they made their way down to an elevator. With a quick ding, the doors opened and they all stepped inside.
As the doors closed behind them, Maddie turned a smile up to her protection officer, hoping to break the silence. "Did you hear this guy in the car Arthur?" She lifted her eyebrows as they all looked to her, her head nodding to Harry.

"Ma'am?"

"Excuse me?" Harry's lips twitched up despite his effort to keep a straight face.

"Yelling at a pregnant woman," she shook her head at him, winking as she grinned. "Did you catch all of that Arthur?"

"Yes Ma'am," Arthur nodded.

"Yes Ma'am?" Harry turned his smirk to Maddie's PO.

"He thought we were going to have this baby at the games," Maddie's smile pulled even higher as she caught Jim chuckling.

"Yes Ma'am," Arthur nodded again, his own laughter puffing through his lips.

"Oh you think that's funny?" Harry shook his head at Arthur and Jim before he turned to Maddie, his arms crossing over his chest. "Real funny until Arthur and Jim are delivering the baby on the floor." Harry looked back at the two men. "Either of you even know how to do that?"

"Actually," Arthur shrugged. "I've delivered a baby before."

"See," Maddie's eyes lit up as she waved a hand at Arthur. "He's delivered a baby before."

"Lovely," Harry nodded, his tension easing as the humor took over.

"I had Ella too," Maddie moved in to his side, cozying up to him. "She's delivered many, many babies."

"You're missing the point," his arm moved around her shoulders, hugging her to him, kissing her head.

"No Daddy," she felt her emotions start to swirl. "I think you are."

"Okay," he agreed, blinking at the way her teary eyes made his well up. "You're right. You win." He kissed her nose. "Now will you please explain to Nurse Nicki that I was not yelling at my pregnant wife?"

Maddie snickered and nodded, turning her eyes to the nurse who stood to the side, unable to control her wide smile. "He was not really yelling at his pregnant wife."

"Yes Ma'am," she laughed lightly.

"Please don't tell anyone that he was yelling at his pregnant wife," Maddie patted Harry's chest, knowing that the nurse could see the joking and the love.

"Of course not Ma'am," she met Maddie's eyes and agreed, easily. "And you should know, Sir, most first time fathers are a bit out of sorts."

"Thank you," Harry met her eyes, grateful for her understanding.

As a ding rang out, the doors pulled open and everyone shifted slightly towards business. Nicki stepped out and ushered them just to the right. "We're right over here." Maddie instantly
recognized the hallway, the rooms. This was where they had waited for Arthur to be born. She knew there was a private waiting room at the end and she followed along as the nurse took them right into the labor and delivery room. As Arthur followed along, Jim took a quick walk down the corridor.

"Doctor Hall has arrived at the hospital and is just downstairs changing," Nicki explained. "She'll be right up and we can get you checked in. In the meantime, if you could change into the gown on the bed, the doctor will want to do an exam and see how far along you are. I'll go grab the paperwork and we'll both be in shortly."

"Thank you," Maddie nodded, watching as the nurse excused herself, as Arthur followed behind.

As the door clicked shut, Maddie took a deep breath in and turned around, her eyes locking to Harry's. And she could feel the emotions wash right over her, her eyes welling up as he turned soft on her.

"Madeline..." His hand pressed to his heart as he closed the gap between them.

"I know," she whispered, her hands reaching out, her fingers wrapping around his arms as he moved to her belly. "I know. Can you believe it?"

"No," he shook his head; disbelief and joy swirling inside of him. "I can't."

"You're not really mad about the games and..."

"No," he cut her off; quick and easy. "Of course not."

"Things are about to get pretty crazy around here Captain," she bit her bottom lip as she smiled up at him.

"I know. But I'm not worried about that. Tell me about you. How are you doing?" His eyes searched hers, his concern for her taking center stage now that the chaos from the car drifted away. "How are you really doing?"

"I'm good," she assured him. "I've been doing the breathing and the counting. You know, the whole thing..."

He chuckled as his hands rounded over her stomach, in awe of where they were. "Are they bad?" He lifted his eyebrows, knowing it was going to get worse before it got better.

"No," Maddie shook her head. "At least they haven't been. The one in the car was worse."

"Okay," he nodded; feeling more and more comfortable as they settled in. "Your mother should be here any minute and you need to...change..." He glanced back at the gown on the bead. "Now tell me...what do you need? Where do you want me to be?"

"Right. There." Maddie's eyes grew tense and her fingers tightened around his arm. She sucked in a breath and smiled weakly. "Here comes another one. Right on time."

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When Nurse Nicki returned, she had Doctor Sylvia Hall with her; changed and ready to go; beaming as she stepped into the room.

"Well, well, well," she looked from Maddie who was sitting on the bed in the gown as instructed to Harry who stood next to her and back again. "I hear that you're having contractions."
"I am," Maddie nodded.

"Good, good," the Doctor smiled, reading over Maddie's chart for the third time since she had received the call that they were on their way. "We're a little earlier than we thought."

"I know," Maddie's fingers wrapped around Harry's hand, slightly nervous.

"Is that okay?" Harry looked from his wife to the doctor, worry creasing his forehead.

"It is," the Doctor was quick to nod, quick to reassure. "You're at thirty-eight weeks and while we like you to be at forty, the baby is well developed and we can absolutely deliver her tonight."

"Wow," Maddie let out a breath she had been holding, her grip on Harry loosening just a little.

"Wow indeed," the Doctor set the notes aside. "Now, the nurse is going to have you both sign some paperwork, all things we've gone over together." She went over to the sink and began washing her hands. "And I'm going to do an exam and see how things are coming along. Daddy?" She looked to Harry. "I would imagine you're staying for this?"

"Absolutely," Harry nodded, appreciating how informal the doctor was with them, loving that she was treating them just like any other pair of expectant parents.

"Good," she reached for a paper towel, drying her hands as she returned to the bed. With a smile, she pulled on her gloves and nodded to Maddie. "Let's take a look, shall we?" As the Doctor adjusted Maddie on the bed, the nurse reached for the chart and stood ready for the doctor to give her some notes.

"You okay?" Harry looked down at Maddie as the Doctor began her examination. He was so sweet and so steady, it made her heart swell.

"I am," she reassured him with a smile, with a nod. With another deep breath, she closed her eyes and let her mind rest for just a moment; Harry's hand wrapped warmly around hers.

"Well okay," the Doctor finished the exam quickly, pulling her gloves from her hands before she brought them up to speed. "My understanding is that your contractions were at about seven minutes apart?"

"They're more like six now," Maddie corrected with a laugh. "Nearing five."

"Good," the Doctor's smile widened. "You're at about five centimeters dilation right now. We have a little ways to go but we're going to admit you and keep you here for sure." She nodded to the nurse to bring the paperwork over. "You'll need to sign these and I'm sure that your people have some rules they want you to follow," she lifted her eyebrows to Harry. "But as far as I'm concerned, you can move around. You can go see your family or have them in here. You can walk around the hospital and really do whatever it is you want to do to make yourself comfortable..." She folded her hands in front of her and looked to Maddie. "Do you think you want an epidural now? Or do you want to wait and see how things go?"

"I think I'll wait," Maddie smiled. "I want to walk around a little bit, get things moving and all," she took a breath, her mouth opening to speak just as there was a knock on the door.

All sets of eyes flew towards the sound, the Doctor the first to move to peek outside.

"There's a woman out here claiming to be your mother," she grinned as she turned back to Maddie. "Mind if I let her in?"
"Of course not," Maddie shook her head, swinging her legs over the side of the bed so she could stand up; wanting to move around.

"Oh my God," Hannah's voice was heavy with emotion as she took in the sight; her daughter in the gown, the bed, Harry. "Look at you two."

"Mom," Maddie warned, shaking her head; not ready for this particular wave of emotion.

"I'm sorry," she apologized quickly, waving her hand at her face as everyone shared in a light laugh. "I'm sorry." She moved in to hug Maddie, kissing her cheek before she turned to hug Harry. "How are you two doing? You okay?"

"We are," Harry hugged her tight. "Now that we're here, we're good."

"Oh! And you did it! You pulled it off." She clapped her hands together. "Nobody is the wiser yet. I expected there to be a frenzy outside but it's actually pretty calm."

"That reminds me," Harry took a deep breath. "I need to let Thomas know we're staying."

"You do," Maddie nodded, watching as he pulled his phone from his pocket. "And then you need to take a shower."

"A shower?" Harry turned back to her, eyebrows high on his forehead. "You're going to have a baby and you want me to shower."

"We're not going to have her right this second," she laughed. "I asked my mother to bring your bag too so you could shower and change."

"Madeline," he shook his head.

"Henry," she countered. "You were playing rugby for God's sake. We have at least ten minutes for you to shower and change. Am I right Doctor Hall?"

The Doctor's eyes went wide as a smirk pulled across her face. "Well I generally stay out of discussions such as this," she looked to Harry and pulled serious. "You do have time to shower and change. It'll be at least another hour, probably two before we start to get settled."

"See," Maddie waved her hand.

"Wow," he laughed. "You are just loving being right tonight, aren't you?"

"Absolutely," she winked. "Now, get ahold of Thomas and get in the shower."

"Yes Ma'am," he offered her up a salute and turned back to his phone. As Maddie turned to her mother and her bag, the Doctor slipped out, letting them have some time before their big night kicked into high gear.

Maddie and Harry had been at the hospital just over an hour when the announcement went out, confirming what had become a growing suspicion with the media.

"The Duchess of Sussex has been admitted this evening to St. Mary's Hospital, Paddington, London in the early stages of labour. The Duchess travelled to the Lindo Wing by car from The Copper Box Arena with the Duke of Sussex where he was playing in an exhibition Wheelchair Rugby Match at The Invictus Games."
As soon as it was announced, the frenzy began. Loop after loop was played of Harry walking out of the match at the Copper Box Arena. Photos of Maddie from that day were splashed all over every media outlet. And the crowd began to build outside the hospital. Thankfully their families had already made it inside by the time the craziness began. And Harry and Maddie, they were safe inside; together and smiling.

As time drew on the contractions increased in frequency and intensity. It had been a long day; Maddie had been feeling contractions for at least five hours, at the hospital with Harry for three. They had taken several walks around, pausing to breathe through the contractions; Maddie's head nestled in Harry's shoulder or his chest as he rubbed at her back and went through the breathing with her. He had taken a shower and changed and Maddie had taken one hot, soothing bath.

People had slowly begun to gather. Her mother was there, Charles and Camilla, Will and Kate. Even Ella and Bishop were waiting, keeping everyone company while they waited for news. They had all cycled in, spending a bit of time with Maddie and Harry, offering a distraction when Maddie asked for it. But as they neared hour five, as the contractions took more concentration and energy from Maddie, the others had settled to the waiting area and were allowing the couple some space and quiet.

Maddie was up, leaning over the bed and resting on her forearms when things began to move more quickly. Harry was standing next to her, rubbing her back soothingly as she breathed through the end of the last contraction. When she raised her head and sucked in a breath, she turned tired eyes up to him and whispered. "I think it's time for the epidural."

And Harry could see it in her face; the stress and the pain and all he wanted to do was to make it easier, make it better. "I'll go get the doctor."

Maddie nodded and closed her eyes, her forehead dropping back to the bed. "Thank you..." She breathed and took a moment to try to regroup before the next wave washed through her.

Moving quickly, he stepped from the room and was back in record time with Dr. Hall. "Okay Maddie," she called out softly as they stepped back into the room. "Harry tells me you're ready for an epidural. Was that something you asked for or is he just trying to help you out?" She joked a bit as she moved inside; washing her hands and drying them at the sink.

"Oh God please..." Maddie chuckled against her clenched jaw.

"Okay," the Doctor smiled and moved over to Maddie, her hands moving to her tiny frame; one at her shoulder and one to her back. "I've called for the anesthesiologist and he'll be right down. But we're going to have to get you up into bed. I want to see how far along we are and then we'll leave you there since you won't be able to move after the epidural. Okay?"

"Okay," Maddie nodded and lifted her head from the bed.

Harry stood to the side, biting nervously at his lip as he watched her move. These last few contractions had been harder on her and he would be lying if he said it wasn't hard on him—to watch her sit in so much pain completely unable to intervene. As Maddie crawled in the bed and laid back, her eyes opened wider and she sent a soft, sweet smile across the room to him.

"How are you doing daddy?" She nodded in his direction.

"Me?" He laughed lightly, moving to the head of the bed next to her; plucking her hand up into his and bringing it to his lips for a kiss. "I'm not sure it matters how I'm doing."
"Sure it does," Dr. Hall smiled up at him as she moved into place by Maddie's feet, sliding her gloves on. "A happy daddy helps make a happy mum and that only helps us deliver a happy baby." She lifted Maddie's gown and nodded up to her, letting her know that she was going to examine her.

"Well I'm doing wonderful," Harry held Maddie's hand, against his cheek, meeting her eyes as she nodded and stroked his chin. "Excited and...wonderful."

In a few quick moments, Dr. Hall took a step back; pulling her gloves off and turning a wide smile to Maddie. "Well Mum, you've done really great today. You're fully dilated. I'll get the epidural in here and it looks like you'll be able to start pushing here very soon."

"Oh my God," Maddie felt a surge of emotion at the realization of it all; at how close they were to meeting their baby. "Okay..." She nodded, turning teary eyes up to Harry. "This is it."

"This is it," he smiled down at her; leaning in to kiss her forehead.

"Okay," the Doctor grinned at the two of them and stepped out of the room to pull in the anesthesiologist. Before this night drew to an absolute close, Maddie and Harry were going to become parents.

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"Oh my God..." Maddie sighed back into the bed with a smile. "Now THIS is amazing." Everything about her had eased; the crinkle of her forehead, the clench of her jaw, the tension in her shoulders.

"Yeah?" Harry chuckled lightly as he looked her over; the change in her demeanor easing his own anxieties. He had sat in front of her, holding her hands as the anesthesiologist administered the epidural and then he had watched as it washed over her.

"Mmmmmm..." She nodded, settling in. "I should have done this hours ago."

"Now don't get too comfortable," Dr. Hall smiled to Maddie. "You're about to get very busy."

"You don't think I can squeeze in a nap really quickly?" Maddie joked.

"You can try," the doctor pulled out the footrests and moved Maddie's feet into them. "I'm going to check on you one more time Maddie and then I think we're going to be able to start pushing."

"We?" Maddie laughed; her voice a little high.

"Fair point," the Doctor chuckled and turned to put on her gown, her gloves. Maddie turned her face to Harry's as the doctor examined her; her heart beginning to pick up speed as she took it all in; what was about to occur.

"What are you thinking?" Maddie asked him, her fingers stroking around his tired eyes.

"I was thinking..." He took a breath and looked at her; warm and proud. "I was thinking how amazed I am by you."

"Oh Harry," she rolled her eyes lightly, turning her face from his.

"I was," he reached out to draw her eyes back to him. "I mean it Maddie. I don't know how you've done this for six hours...." He shook his head and swallowed at the lump in his throat. "And I was thinking about how much I love you..."
"I love you too," she cut him off, her fingers pulling at the fabric of his button down flannel, wanting him closer. And he went; without thought or hesitation, he went. Kissing her lips with love and want and adoration.

"Well," Dr. Hall took a breath as they pulled apart, both of them looking up to her. "I hope you two are ready to lose some sleep." She turned a nod to her assistant who began to move around with purpose. "Because you're about to become parents."

"Really?" Maddie felt the craziest combination of giddy and nervous and ready.

"Really," the doctor nodded again; taking a face mask from her assistant and tying it around the back of her head. And everything began to move quickly around them. The doctor dressed and readied, the assistant gathered items and flipped on lights, the nurse moved towards the head of the bed, opposite from where Harry stood and she smiled down at Maddie, pushing a button on the bed to bring Maddie more upright.

"Do you remember your positioning for this?" She was sweet with Maddie, having been there with her all day. "Sit up and hold your knees..."

"I remember," Maddie nodded her head, glancing over to Harry who was on his feet, watching the action in the room. "You ready daddy?" She asked him, her voice cracking at the end.

With wide, happy eyes and a smile that hurt his cheeks, Harry nodded quickly. Their eyes locked for a moment; this brief, hot, unbelievable moment where they were both wrapping their minds around this intimate miracle they were about to share. And then the doctor's voice called out to her.

"Okay. Maddie..." Maddie pulled her eyes from Harry and looked to the doctor. "When the next contraction comes, I'm going to want you to start pushing. Okay?"

Maddie nodded; blinking at tears as she sat up taller, as the nurse moved closer to her side. "I can't believe this is happening," she wavered as she tried to calm her pulse, her nerves. "I can't believe we're about to meet our daughter..."

"I can't either," Harry whispered in return, moving closer to her, ready for whatever she needed from him. "You know, there was a time in my life when I thought that none of this would happen for me..." He leaned down to kiss her, to smooth her hair back from her forehead. "I can't even find words to tell you how much this means to me. God...I love you so much Madeline."

"I love you too Captain," Maddie nodded; sniffing as she kissed him once more. With a glance down at the end of the bed where there had just been chaos and movement, there was stillness. And the heaviness of that caught in her throat.

Everyone was in place, soft smiles and kind eyes and then the doctor nodded up to Maddie. "Okay Maddie. I want you to take a deep breath, bear down and...push."

So Maddie nodded; to Harry, to the Doctor, to herself. She released her hold on Harry and sat up tall, her hands reaching to hold onto her knees just as they had been taught. And as she leaned forward, she could feel Harry's hands on her shoulder, on her back. She closed her eyes, sucked in a deep breath and then with every single ounce of love and energy she had left in her body, she pushed.

Though she drew into herself; centering and pulling in, she could hear those around her. She could Harry's low, warm words of encouragement. She could hear the doctor counting her through the contraction and she could hear her heart beating in her ear.
"Okay," the doctor called out to her as the contraction ended. "Good job Maddie. Great job..." Maddie opened her eyes as she slumped back on the bed, taking in her breath as Harry rubbed back, his smile steady and strong. "I'm going to need another one just like that Maddie. You can do that right?"

"Mmmm," Maddie nodded to the doctor, her lips pressed together as she moved back to sitting.

"Okay..." The doctor adjusted something, her eyes glancing up at the monitors before focusing on Maddie. "They're going to come fast now. In three, two, one...Push."

Maddie's eyes closed, her breath sucked in and she pushed. A puff of breath escaped her mouth, a slight moan from her throat.

"Not yet," the doctor directed. "Keep pushing...keep pushing...you're almost there...." And after the longest pause of Maddie's life, "okay. Rest. Breathe."

Maddie fell back again, her lungs straining to gather air, her eyes turning to Harry; her strength. And he smiled, pulling her hand to his chest. "You're doing amazing..."

"You are," the doctor agreed, moving closer and nodding to Maddie. "Okay Mum. Sit up. Deep breath." Maddie nodded, unable to pull the effort to speak—all of her energy being directed somewhere else. With the nurse on one side and Harry on the other, she moved into position and closed her eyes. "Push."

And she did; she pushed with everything she had, everything she could gather until she felt tears in her eyes and an ache in her chest. "Okay Maddie. Exhale and look at me." Not able to do anything but what she was instructed, Maddie did just that. "This next push I need to be a big one and it's going to come fast and we're going to have a few big ones right in a row but at the end of it I think you're going to meet your baby. Okay?"

"Okay," Maddie's voice rattled as she nodded and Harry's hands were on her, stroking at her back at her shoulders; his lips on the side of her head. And she was almost afraid to look at him, knowing the emotion that must be on his face.

"Okay," even with the mask covering the doctor's face, it was clear she was smiling. "Okay Maddie. Let's do this. Big breath and Push."

Maddie's eyes closed and she counted along inside her head with the doctor.

Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, Six, Five, Four, Three, Two...

"Take a breath," the doctor called out. "And Push."

Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, Six, Five, Four, Three, Two...

"I see some hair!" Maddie's eyes flew open as she took a breath; the news startling her into a new energy.

"Harry..." Maddie called out.

"I'm right here." And he was; right next to her, his own breath ragged from holding his just as she was holding hers. "I can't believe you're doing this."

"Me neither," she cried.

"Okay Maddie," the doctor called out. "You're doing this. Big push here. Big push. Take a breath
and Push."

Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, Six, Five, Four, Three, Two...

"Quick breath Maddie and Push!"

Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, Six, Five, Four, Three, Two...

"Oh!" Maddie called out into the room, the exhaustion of it all taking over her body for just a moment before she sucked it back in.

"Push Maddie. One more."

Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, Six, Five, Four, Three, Two...

"Here comes the head," the doctor adjusted something, her assistant leaning in as Maddie fought to catch her breath. "Hold on just a second for me. Take a breath."

"My God Maddie..." Harry looked at her with awe, with reverence; his own heart thudding in his chest at what was happening around him. His fingers trembled just a bit as he smoothed her hair from her face; his lips shaky as he kissed her temple, her jaw, her hair. "I..." He had no words; none.

When she turned her head to look at him, the look on his face, in his eyes, slammed into her already fragile heart. She pushed her hand over his eyes, the sheer emotion there threatening to end her strength. "Keep those teary eyes away from me Captain."

"I'm sorry," his voice was rushed and genuine as he pulled her hand from his face, taking it in both of his and kissing the back of it. "I'm sorry. I can't. I can't..." He shook his head. "I'm so proud of you right now, I can barely think straight, I..."

"Stop it," her words wavered as her eyes welled up.

And then the doctor cut into their moment and leveled the room. "Okay Daddy. Would you like to help me deliver your daughter?"

His mouth opened but nothing came out, the lump in his throat taking over his words for a moment. "I can do that?" He whispered the question.

"You can," the Doctor nodded, amused at the look on his face. "If it's okay with mum?"

Maddie smiled; tired and worn out and in love with everything about him. "Of course," she blinked at the tears in her eyes. "Yes, of course."

"Nicki, would you put a gown on Harry?" The Doctor looked back up at Maddie as people began to move. "I'm going to deliver the head and then we'll let dad get in here." She nodded up to Harry who bent to kiss Maddie's hand before following the nurse. "Okay Maddie," the doctor looked up to her. "This is it. Deep breath and a big Push."

"They've all been big Pushes," Maddie laughed as she moved into place.

"This needs to be bigger," the doctor challenged. "Now Push."

Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, Six, Five, Four, Three, Two...

"Here it comes..." The doctor was focused and businesslike as she readied herself to do her main part in the delivery. "Big breath Maddie and Push!"
"Oh my God," she heard Harry's voice as he moved back to the action, his hands back on her; warm and comforting. With a gown on similar to the one the doctor wore, he was ready to step up when called.

"Almost there..." The doctor spoke to Maddie; her voice holding her there in the moment. "Deep breath, Maddie and Push...."

"Oh!" Maddie cried out into the room just as the doctor announced.

"We have a head!"

Maddie's eyes flew open and the first thing she saw was Harry; wide eyed and entranced and it made her cry. All of the pain and the stress and the exhaustion was just taking over and pulling at every emotion she had. The doctor was at work, turning the baby and waving Harry over.

Squeezing Maddie's fingers, holding her eyes with his, he moved next to the doctor, so caught up in the moment, the feeling overwhelmed him. And everyone could see it, just how big this was.

"Okay Maddie, a few more pushes and you'll have your baby." And somewhere in Maddie's mind she wondered how the doctor managed to stay so calm and collected while everyone around her gave into the feelings. "Maddie...Maddie you with me?"

"Yes," She breathed.

"Harry, are you ready?" She smiled at the man who stood next to her, completely enamored with his wife and what she was doing.

"Yes," he managed to answer through his emotion filled voice.


"Oh my God," Harry shook his head, the anticipation, the wait, the gravity of it all coming to a head as Maddie pushed and pushed.

"One more Maddie. Push."

Behind Maddie's closed eyes was the warmest auburn color, behind her tightly pressed lips was a cry of joy and even when she thought she couldn't push any more, that she had nothing left to give —she found more.

And then all of a sudden she felt a release of pressure and her eyes pulled open.

"There we go..." The doctor encouraged, the assistant moving around her; handing her things and taking them away. Quickly, she waved in Harry. Showing him where to put his hands, explaining how this would work, she scooted off to the side and smiled her encouragement as she spoke to Maddie in the sweetest voice. "One more little push mommy. Can you do that?"
She nodded and took a breath and looked right up to Harry and she pushed.

Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, Six, Five, Four...

"And we have a baby!" The doctor exclaimed as watched closely, ready next to Harry with a blanket.

"Oh my God!" Harry's voice tripped over itself as he held onto his little girl, as his wife pushed her into the world. "Oh..." His words caught in his throat as everyone moved around him. "She's here..." Harry's eyes blinked at tears, at emotions he had never felt

"Oh my God..." Maddie choked up, her heart swelling in her chest as she looked up at her little baby in Harry's hands, as he pulled her to him on instinct. "Oh my God Harry...she has your hair..."

"She's perfect Maddie, she's..." And then he looked to Maddie and all he wanted to do was be by her side. "Here..." He moved with the doctor who was patting her off, running towels over her as the nurse cleared her airways; smiles all the way around the room.

"Here we go..." The Doctor looked to Maddie as Harry walked with her. "Let's reunite her with her mum." With a long, deep breath, Maddie leaned back against the pillows; the nurse at her side helping her move, adjusting her gown down a bit. She watched as her completely smitten husband laid her tiny little baby on her chest and then in a moment that she would never ever be able to erase, she smiled down at her daughter.

Her daughter.

And suddenly she wasn't sure how there was enough room in that hospital for all of the love she felt.

"We're not done with you daddy," The doctor handed Harry the scissors, showing him where to cut the umbilical cord and when he did, the look on his face was brighter than Maddie had ever seen it.

"Oh my God..." Maddie began to cry, her body letting go of all the stress, all the work; all at once. She watched as the nurses moved quickly and efficiently, finishing up; cleaning and checking and making sure things were going as they should. "Hi there darling...you're so precious...so beautiful..." Maddie felt Harry back at her side, felt his arms around her, around their baby—his lips kissing her bared shoulder, her cheek, the side of her head. "I'm your mom..." Her voice cracked as she spoke.

As she said the words, she turned her eyes to his tear filled ones and her own tears fell. And then she let him kiss her; long and full and without regard to the fact that were at least four other people in the room.

She let his mouth open hers, she let his tongue pass over, she let the passion they had shared, the love that had created this baby, be in that moment with them. And then she turned her lips from his and he leaned to kiss their daughter's head and she smiled. "And this...this is your daddy."

"Welcome to the world," he spoke softly as he stretched out a finger to stroke her chubby little cheeks. "You've had a very busy day."

"You have," Maddie agreed, running her hands over her head. "Look at her mess of red hair..." She shook her head, amazed. "And her perfect little nose and these cheeks..." She laughed, beyond happy.
"She's so tiny," Harry's fingers spread out as he ran his fingers up over her head; his hand looking so big next to her.

"Do you want to hold her?" Maddie kissed her daughter's forehead, nuzzling into her.

"Yes." The way he said the word; the tone and inflection and emotion—absolute reverence.

As Maddie adjusted the little bundle in her arms, Harry stood next to the bed and leaned in; his arms moving instinctually into position to take her and cradle her and protect her.

With a wide smile and adoration, Maddie handed the baby off to him. As he took her into his arms, as he drew her into his broad chest, as his large arms wrapped around her, as he looked down at this amazing little girl he had made, this tiny little baby that was his and Maddie's—he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that his life had changed irrevocably.

And he knew he could never be happier.

The Doctor moved quietly toward the new parents, the new family, smiling at Maddie. "Tell me, does she have a name? Or is it going to be Baby Girl Sussex for a while?"

Maddie's eyes met Harry's and she lifted her eyebrows, asking the same question he was asking her with his smile. Together they decided that the woman who helped them bring her into the world could absolutely be the first to know her name.

With a soft nod, Maddie leaned to kiss their daughter's head. "Her name is Lillibet," Maddie inhaled the sweet soft scent of her hair. "Lillibet Frances K."

"Oh Maddie..." Harry shook his head as he peered down at the baby, already hopelessly in love with her. "She's perfect. Little Lilli...she is absolutely perfect."
With every step that Harry took down the corridor to the waiting room, he could feel this new role changing him. He walked taller, his step was peppier. His smile couldn't have been wider and he was sure that the look in his eyes could be construed as crazy by just about anyone else. But he didn't care.

He didn't mind one bit.

Leaving Maddie's side had been difficult. At first he couldn't be pulled away from them. He was mesmerized; hooked. On Maddie and his daughter. Nothing inside of him had wanted to step out of the room. He knew there were people waiting to be told; his father, her mother—The Queen. But he couldn't seem to force himself from her side. The nurses had insisted he wouldn't miss anything. All they needed to do was finish up a few things, clean up and let his girls settle in. But when Maddie had turned her sweet eyes up to him, when she had lifted his chin and stroked his cheek, when she told him in that wonderfully soft voice of hers, "Go. Tell them the good news."—he went.

He would truly have gone anywhere she commanded him to. He was so in awe of her in that moment. So he had kissed his wife and kissed his daughter and then he had stepped from the room. And his heart was quickly torn; as excited as he was, as ready as he was to celebrate with their loved ones, he was leaving a part of himself in that room with Maddie and their baby.

Standing just outside the waiting room door was a small collection of protection officers; each one's presence telling him exactly who in his family was on the other side of the door. Their smiles lifted to greet him and he looked quickly for Arthur, finding him standing off to the side.

"Arthur," Harry called out to him as he approached them.

"Sir?" He stood tall, looking to Harry.

"We made it," Harry's smile spread higher as he extended his hand. "We made it in plenty of time and she's..." He swallowed and shook his head, a soft chuckle pushing from his lips. "They are both...perfect."


"Thank you," Harry beamed. "And thank you; for getting her here."

"Of course," Arthur nodded, happy at the news. As the others offered their congratulations, as Jim met Harry's eyes through the group of men, Harry took a step towards the door. Knowing that he could have easily been drawn into hugs and wishes of congratulations from them, he had family waiting. He had an announcement to make.

Taking a deep breath, Harry reached for the handle and pulled open the door. With a whoosh of air and the click of the door behind him, all eyes turned to Harry; conversations halted and he could almost hear their collective breath hold. Through teary eyes, he glanced around the room; at his father and Camilla, at Hannah sitting with Kate, at William talking to Bishop, at Ella standing alone by the windows. He looked at all of them and then his smile cracked wide across his face.
Harry clapped his hands together and with a voice full of more emotion than he could handle, he let them in. "She's here. She's...our daughter. She's here."

And quite suddenly the room around him was alive and in motion. There was a smattering of applause, more than one shout of celebration. There were hugs and there were tears and from his lovely sister-in-law, there was a breath of relief. As they all moved to hug him, to congratulate him, the questions began to fly.

"How is she?"

"She's perfect!" He was beaming as he answered. "She has all of her toes and all of her fingers and..."

"How's Maddie?"

"Oh God," both of his hands pressed to his chest. "She's...she's just amazing." He looked for Hannah then, finding her just to his left as he reached for her hand. "She's wonderful. She's doing just fine. Everything went really well and she's cleaning up and getting settled and then you can all come in and see her...see them." His voice caught on his words as his father's hand closed over his shoulder.

"Congratulations son," he was so proud, so happy. "How are you? Exhausted?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "I'm...wow...I'm..." He couldn't really find it, couldn't quite pick out the right word.

"Of course you are," Charles smiled, leaning to kiss his cheek, holding onto him for an extra beat.

"Well, do tell," it was William who was most curious. "Who does she look like?"

"Oh Maddie," Harry sighed. "She's just like her mother...but with my hair..." Warm, wonderful bursts of laughter filled the room as he shrugged. "Poor thing."

"Does she have a name?" Hannah asked.

"She does," Harry nodded. "It's Lillibet," his eyes shifted to his father. "Lillibet Frances K..." His eyes moved to his brother as a sentiment passed between them all.

"Lillibet Frances K," Charles repeated, pride pouring from his pores.

"K?" Bishop lifted his eyebrows, knowing exactly where the rest of it came from. "Just the letter?"

"Yes," Harry nodded, swallowing a lump in his throat. "K...for Khenda." As he said her name, he looked to Ella and both of their eyes welled up.

"Khenda," she whispered, her hand pressing to her lips to keep from crying.

"Yes," Harry nodded, not bothering to wipe at the wetness in his eyes. "Lillibet Frances K....and she is just...perfect."

"Except she has your hair," Will pointed out with a grin, bringing laughter from all around.
"Yes she does," Harry nodded, his eyes widening as he remembered. "Oh! And they let me deliver her!"

"They what?!" Ella began to laugh through her tears.

"They did," he nodded excitedly as the room rumbled with chuckles. "I mean clearly the doctor did most of the work but in the end..." He choked up as he remembered. "They let me catch her..."

"That's amazing son," Charles patted Harry on the back, his excitement contagious.

"Can we meet her?" Hannah was just as eager as the rest of them.

"You can," Harry nodded enthusiastically. "The nurse said she would come here as soon as they were ready."

"Is there anything we can do for you? Anything you need or..." Thomas' voice called out from the left.

"Thomas!" Harry smiled wide as he spun to him.

"Congratulations Sir." He was proud and happy for Harry, having watched him grow to this fine young man, to this new father.

"Jesus," Harry shook his head as he hugged him. "You stopped my heart at that rugby match. I nearly passed out in front of all those people."

"Yes Sir," he laughed. "I want you to know that I'll be here for a while. You'll let me know when you're ready to make an announcement?" He gestured towards the windows, alluding to the people who were waiting for the news.

"I will," Harry nodded with a smile. "Thank you. For everything you did tonight."

"Of course, of course."

Harry's phone call was quick. Letting his grandmother know that he was a father—that his daughter bearing her name had arrived—it only added to the emotional flood that had taken him. Bringing her the happy news and accepting her heartfelt congratulations made it all that much more real. The call was over quickly, his duty as a grandson and as a Duke had been met and before long he was on his way back to Maddie.

And he was bringing with him quite the crew. When the nurse came to fetch them all, Bishop and Ella decided to stay in the waiting room, wanting the family to go first.

"Are you sure?" Hannah looked to them with warmth.

"Of course," Bishop nodded as Ella smiled. "We'll wait. We don't want to overwhelm them."

So as the two of them sat close together on the couch, the rest of the group followed the nurse and Harry back to Maddie. Despite the late/early hour, they were all awake, all eager to see for themselves this sweet new addition to their family. When they stepped back into the room, the
scene was different than when he had left; quieter, more peaceful. The chaos from Lilli's birth had been cleaned up and Maddie was tucked into a new bed; a bigger bed with fresh, clean sheets. And when she looked up towards them, when her smile pulled wide across her tired face, Harry felt his heart swell in his chest.

"Hi," she called out to them, hugging the little swaddled bundle closer to her chest as she waved them in with her hand. "Come in, come in..."

"Oh my goodness," Hannah's voice cracked as she moved into the room; slow and in awe—just like the rest of the group that gathered around the bed. Her fingers pressed to her lips as she looked at her daughter; as she looked at her daughter holding her daughter.

Harry moved right to Maddie's side, his pride beaming from his smile, from his eyes. "How are you?" His hands moved to them reflexively; fingers of one hand tucking hair behind Maddie's ear as the fingers of the others smoothed over the bright red wisps of Lilli's hair.

"We're great," Maddie smiled up at him, so in love with him, with their little family. Her lips turned up to him as he leaned to kiss her; not caring one bit that they had a crowd. With a soft chuckle, Maddie looked to their audience as they watched.

"Is she asleep?" Hannah asked, peering at the tightly wrapped baby in Maddie's arms.

"No," Maddie shook her head, feeling her emotions swell as she looked up to her mother. "She's just quiet...and content..." Her fingers tugged the blanket away from her face. "She's eaten and had a bath and she's just...she's ready to meet her family." Maddie's eyes were bright as she turned to her mother. "Would you like to hold her?"

"Really?" Hannah's voice was soft and quiet, her eyes darting up to Charles. "Would you like to..."

"No, no," he shook his head, holding his hand up as he nodded to her. "You first."

Though he desperately wanted to hug his granddaughter, though he wanted nothing more than to kiss her pink little cheeks, he knew in his heart that she should meet Hannah first. So he stood next to the bed with a wide smile and dancing eyes and he watched as Maddie passed her daughter over to her mother. And he watched with joy as a new grandmother was born.

"Oh my..." Hannah brought Lilli close, her eyes welling up as she leaned to kiss her head, to smell her, to absorb this new little life into her senses, into her memory. "She's absolutely perfect Maddie."

"I know," Maddie nodded, a light laugh on her lips.

"She looks just like you did as a baby Madeline," Hannah smiled down at the baby, taking in her little nose, the curves of her lips. "Just like you."

"Except for the hair," Maddie reached for Harry's hand.

"Except for the hair," Hannah nodded with a chuckle.

"Did Harry tell you her name?"

"He did," Hannah smiled, her eyes not leaving the baby in her arms; mesmerized by her instantly.
"Lillibet Frances K..." She spoke her name with love and devotion. "What a lovely name for such a lovely little baby."

"It was all Maddie," Harry spoke up, his voice and his eyes full of love for his wife.

"It's true," Maddie winked up at him. "Had Harry had his way, you would be cuddling with sweet little Invictus Sussex right now," the room rumbled with laughter as he shrugged.

"I have been a little single minded lately," he admitted. "Thankfully Maddie's clearer head prevailed.

"Thankfully," Charles' voice was deep and rich as he patted his son on the back, his eyes meeting Maddie's with a smile.

"Okay..." Hannah's voice was soft as she bent to kiss her granddaughter once more before she looked up to Charles. "Come now," she nodded to him. "I feel guilty keeping her all to myself. I think it's time for you to meet our granddaughter."

"Oh my," Charles pressed a hand to his chest as he looked across the bed at Hannah. "Really?"

"Of course," Hannah nodded. Handing the baby to Harry who sat next to Maddie, she turned her attention to her daughter. "How are you doing my dear?"

"I'm doing fantastic, thank you," Maddie's smile reassured them all. "Everything went so well!" She looked around at her co-conspirators. "Thank you all so much for your help. I can't believe we were able to get out of there without any sort of uproar."

"I can't either," Kate shook her head, moving closer to Maddie, catching her eyes. "You're really feeling okay? Everything's fine?"

"I am," Maddie reached out towards her, as though she were going to take her hand. "Everything went great. We got out of the games just fine, we arrived with plenty of time...and without any photographers!"

"I can't believe that," William shook his head, watching as Harry adjusted Lilli in his arms.

"I can't either," Harry chuckled taking the opportunity to kiss her once more, to run his fingers over her cheeks before he stood to hand her over to his father. "Here we are Lilli..." Harry spoke softly to her, his eyes turning up to Charles. "This is your grandfather..." Standing tall, he settled the tiny little bundle into his dad's big, strong hands and he watched him melt.

"My goodness," his deep voice was laced with emotion as he tucked her close to him. "She's just...beyond precious," he looked up to Harry with a wide, easy smile. "And she really does have your hair."

"She really does," Harry laughed along with the room. And when Lilli let out a cry, the laughter in the room only deepened.

"There, there," Charles soothed her, bouncing her lightly in his arms as he chuckled. "Don't let it upset you. Your father has done quite well with it and I'm sure it will grow on you."

"Look at you," Maddie smiled as Lilli's crying subsided. "You're quite the natural."
"Ah thank you for saying so," Charles smiled up at Maddie. "But this isn't my first time and...it does seem she has her father's wail too."

"Oh lovely," Maddie laughed, looking up at Harry who was beaming with pride, even as they poked gentle fun.

"There we go," Charles cooed down at her. "You're just fine. Now...would you like to meet the rest of your family?" He turned to look at Camilla who was melting as she watched Charles with his granddaughter.

And so it began; the passing of the tiny little bundle of baby. She was cradled in Camilla's arms. She was whisked up into William's, his eyes meeting Harry's as they shared a look, an understanding; this new bond of brotherhood now that they were both fathers. Kate kissed her soft, sweet little head and promised her years of spoiling and shopping and all of the wonderful things only an Aunt can do.

After they had all had their turn with Little Lilli, they returned the sleeping baby to Maddie's arms and decided it was time to take their leave. After making promises to come back, to bring Arthur along, it was time to go. With kisses and hugs, they began to slip from the room, making their way through corridors and out the back door, into cars that would take them through the shower of flashbulbs and to their homes. As his family drifted away, Harry closed the door behind them and turned back to a quiet room, wanting a moment with them before he brought in more excitement.

"How are you?" He spoke softly to Maddie, his eyes shining from across the room as he looked at her.

"I'm..." She trailed off, shaking her head with a great big grin on her face. "God Harry, I'm just....wow." Her last word came out as a whisper as happiness built in her throat. "She's here."

"She is," he nodded, moving in next to her on the bed, his arm moving back around her as his other hand moved to stroke their daughter's head. "You have no idea how unbelievably impressed with you I am right now," he leaned to kiss Lilli's head before leaning to kiss Maddie. "I've always been impressed that women could...create people and then bring them into the world but...watching it happen..." He laughed and shook his head, a deep breath pulling into his lungs. "I'm in awe."

"You're...something," she kidded, leaning to kiss him again, her nose nuzzling against his as she tucked into the crook of his neck.

"You know I hate to bring this up..." He smiled as he looked down at his girls. "But..."

"But?" Maddie lifted her eyes to him.

"There's an announcement to be made..."

"Ah yes," Maddie smiled. "I must have forgotten you were a Prince."

"Me too," he chuckled.

"Do you need to call Thomas?"

"No, no," Harry shook his head. "He's out in the waiting room with Ella and Bishop. Are you up for a few more visitors?"
"I am," she nodded.

"I'll go get them," Harry kissed the top of her head and took a breath as he stood up from the bed.

"Thank you," Maddie's fingers reached for his. "And Harry..."

"Hmmm?" He lifted tired eyebrows, his fingers catching with hers.

"Tell Thomas to make the announcement."

"You're sure?" He bent to kiss her hand.

"I am," she lifted a finger to stroke his lips. "She's here; safe and sound and...wonderful. We should let them know that." She shrugged her shoulders and laughed. "Maybe they'll go home."

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back as his laughter rumbled softly from his chest. "I doubt that very much, but I'll tell him." Moving in, he bent his head to kiss her; soft and warm and slow. His lips ran over hers, his hands moving to her cheeks, to her hair; his emotions taking hold of them both for just a moment.

"Easy," Maddie teased, pulling her mouth from his and catching his heavy gaze. "Or we'll have another one on the way in not time."

"Hmmm..." Harry grinned wide at the thought, pressing a quick kiss to her lips before he stood tall. "I'll be back. With Bishop and Ella."

"Thank you." With a squeeze to his fingers, she released him, watching him step from the room before her focus returned to their daughter.

When Harry returned to the much quieter waiting room, he sent Ella and Bishop to Maddie's room and moved to take a seat next to Thomas. Falling into it, the two men looked at each other, sharing a quiet, happy moment before Harry cleared his throat and spoke.

"Did you want to come in and meet her?" Harry's smile was tired but wide.

"No no," Thomas shook his head. "Tonight is for family."

"You've been here...all night," Harry laughed, feeling the tips of emotion take over his voice. "You've been with me for...so long. Thomas. You are family." He clapped his hand on his shoulder. "Come back and meet my daughter."

"I will tomorrow Sir," Thomas patted Harry's hand. "I just have one more thing to do tonight before I leave you with your family."

"Ah yes," Harry let out a long slow breath, his arms crossing over his chest as he let his mind drift from the bliss for a second, back to the duty of it all. "You need to make an announcement."

"But not before you're ready," he assured him with a smile. "The world can wait for another day as far as I'm concerned."
"Ha!" Harry laughed, knowing that while he meant it, it really wasn't a possibility. "No. Let's not make them do that. My wife sent me out here to ask you to let them in. Make the announcement and then go home. Get some rest. And tomorrow, come back and meet my daughter?"

"I would be honored sir," Thomas nodded, leaning in to hug Harry, kissing his cheek before he pulled back. "You'll give my love and congratulations to the Duchess?"

"I will," Harry hugged him back. "Thank you. For everything."

"My pleasure," Thomas grinned, telling the absolute truth as he pulled away from Harry. "I'll see you in the morning."

Harry nodded, rising to his feet and watching as Thomas pulled on his coat, gathered his bag, and made his way down the corridor. Looking back at the now empty waiting room, Harry took in a long, deep breath and turned towards Maddie's room, knowing that the world was about to be a part of this wonderful little secret that had, for a brief glimpse of time, been just theirs.

When Harry returned to the room, Ella was on the bed next to Maddie while Bishop held Lilli in his arms, looking down at her with almost as much adoration as Harry held.

"I see she already has you wrapped around her finger," Harry joked as he slipped inside.

"She does," Bishop lifted a grin to his best friend. "She's absolutely beautiful Harry."

"Of course she is..." Harry moved to his side, smiling down at his daughter. "Look at her mother." Bishop lifted a smile to Maddie as Harry's smile faded. "On second thought, don't look at her mother," he reached to thump his friend's head as they all laughed.

"I don't know Bishop..." Ella called out, her eyes fixed on him. "Watching you hold her, it's really making me want another."

"I don't know Bishop..." Ella called out, her eyes fixed on him. "Watching you hold her, it's really making me want another."

"Is that so?" Bishop's beaming grin turned right to her.

"It is," she giggled. "You may want to put her down before this gets out of hand." Maddie snickered next to her but Bishop stood still.

"Maybe not," he shook his head. "Buckie is almost a year old. It wouldn't be a terrible time to start trying for another, particularly one that was planned."

"Jamie Bishop," Ella blinked; shocked. "You want another?"

"You should know by now," he adjusted Lilli in his arms. "I want whatever you want."

"Okay, okay," Harry gently chided, raising a finger in warning. "Maybe you two leave your family planning for the privacy of your own home this time."

"Ha!" Maddie clapped her hands together. "Maybe they want a baby named Lindo."

"Lindo Bishop?" Harry laughed along with the rest of them.

"Lindo and Buckie," Ella shook her head as Bishop and Harry moved closer to the bed. "Sounds
good to me. How about you?" She wagged her eyebrows at her husband.

"Like I said," he winked. "I want whatever you want." Tearing his eyes from his wife, he leaned to kiss Lilli's head before moving to pass her back to her mother. "Madeline, love, may I make a request?"

"Of course," Maddie smiled, taking Lilli back into her arms. "What is it?"

"I would like your permission to borrow your husband..." He stood tall and patted his suit coat, right over his breast pocket. "We have a little celebratory tradition I would love to share with him..."

As Maddie grew soft, remembering that when Bishop had become a father, it had been her who had celebrated with him because Harry had been flying an Apache in Khundu. "Of course," she whispered her answer, fighting with the emotions that swelled inside of her. "Of course you can." Looking to Harry who seemed to be almost as caught up in it as she was, she nodded to him. "Go with Bishop, Daddy. We'll be right here when you're done."

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"8. February. Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Sussex was safely delivered of a daughter at 1:34 a.m. today. Her Royal Highness and her child are both doing well."

Harry and Bishop were already on the hospital roof when the announcement to the world was made. As they stood together under the stars, puffing on the fine cigars Bishop had smuggled in, they could hear it all unfold on the streets below. The roar of excitement and applause that took over the crowd outside wafted up to their ears and gave it away. Harry laughed with a shake of his head as Bishop joined in on the celebrations. Sticking his cigar in his mouth, he turned to Harry and offered his very own round of applause.

"You did it Wales," he grinned, pulling the cigar from his lips, a trail of smoke following behind. "After years and years..."

"Years and years," Harry added with a wide, smug grin and more than a hint of sarcasm.

"...and woman after woman..."

"After woman..." Harry rolled his eyes.

"You're finally a father," Bishop's teasing slipped away as the weight of the moment settled on their shoulders.

"I'm finally a father." With a lump forming in his throat and a soft smile, he nodded his head, looking back out over the city.

"Welcome to the club," Bishop spoke with gravity, with the same kind of wide, warm, happiness that Harry held onto.

"What a fine club it is," Harry couldn't help it; he felt the closest to giddy he had ever felt.

"A sleepless club," Bishop warned with a smirk as Harry laughed. "A...smelly club..." They both laughed. "But a wonderful club nonetheless."

"True..." Harry took a puff from his cigar and, with a long, slow, deep, breath, he stood tall and
looked up at the sky. "I know that you're going to think I'm...." He shook his head with a snicker, not able to find the right word; Silly? Goofy? Emotional?

"Tell me anyway," Bishop encouraged.

"It's just...." He looked over to his best friend and shrugged. "Everything is...different." He bit his bottom lip and tried to control the way his feelings were brewing. "She's only been here for a few hours and...everything's different. My priorities have shifted and...wow..." He blinked and smiled and sighed. "I already love her."

"Oh my friend, of course you do..." Bishop chuckled. "That's exactly what's supposed to happen. You're supposed to fall in love with her...just that quick."

"Yeah?"

"Yes," he nodded. "And..." He leaned in and lowered his voice. "It only gets bigger from here. Wait until she starts smiling and holding your hand and..." Bishop trailed off, his smile pulling wide and high on his cheeks as he thought of his own son.

"You do know that I'm sorry I missed this," Harry met Bishop's eyes, his hand over his heart and his voice full of sincerity. "For you. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you became a father and..."

"Don't do that," Bishop shook his head, laughing through the emotions that rose up as he remembered the night Buckie was born, a night much like this; with stars and an overabundance of joy. With a grin, he shrugged. "You were out...serving our country," he lifted his eyebrows as Harry smirked at the words. "You were trying to keep the world safe..."

"You're laying it on a little thick now aren't you?"

"Not at all," Bishop chuckled. "I'm just saying...don't apologize. Let's just...let's enjoy these cigars and this gorgeous night and..."

Bishop's thoughts were cut short by the loud booming of the canons ringing out over the city of London.

"Jesus Christ!" Harry jumped, shocked as the booming continued. "Is that really necessary?"

"Come now," Bishop grinned, pulling a flask from his coat pocket and holding it out. "Haven't you heard? We have a new Princess in town."

"We do," Harry's eyes lit up as he thought of his daughter, reaching for the flask and taking a drink. "We do..." His voice shifted softer, quieter. With a big, deep breath, Harry handed the flask back.

Bishop smiled as he took it back, looking out at the city as they quieted; it was late and it had been a long day. As the canon fire faded, he looked to Harry and asked, "are they going to title her?"

"Mmm," Harry nodded, his lips pressed together as his thoughts drifted to thoughts of the rest of the world. "Gran had letters ready to issue when Maddie went into labor..." He ran a hand over the back of his neck. "We thought about...not but..." He took in a breath and looked over to Bishop. "With Will and Kate only having one and...ha..." He laughed, his mind reeling a bit as he contemplated his daughter's future. "She'll be a senior royal someday so..."
"So she's Princess Lillibet," Bishop offered, his smile warm and sympathetic.

"She is," Harry nodded. "She is."

Bishop nodded along with him, watching as Harry's brow creased, as he bit his bottom lip. "You want to talk about it?"

"About how she'll be the spare?" Harry's tone took on a bit of bitterness, a hint of sarcasm.

"You know..." Bishop took a breath. "Being the spare is actually a pretty amazing role."

"Is that so?" Harry lifted his eyebrows with a huff.

"Absolutely," Bishop nodded his head, taking another puff from his cigar. "Her father ended up making it into something quite respectable. Did really great things with his position. So...if she's anything like her father..."

"Oh God," Harry cut into the heaviness with wide eyes and a laugh. "Let's hope she's more like Maddie than me."

"Well either way, my friend, I think you have your work cut out for you." Bishop offered a wink and a grin as Harry's tension eased.

"That's probably true..." With a deep breath, he stood tall.

"Come on," Bishop patted him on the back, nodding his head towards the door. "Let's get back to the family, shall we?"

When they stepped back into the hospital room, the lighting was dimmed and Maddie was tucked into bed with Lilli in her arms while Ella sat next to her, staring down at the sleeping baby with matching enamored smiles.

"Well look who's back," Ella's voice was soft as she looked up at the men.

"Hey there daddy," Maddie looked up to Harry. "Did you hear the canons?" The grin on her face tipped higher as he moved in next to her.

"Hear them? I felt them." Looking down at Lilli, his fingers stroked her round, chubby cheeks. "May I?"

"Absolutely," Maddie nodded, handing her over to Harry with a swift gentleness that seemed practiced and perfected.

"There she is..." He brought her in close to his chest, his hands and arms adjusting around her. "Did they wake her up?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "She's sleeping through just about anything right now."

"What a good little girl..." Harry grinned like a fool as he looked down at the bundle in his hands.

"Speaking of sleep," Ella nodded to her husband.
"Yes," he stood tall, clapping his hands together. "We should go home, get some sleep."

"Come back tomorrow?" Maddie looked to Ella. "Bring Buckie?"

"Of course," Ella nodded, moving to look down at Lilli once more. "Goodnight little Lillibet. You just keep right on sleeping. Let Mum get some sleep too."

With one last round of congratulations, hugs and kisses, the Bishops slipped from the room leaving the new little family all alone in the dim light and the late, late night.

Maddie's head tipped to the side on her pillow, watching as Harry walked around the room with their daughter. He was a natural, so quickly adapting to this role of a new father; bouncing her lightly in his arms, swaying just enough. And his eyes, the look in his eyes made Maddie's chest tight and warm with love and happiness.

"You look so good with her," Maddie called out him, her mouth stretching into a yawn as she spoke.

Lifting his eyes to look at her, he wondered if she could see on his face just how much he adored her, how in awe of her he was. "You're tired," he moved back to the side of the bed. "You've had an incredibly busy day Mum..." His lips curled higher as he said it. "You should close your eyes, get some sleep. I'll hold her for a while."

"You know," Maddie reached out to stroke his arm. "You can put her down while she sleeps."

"I know," he nodded, holding Lilli in one arm as his other hand reached for Maddie's fingers. "But there will be plenty of time for me to put her down...I think I'll hold her for a little while." Bringing her fingers up to his lips, he kissed her hand a few times. "Sleep love..."

And because her eyelids were getting heavier and heavier every time she blinked, because sleep was beginning to wash over her as the quietness filled their room, she nodded. "You'll wake me when she's hungry?"

"Oh I think she'll wake you when she's hungry," they both chuckled and Maddie squeezed his hand in hers before she let go and settled in. "I'll see you in a few hours love." Harry leaned to kiss her.

And even though she was tired, by all accounts exhausted, she couldn't help but kiss him back; full and warm and laced with the deep love she felt for him, this wonderful closeness they had. "I love you Harry."

"Ah Madeline," he shook his head as he bounced Lilli in his arms. "I love you too. God, I love you too."

It was only a matter of minutes before Maddie had slipped off to sleep, her face holding onto her smile even as her dreams took over. Harry settled into the large recliner next to the bed, his arms cradling his daughter as she slept, his eyes watching over Maddie as she did the same.

And it struck him, for probably the hundredth time that day, it struck him. This was his life now; his wife and his daughter—his family. Tears sprang to his eyes as a lump rose in his throat; his emotions swirling in the most wonderful, wild way. He had wanted this—just exactly this—for about as long as he could remember.
And here it was, right here. In this room. In his arms. His wife and his daughter—and the impact of it all was not small. The weight of it all was not light on him.

As he leaned back in the chair, he took a long, slow deep breath and let it out. And at the very same time that he was wondering just how exactly his life could ever top this—he already knew the answer.

Because there was always tomorrow. And the next day. And the day after that. He had days and weeks and months and years and a lifetime to watch his little girl grow, a lifetime to stand next to Maddie as they grew their family.

Dipping to kiss Lilli's head, he closed his eyes and inhaled her soft, sweet scent and he smiled. "Welcome to the world Little Lilli...I've been waiting for you for a very long time."

And then with a newfound peacefulness and a tired smile that reached his eyes, Harry watched as the two most important people in his life slept.

And he had never felt more complete, never felt happier.
Chapter 170

By the time the sun rose over London at seven-twenty the next morning, Lilli had woken her parents twice through the night. When her tiny little lungs would open up with a not-so-tiny wail, Maddie and Harry were roused awake quite easily. And just as easily, a new routine was formed.

Harry, with wild hair sticking about and a rough stubble on his face, would climb from bed and go to the baby, scooping her up with a half tired smile. Talking in low, soft, tones, he would soothe her while he changed her diaper. Once she was changed he would bring her to Maddie who was awake and waiting to nurse. Climbing in next to her, his arm would move around behind her, his lips bending to kiss her shoulder and he would watch through sleepy eyes as Maddie nursed their sweet little girl. When she was finished, when Lilli had drifted back to sleep, he would scoop her up, swaying with her as he returned her to her little bed right next to them.

And then he would crawl back into bed next to his wife and, tucked together in that extra-large hospital bed, they would drift back off to sleep—only to do it all again in a few hours. It was a long night; new to the both of them and full of the crazy kind of wonderful unpredictability that came with new parenthood.

Even with the two feedings, they managed to get in a few long stretches of sleep before their day began.

First there were doctors; checking on Maddie, checking on Lilli. Both were doing marvelously, both of them healthy and well. They were making plans to release the both of them the next morning. Since Maddie had had Lilli so early in the morning, they wanted to give them on more night at the hospital before they sent her home. But she was fine to be up and moving around, recovering nicely from Lilli's delivery.

When the doctor's left, they had given Maddie the okay to shower and change if she wanted. With a little help from the nurse, she managed to shower and wash her hair. Dressing in large, long flannel pajama shirt gown and warm socks, she pulled her hair back into a ponytail and took Lilli into her arms while Harry went to shower and change, thankful for the bag that had been sent over for him. After a light breakfast, they were dressed and ready for the day that was about to unfold. They were expecting more visitors, they were expecting Thomas and, at some point, they were going to have to go out the front doors and make an appearance.

But first, it was family.

"My goodness," Hannah cooed as Harry settled Lilli in her arms. "She's even more beautiful this morning."

"Isn't she?" Harry beamed as he smiled down at her and both women in the room chuckled, catching his complete adoration.

"And you two don't look so bad either," she glanced up at them before drawing her granddaughter closer. "Did you let mom and dad sleep a little bit last night?"

"She did," Maddie nodded, moving to stand up, to stretch. "She only woke up twice to change and eat."

"And she went right back to sleep after she was full," Harry sat down in a chair next to Hannah.

"What a good little girl you are," Hannah leaned to kiss Lilli's forehead before looking up to her
daughter. "How are you feeling?"

"Well," Maddie returned to the bed with a tired smile. "I'm still sore and...bleeding..." She let out a light laugh. "But the doctor said I'm recovering nicely and we can probably go home tomorrow."

"Oh good," Hannah looked back down at her granddaughter. "You do know that there is quite the crowd outside."

"Still?" Maddie's eyebrows lifted, reaching for her cup of water on the bedside table.

"Mmm," Hannah nodded. "Some of them knew my name..." She looked up at Maddie, a bit of stun in her eyes. "They were calling out to me..." She laughed and shook her head. "I didn't know what to do, so I gave them a wave. I hope that's okay." She looked over to Harry whose expression was one of amusement mixed with irritation.

"Of course that's okay," he nodded to her. "They weren't inappropriate were they?"

"No, no," she shook her head. "Curious. They were calling out questions, wanting to know how the baby was...that sort of thing." She looked to Maddie then. "I didn't think you wanted me to say anything about her, so I just pretended I couldn't hear them and I walked right in."

"Ha!" Maddie clapped her hands together, nodding her head to Harry. "Now that's a tactic we'll have to try."

"Pretending we can't hear them?" Harry laughed, winking at Maddie. "I'm in if you are."

"Ah..." She sighed. "It's a fun thought."

"It is," Harry nodded, leaning back in his chair, turning his head to look at Hannah as she adjusted Lilli in her arms.

"So what is the plan for your exit?" She looked from Maddie to Harry who shrugged, a flash of concern taking over his bliss for just a moment.

"I don't know exactly," he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Thomas should be here at some point this morning to come up with a plan for tomorrow." With another shrug, he shook off the concern and leaned in closer to Hannah, his fingers reaching for Lilli as his smile widened. "But if it were up to me, I would smuggle you out the back door..."

As Lilli let out a big yawn, the three of them faded into warm laughter, forgetting for a moment about the world that waited outside. All of their focus was on the world that was right there in that room.

Will and Kate were the next to arrive, toting along a happy little Arthur; walking and smiling wide as he held on to the long ribbon of a balloon. When he looked up to the bed and saw Maddie, he called out to her.

"Maaaaahhh!!!" His chubby little hands let go of the balloon to clap and the balloon floated to the ceiling with a thump. "Uh-Oh!" He looked up at it with a surprised face, laughter rumbling around the room.

"Here we go little man," Will reached up to retrieve the balloon, bending to hand it back to his son. "Did you want to go give this to Maddie?"

"No, no, no, no..." He smiled wide as he walked over closer to the bed, the laughter around him increasing.
"He's only saying no because he can't quite say yes yet," Kate explained as she followed behind him.

"Are you sure?" Maddie laughed as Kate lifted him up to the bed. "Maybe he's decided to keep the balloon."

"I'm sure," she grinned as she held onto her son. "Look Arthur. It's your baby cousin Lillibet."

"Baby!" He exclaimed, clapping his hands again, laughing this time as the balloon thumped to the ceiling. "Uh-oh!" He giggled, looking over to Will and pointing up to the ceiling as though he clearly expected his father to retrieve it again as he had before.

"Wow," Harry chuckled. "Would you look at that? You already have your dad trained, don't you buddy." Harry moved in closer, reaching out to tickle his nephew, causing him to giggle and squirm in Kate's arms. "Come here buddy. Let me toss you in the air." Harry held out his hands and Arthur did the same, eager to go to him.

"Here we go," Kate handed him over, sighing as she looked back to Maddie. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"I'm good," Maddie smiled up at her reassuringly. "They think I'll be able to leave tomorrow."

"Oh good," Kate was relieved to hear that, her eyes and her smile turning to the little baby in Maddie's arms.

"Would you like to hold her?" Maddie asked, seeing the look in her eyes.

"I would love to," Kate nodded, excited as she held out her hands, eager to cuddle her close. As Maddie passed off Lilli and settled back into her pillow, Harry had moved over, tossing a happy Arthur up into the air, swinging him around, as he talked to Will.

"After we leave here, I'll head over to the Games," Will brought Harry up to date. "Zara and Mike are going to the powerlifting. I'll be at the Sitting Volleyball. Kate and I are going to handle swimming and then I'll step in for you at the Closing Concert."

"Thank you, really," Harry smiled at his brother, sincere and thankful. "I really do appreciate it. I know it's such short notice and not at all what you had planned but..."

"Think nothing of it," Will held up his hand with a genuine smile. "I'm happy to help out, though I'm sure your fans will be quite disappointed to see me instead of you."

"Please," Harry rolled his eyes.

"Please," Will countered.

"Hold on..." Maddie's voice called out and both of them turned to look at her. "What are you two talking about over there?"

Harry took a step towards her with a casual explanation. "Will is going to fill in for me over at the games."

"Fill in for you?" She looked from harry to Will and back again. "What do you mean?"

"Well, there are still a few events today and since I'm here, Will and Kate and Zara and Mike are going to go over to some of the events and Will is going to take over at the Closing Concert and..."
"No," Maddie cut in with a quick shake of her head.

"Sorry?" Will's lips twitched up as he glanced between them.

"I'm sorry Will," she looked up to him. "I...that's very sweet of you to offer, really it is. A nice thing to do but..." She looked up to Harry then, shaking her head again. "No. Absolutely not."

"Maddie?" Harry laughed, slightly confused.

"You did not work on this event for...Jesus a year? You did not work all of those late hours and weekends and...to miss it?" Her eyebrows rose as she let out a light laugh. "No Harry. You need to be there and...you're crazy if you think I'm going to let you miss it."

"Let me?" He blinked, his smile pulling higher even as his eyes narrowed. "Madeline. I don't need to be at the games today. The games will go on without me."

"But they shouldn't," she reached out for his hand then. "Harry...Captain...You should go."

Though he opened his mouth to protest, she hurried on. "I'll be fine here without you. We'll be fine without you. We're going to be in the hospital tonight anyway and we can stay here while you go. You should go."

"Go!" Arthur called out, clapping his hands, bringing laughter to the moment. "Go! Go! Go!"

"See!" Maddie pointed to Arthur with wide smile on her face.

"I couldn't possibly leave you here, Madeline. You just had our daughter and..."

"And what?" She laughed. "We're going to just be here in bed, doing nothing but sleeping and eating. You absolutely could leave us here. And you should. Think of what this means to those men and women, think of how big this night is for them..."

"Maddie..."

"This isn't about choosing work over family. This isn't about choosing an event over us..." She tugged at his hand. "This is the accumulation of months and months of work and preparations and these athletes...they want to celebrate that with you. And you should be there, Harry. You know you should be there."

"But..."

"What about a compromise?" Kate's voice was sweet and easy as she cut in, all eyes swinging to hers. "I'm sorry." Her cheeks blushed, surprised at herself for stepping in. "I just thought...maybe you let us handle the events," she looked to Maddie with a smile and then up to Harry. "And you take the Closing Concert."

"Kate darling," Will looked across the room to her. "Maybe you shouldn't..."

"I'll take it," Maddie spoke up, turning her smile from Kate to Harry. "I like it. If you're willing to take that compromise, I am. I just...I'll never forgive myself for letting you miss this entirely, even if you wouldn't care."

"I wouldn't care," he was being honest and open with her. "I really wouldn't." He held her gaze for a moment, taking a deep breath before he gave in. "But we both know you'll win any argument right now."

"So you'll go?"
"To the Closing Concert? Yes. I'll go."

"Yay!" Maddie's hands lifted in the air, causing Arthur to do the same in his uncle's arms.

"YAY!" He mimicked Maddie.

"Yay..." Harry laughed, kissing Arthur's cheeks. "I'll go to make a speech and I'll stay for a tiny bit. But then I'm coming back to my girls." He looked from Maddie to Lilli who was sleeping snugly in Kate's arms. "Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Maddie agreed, squeezing his fingers in hers before she relaxed.

It wasn't long before Will, Kate and Arthur were leaving the hospital. Kate reluctantly handed over Lilli and Arthur happily handed over the balloon, squealing as Maddie kissed his cheeks before releasing him. The three of them were bombarded with photos and questions as they left that day and as Will informed the press that his niece was happy and well, Arthur clapped his hands and called out "Baby!" bringing laughter to the already joyous crowd.

As Kate and Arthur went back to their home at Kensington, Will was whisked away to the Sitting Volleyball match about to begin. The first games of the day, there was quite the buzz in the crowd about the newest baby in the royal family and, when the announcement was made overhead that Harry was a new father, that his brother would be filling in for him at that event because he was at the hospital with his wife and his daughter—the roar in the crowd was wild and touching.

And back at the hospital, Harry was out in the hallway meeting with Thomas, firming up details for that evening while Lilli slept in Maddie's arms. Maddie was happy, content and pleased as she laid curled up with her tiny little baby when the door to her room opened just a crack and a smile she would recognize anywhere in the world peeked in.

"Oh my God..." She felt her emotions stir up as he stepped into the room.

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to get in to see a Duchess?" He let the door shut behind him, his smile warm as he looked over to her.

"Collins!" Maddie felt tears well up in her eyes as she waved him in. "I'm so happy you're here! Where is Isaiah?"

"He's out in the hallway with Harry, fascinated with your protection detail," he moved into the room, right over to her bedside, his entire face softening as he looked down. "Is that her?"

"Ha!" Maddie laughed with a nod. "Come here. Come meet her..." She patted the bed next to her, wanting to be close to him, loving the aura he carried with him.

Without a second thought to it, he crawled in next to her, his long legs stretching out next to hers. With a kiss to her cheek and a hug to her shoulders, he looked down at the swaddled baby in her arms. "My goodness, Doc. She's beautiful."

"Thank you," Maddie couldn't agree more.

"Did you name her yet?" His long fingers reached out to push the blanket away from her cheeks.

"We did," Maddie swallowed at the lump that came to her throat. "Lillibet Frances K."
"K?" His eyebrows lifted, his eyes not leaving the baby.

"For Khenda," Maddie whispered, her voice cracking as tears rose to both of their eyes. "I figured..." She sniffed, knowing without looking that he was crying with her. "Being named after three such amazing women, she would have no choice but to be remarkable."

Nodding his head, he wiped at his eyes as he looked up to her. "Oh Doc...she's half you....of course she'll be remarkable."

"Ha..." Maddie swallowed; touched by his words. "Here. You should hold her." Lifting her baby up to him, she handed her over, watching as he handled her with ease. "Lilli, this is your Uncle Collins. He's a phenomenal man and quite the dancer."

"Oh wow..." Collins tucked her close to him, his fingers smoothing over her, his smile full of awe. "She's perfect Doc...just perfect." He turned his grin to her then.

"I know," Maddie nodded, unable to argue with him.

"Congratulations mum," he reached out to squeeze her small hand in his large one.

"Thank you," Maddie grinned, holding his hand as she leaned her head on his shoulder. "Thank you for coming to see us."

"I wouldn't have missed this moment for anything in the world." And he absolutely meant it. This was his family too; Ella and Maddie and Harry and now little Lilli who was yawning and opening her eyes to look up at them, these people who already loved her.

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Leaving Maddie and Lilli at the hospital caused Harry to have a literal ache in his chest. He hated walking out of their room, even if it was for the Invictus Games. It eased him up just a bit knowing that Ella and Bishop and Collins were there along with Hannah, the TV tuned to watch Harry's appearance while they passed Lilli around and watched as Isaiah played with Buckie. With a kiss to Maddie and an extra-long snuggle to Lilli, Harry stepped from the room and made his way to the games; Thomas at his side and a bit of a surprise for the crowd in his pocket.

The air was electric; alive with a celebratory buzz. The excitement that had bubbled up throughout the games had reached a wonderful, rousing apex as the sun set on Invictus and the crowds gathered for the Closing Ceremonies. Though nobody in the audience expected to see the Prince as planned, every single one of them understanding that his duties stood elsewhere—they had heard the rumor. No one was quite sure where or how it had started, but it had travelled around through the competitors and the fans alike; he just might make an appearance.

As the masses gathered in the open field, as the bright lights went up and the now famous "I Am" logo shone on the big screens, the energy and the hope were high. When one of the Chief Organizers of the games stepped out onto the stage, the momentary let down was audible and anyone watching him could see the hint of a smirk on his lips.

"Good Evening," he spoke into the microphone, drawing the crowd to a hush. And his next words shook them into a frenzy. "It is my distinct pleasure to introduce you to tonight's speaker here from a most important post to deliver our Closing Ceremony address." He paused for a breath, for a quick smile off stage. "He is a Captain in the British Army, a three time war veteran. He's an Apache Commander and the Founder of the Invictus Games..." As the murmur in the crowd rose with every word, his smile spread. "And very, very recently, he's a brand new father. Ladies and Gentlemen, His Royal Highness, The Duke of Sussex."
The roar that waved over the crowd was deafening.

And when a beaming Harry stepped out onto the stage wearing his Invictus fleece, tired eyes, and the widest smile they had ever seen, the applause and cheers increased.

Walking to the middle of the stage, right up to the microphone, he allowed for a moment of applause, sinking into the excitement as he waved out to the crowd—elated to see him standing there.

"Hello London!" He called out to them, eliciting more applause, more cheering. "Thank you. Thank you..." He smiled and nodded and waited for the noise to subside, just enough so he could speak to them. "Good Evening, Good Evening..." He chuckled as bursts of applause rang out, as a few called back to him. "As you may know...the last twenty-four hours of my life have been..." He laughed, shaking his head as his hand pressed to his chest; a roar of applause sounding out again. "And I will say this. My time in the Army most certainly worked to prepare me for this amazing new role. Already I've put my training to good work. I've slept in barracks, in trenches on the frontline..." He could hear the laughter around him. "So sleeping in the chair of a hospital room...no problem," he shook his head and laughed along with them. "Having been on-call as an Apache Commander, when the cries sound out, I'm up and alert and ready for battle..." He took a moment, biting his lip as he took a breath. "And when my...commanding officer gives me orders..." He lifted his eyebrows as his lips tipped into a smirk and the crowd went wild. "I hope you all know that there is truly only one other place in the entire world I would rather be right now." His eyes shined as he choked up just a bit, just enough. "And that is with my beautiful wife and my...daughter." He grinned wider as the applause rang out. "However, my phenomenal wife, in her infinite wisdom, ordered me from her room to these Closing Ceremonies...so here I am." He held up his hands and nodded at their laughter. "And truly, this is the only place, the only thing that could pull me from the two of them tonight."

Clearing his throat, he glanced off stage for a quick moment and then continued. "You should know that Maddie is doing remarkably well. She's resting and she's smiling and she sends her love and her regrets that she too couldn't be here with us tonight," he softened as he thought of her, his emotions getting the best of him—even as he stood on that stage in front of thousands. "As such, she asked me to bring this along to share with you..." With a nod to the side, Harry looked up at the gigantic screen behind him and the crowd went crazy.

Behind him, big enough for all the crowd to see, was a photo that had been snapped just before he left the hospital of his little family. Maddie, beaming as she held Lilli in her arms, tucked into her blanket and wearing a tiny Invictus stocking cap, and Harry sitting next to her in the bed, his arms around the two of them and a look of absolute bliss on his face.

He had known the crowd would go crazy, he had known that the picture would make its way to more than just the people there in front of him. But when Maddie had suggested it, he had been in just enough of the celebratory mood that he went with it. And now, as the applause rang out, as people cheered, as flashbulbs went crazy—he didn't care so much that this would monopolize the internet. He was the happiest he had ever been; Invictus had been an unmitigated success and, across the city, his wife and his daughter were both healthy and happy and his.

Allowing the excitement to swell for just a moment longer, he cleared his throat, nodded off stage to have them take the photo down and then he did what he was truly there for, to bring all of the focus, all of the attention back to the competitors.

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When Harry returned to the hospital later that night, there was a barrage of press waiting for him; flashbulbs brightening the night sky as he hurried happily up the steps towards his wife and daughter. And when he stepped into their room, it was quite different than it had been when he
had left. All of their guests had cleared out and, in the soft dim light, both Maddie and Lilli were tucked into their beds, sleeping soundly.

Closing the door softly behind him, Harry stepped quietly into the room. Shedding his fleece, he laid it over a chair and walked over to the tiny little bed where Lilli slept. With his arms crossed over his chest, he leaned in to watch her and every nervous tension he had had that night, drifted from his mind.

"Look at you..." His voice was low, deep and soft. "You should know..." His fingers stretched out to her, stroking her hair, her cheeks. "I think you're the most wonderful, beautiful little girl in all of the world..." He couldn't help the smile that took over his face, the way his heart melted as he looked down at her, the way he longed to pick her up and snuggle her close.

"And you should know..." Maddie's voice called out from her bed, sleepy but happy as she watched him with a smile. "If you wake up our sleeping daughter, you're going to be in trouble with your wife."

"Ha..." He laughed softly, pulling his hand back from the tiny little bed and turning his attentions to the other love of his life. "Well I certainly don't want that."

"No," Maddie shook her head, holding out her hand to him. "Come? Tell me about your night?"

With a nod, Harry moved to her side, toeing off his shoes before he climbed in next to her, taking her hand in his as he did. "You were right," he brought her fingers to his lips, his eyes lifting to catch hers. "You were right to send me there."

"Yeah?" Her eyebrows rose, her smile curling higher as she snuggled closer to him, craving his heat and his scent—him.

"Mmm..." He nodded, his arms moving around her, bringing her in. "It was...unbelievable." He shook his head, his emotions swirling up just a bit. "Seeing all of the competitors and their families. So many of them send their love and congratulations to you."

"That's very sweet of them."

"And..." Harry took a deep breath, bending to kiss her. "I can't believe it's all over. All of that planning and worrying and...all over..." He let out his breath and sank closer to her. With her fingers soft on his cheeks, Maddie lifted her lips to his, holding his eyes as she smiled. "We're so proud of you daddy...so incredibly proud."

"Ah Madeline..." His hand moved to his heart, a lump to his throat. "You have no idea what it does to me when you say that."

"I figured they would."

"And..." Harry took a deep breath, bending to kiss her. "I can't believe it's all over. All of that planning and worrying and...all over..." He let out his breath and sank closer to her. With her fingers soft on his cheeks, Maddie lifted her lips to his, holding his eyes as she smiled. "We're so proud of you daddy...so incredibly proud."

"Ah Madeline..." His hand moved to his heart, a lump to his throat. "You have no idea what it does to me when you say that."

"Well I mean it," Maddie moved to kiss him again, letting her lips linger just a bit longer on his. "I'm very proud of you Harry..." She kissed him again. "And Lilli...she's so lucky to have such an amazing father..." And when she kissed him this time, Harry held onto her. With one arm wrapped around her, holding her close, his other moved to her face, soft on her skin. And he kissed her back; warm and long and slow. And even though they had a sleeping baby in the room, even though Maddie had given birth only that morning and even though they were both sleepy—the passion and the love between them filled the room and drew them closer. They had a big day ahead of them and a night that would most certainly be interrupted by their daughter needing changing and feeding but for that moment, for just a little bit, they were going to lose themselves
in each other and Harry—Captain, Duke, Father—was going to steal this moment and make out with his wife.

"Oh wow..." A light, nervous laugh escaped Maddie's lips as she and Harry walked through the corridor of the hospital. In matching shades of lavender, with Lilli tucked safely into Maddie's arms, they were on their way out. The doctors had been by first thing that morning, checking Maddie and Lilli thoroughly and clearing them for release. And their team of people had gathered round; Thomas taking care of logistics, the Security team arranging for cars and personnel, and Tara to do Maddie's hair and makeup for her first appearance as a mother.

"Are you okay?" Harry turned to face Maddie as they paused just before the last turn. The doctors had cleared them to go home but first, they had to step out into the world, into the craziness that had gathered outside. It was not quite the spectacle that there had been when Arthur had been born, but it was still enough to bring about every protective nature Harry had inside of him. His hand moved around to Maddie's back as his voice lowered. "Madeline, darling..."

"I'm fine," she nodded her head, a shaky smile on her lips. "I just...I can't believe it, is all."

"I know," he took a deep breath and nodded to Thomas who stepped forward to the two of them.

"You'll walk right out the front door," he ran through it all for them one more time. "Right across the street is the press pool. You'll answer a few questions, smile for the cameras and then come right back inside."

"And then we can go home?" Maddie asked, bouncing Lilli lightly in her arms.

"Yes Ma'am," Thomas nodded. "Your things are packed upstairs. You'll put your daughter in her carrier and the car will come around for you. One more trip outside and you'll be done."

"Okay," Maddie let out a breath of relief, turning to look up at Harry. "You ready for this Captain?"

With a grin and a shake of his head, he answered. "No. I don't think I'll ever be ready to share my girls so openly with the world. But..." He clapped his hands together and nodded to Thomas. "Let's do this."

"Yes sir," Thomas nodded and stepped aside.

"I love you very much Maddie," Harry spoke to her, his hand strong at her back.

"I love you too Harry," she gave him a quick smile, eyes with gratitude and then, as she trained her gaze forward and held on to their daughter, they took those last final steps towards the doors of the Lindo Wing.

And when they stepped out into the bright, sunny day, the crowd that awaited them burst with excitement. With wide smiles and heads held high, the two of them took careful to the stairs and made their way out into the middle of it all. They paused for a few photo opportunities, smiling and waving up to the people who watched above them, over to the crowds that waited to the side and then, as Maddie passed Lilli over to a beaming Harry, she could almost hear the sighs from the crowd. Meeting his eyes with humor, they shared a smile and stepped over to the press pool.

The first reporter to speak, looked to Harry, taken by the look on his face as he cradled his daughter in his big, strong arms. "Congratulations Sir..."
"Thank you," Harry smiled.

"What a weekend for you Sir. How is your daughter doing? Does she have a name? What can you tell us about her?"

"It has been quite a weekend," Harry's beaming smile was directed right at Maddie. "My daughter is doing very well. She's healthy and quite content." Harry looked down at her, his eyes soft. "She's letting us sleep for a few hours at a time and of course, I can't get enough of her."

"And her name Sir?"

"We do have a name," Harry's eyes met Maddie's. "But we're going to keep that to ourselves for just a little bit longer."

"And you, Ma'am," the reporter looked to Maddie. "Congratulations on your daughter. Are you doing well as well?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded with a smile. "I'm feeling very well and of course just...overjoyed that she's finally here with us."

"And the Duke, has he changed a nappy? Is he helping out with duties?"

"Of course he is!" Maddie laughed, her hand falling on Harry's arm. "He's already been very involved as a father. In fact, I think he's changed nearly all of the nappies."

"I think so too," Harry nodded with a laugh, guiding Maddie over a little further as they moved down the line, accepting congratulations and well wishes with ease.

"Will you be heading home soon Sir?"

"We will," Harry nodded. "We're heading home today in fact, shortly after we're finished here."

"Are you nervous?"

"No, no, of course not," Harry shook his head, a flicker of humor in his eyes. "I'm very much ready to take my girls home and settle in."

"And of course, congratulations on the Invictus Games, Sir. It was quite a surprise, and a treat, to see you there last night."

"Yes well, I've certainly had a big weekend, as you know. I'm just terribly proud...of the competitors at the Games and of Maddie," his eyes lifted to look at her and the love and respect he had for her was clear even to the people watching from across the street. "I'm just incredibly fortunate to be allowed to stand by and take part...in both of these things."

As they made their way down the line, there were a few more questions for both of them, a whole well of good wishes. And then, with a final wave to the crowd and wide, beaming smiles, Harry held onto his daughter and slipped a hand around to Maddie's back and escorted his family back inside the hospital; letting out a breath of relief once they were inside.

As the staff moved around them, calling for the car, loading their bags, Harry and Maddie focused on securing Lilli in her carseat. Maddie laughed as Harry checked and double checked and triple checked the clips. And Harry leaned in to kiss her, soft and slow, before they turned to step back out into the craziness.

It was a short trip this time, just down the stairs and to the car that waited at the curb.
Though the crowd cheered and the cameras snapped, Harry and Maddie offered waves and smiles as they went directly to the car. Maddie slipped into the backseat as Harry secured Lilli's seat into the base and then, leaning to kiss Maddie once, Harry moved around and into the driver's seat.

As he pulled away from the hospital, anyone who was watching, anyone who would see the pictures later, could see with an abundance of clarity, just how proud and happy and complete he was. With the crowds and the press and the Lindo Wing in his back mirror and his two girls in the backseat, Harry was finally, finally taking his family home.
There was so much that Maddie had learned in those first few days at home with Lilli. There was so much this tiny little miracle had taught her, about love and life and priorities. So much so that she would struggle to ever begin to quantify it. This baby, as loved as she was, as cherished as she was, had thrown a wild, lit firecracker into the peaceful calm that Maddie and Harry and crafted around them. And, as she set off, as she made her brilliant, bright presence known, Maddie couldn't help but notice how well equipped to adapt to this welcome disturbance her husband seemed to be.

Even when Lilli's cries woke them for the fourth time that night, even when her tiny little lungs proved a prime competitor for the cannons that had announced her arrival. As the sound pierced into Maddie's revered slumber, as her darling little baby sleeping in the bassinette in their room called out to her parents in need of any number of things, Maddie could hear Harry's deep, warm voice, calling out to the both of them, bringing comfort to their room, to his girls.

"We're here..." He called out to Lilli, rubbing his hands up over his face, into his hair. "We're here. We're coming..." Sitting up in their bed, he leaned over to kiss Maddie's shoulder, his hands rousing her gently as they ran over her. "Maddie love..."

"I know," she nodded, pulling her eyelids open. "I know..."

And then, just as he had done during the three previous times that night, Harry pulled himself from bed. Giving Maddie time to wake, time to sit up and right herself, he was quick to his daughter's side, sweet and soft as he lifted her up into his hands, bringing her tiny little body into the large, protective fold of his. "Oohhh...there, there little Lilli..." He cooed, his fingers stroking at her cheeks as he took her to the changing table, prepared to do his part; changing her nappy before taking her to Maddie to nurse.

Sitting back against a pillow she propped up against the headboard, Maddie watched the two of them through half-opened eyes. And she would be lying if she said that watching Harry with their daughter didn't make her want to forgo the next two precious hours of sleep and love on him instead. But this wasn't the time and she had weeks before she got her body back.

"Thank you Captain..." She called out to him, feeling blessed that she had him, that he was ready and eager to help out –even at three in the morning.

"Of course. Of course..." Flashing a quick, wide smile up to her, he nodded his head and looked back to their daughter, focusing on the task at hand. "Now, now Lilli-bean...let's see what we have..." His back straightened, his face turning away. "Holy shit." His face scrunched up.

"Harry!" Maddie called out, laughter following close behind as she watched him take a deep breath and turn back to her.

"My God," he shook his head. "No wonder you're screaming so much my dear..." Pulling it together, he reached for the supplies on the table. "I would be raging myself if that were in my pants."

"Really now..." Maddie groaned through her laughter.

"What?!" He looked up to her. "I would!" With a knowing grin, he looked back down at their
daughter who seemed to be quieting now that he was cleaning her up. "Your mum would too...I guarantee it." With quick work and steady hands, he had her in a clean nappy and was zipping up her pajamas and pulling her back up into his arms. "There you are little miss...now let's go see Mum for some breakfast..." With a snicker and a sigh, Maddie watched the two of them with nothing short of adoration in her eyes—even if she could barely keep them open. "Here we are..." He reached her side of the bed, leaning in to settle the squirming little baby into Maddie's awaiting arms.

"Thank you," Maddie smiled up at him as she adjusted their daughter, bringing her in so she could nurse, hissing as she latched on. "Wow..." She exhaled, turning wide eyes up to Harry as he watched in interest and intrigue.

His teeth clenched, his eyebrows lifting. "Hurts?"

"Mmm. A little." Maddie nodded, settling back as Lilli settled in. "I'm just getting used to it is all."

"Sure. And I suppose it would hurt after somebody clamped on every two hours..." He pressed his palms to his own chest, grimacing as he thought about it.

"Maybe we'll try it sometime," she wagged her eyebrows at him, laughing with him as he looked down at their nursing baby. "They're still tender and...seriously...so big."

"Ha. Yes they are." His smile slipped smug as his head tipped to the side. "You know, I know this is going to sound incredibly inappropriate..."

"A thousand dollars says I know what you're about to say," she narrowed her eyes at him. "But they look...amazing..."

"Annnnd...you owe me a thousand dollars," she tried to glare up at him but the humor in his eyes matched that in her own. Turning her smile down to her daughter, she shook her head. "You do know that they are only this big because they are full of milk, which is there to feed your child."

"You know, you would think that would somehow make it less sexy..." His finger stroked her cheek as he leaned to kiss her. "But it doesn't."

"Of course not," Maddie sighed. "Your father is a strange man Miss Lilli...but we sure love him, don't we."

"That's what I like to hear," Harry chuckled as he climbed back into bed next to her. "Okay. Tell me. What can I do for you? Water? Tea? Some of the pizza Bernard left for you?" Just as he had every time before, he offered up a variety of options, of things she might need or want as she fed their baby.

"No," Maddie shook her head, stifling a yawn. "Nothing, thank you. Just..." Her hand reached out to him, rubbing along his slightly rough jawline. "Just stay here with me..."

"Okay," he pulled her hand to his lips for a kiss, his head falling to his pillow next to her, watching her in his new standard mode of awe. "Okay..."

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"Hey..." Harry's voice was just above a whisper as he snuck into their room, standing next to
Maddie as she watched Lilli sleep. She was nestled up on the soft blanket Hannah had made out of Jay's old shirts, sleeping soundly.

"Hey," Maddie turned a soft smile to him. "Are they here yet?"

"No," he shook his head, his fingers moving over hers as they rested on the railing of Lilli's bed. "They are on their way but...I don't know..." He looked down at his daughter, her lips moving in a slight, soft sucking motion as she napped. "Do we dare wake her?"

"I don't know," Maddie shook her head, biting her lip to keep from laughing. "There is the old adage...never wake a sleeping baby, but..." She sucked in a breath and grinned. "She's expecting a visit from the Queen."

"Ha..." Harry laughed, low and quiet. "Well, she doesn't know that the Queen is coming."

"No, no she doesn't," Maddie shook her head, her hand moving out from under his, reaching to smooth down a wayward puff of red hair on Lilli's head. "You have a busy afternoon little girl. So many people want to meet you..."

"You know, I don't think Gran would ever expect us to wake her just because she's here," Harry's hand moved to Maddie's back, rubbing warmth and comfort. "She's had children before, she understands."

"Yeah?" She turned a smile up to him, her eyebrows lifted.

"Absolutely," he nodded, his hand tightening around her waist, drawing her closer to him. "And so will all of the other people coming after her; Grandpa, my father, your mother..."

"Ha..." Maddie shook her head. "She really didn't need to go stay somewhere else."

"I know," Harry agreed easily. "But she wanted us to have our first night here together...alone..."

"To see if we could make it?" Maddie's lips curled up in amusement.

"Maybe," Harry chuckled. "Or maybe she was just being sweet."

"Maybe she was..." Maddie nodded her head, a small yawn slipping from her lips.

"Hey...how are you love?" His eyes ran over her, checking her smile, cataloging the tired look in her eyes. "You okay?"

"I am," she nodded, leaning into him with a sigh. "I'm tired, but it's only been two days and...I think I'm supposed to be tired." Pressing a kiss to his chest, she nudged him. "And you? You seem to be holding up pretty well."

"Yeah?" He couldn't help the smirk that flashed across his lips.

"Yeah. And you've had the same amount of sleep as I have...probably less...I don't understand..."

"Well you were the one who grew her," he tipped her chin up so that he could kiss her. "Of course you're more tired than I. All I did was...stand by in awe."
"Harry..." Maddie was stretched out on the couch in the living room, catching up on her emails, on the news as Lilli napped. "My God...Harry..."

"Yes?" He looked up from the file he was reading, catching the warm smile on her face. "Everything okay?"

"Okay?" Maddie laughed, shaking her head. "Everything is...wow...Harry." She pulled her eyes from the computer screen, looking right at him. "Have you seen the news?"

"I have," Harry chuckled at the wide-eyed look on her face. "Apparently some married couple had a baby. It was a girl." The smirk on his lips was reflected in his eyes. "They haven't revealed her name yet, but we are all on our toes."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, shaking her head. "Well, rumor has it we should find out this afternoon."

"Thank God!" Harry winked, tossing his hands up in mock relief before he settled back in his seat and nodded to her. "That's not what you were talking about though, was it?"

"No," Maddie giggled. "No it wasn't..." Tucking her feet up under her, she softened. "I was talking about the coverage of Invictus."

"Ah..." He nodded, his eyes glancing away with a bit of embarrassment. "That."

"Yes Harry, that." Maddie's foot stretched out to poke him. "Goodness, Captain. You pulled off something amazing. And what's even better...is that the entire world knows it and is acknowledging it and...Harry, baby...it's...it's wonderful."

Taking a deep breath in, he sat his file aside and let it out, his eyes rising to meet hers. "The coverage has been remarkable."

"The Games were remarkable," Maddie inserted with a tip of her head. "It must feel nice, right? To get the recognition you deserve?"

"I don't know," he shrugged, his shy smile tipping higher. "It's nice to see the games getting the recognition. It's nice that they are already talking about next year, that other cities are already contacting my office to talk about hosting and organization prospects and..." He sighed. "Yes...yes. It feels...nice. But you know as well as I do that it wasn't me..."

"Harry," she shook her head.

"It wasn't," he insisted. "It was a team of highly talented people..."

"Lead by a highly talented leader and..."

"Madeline," he tried again to deflect her praise, having always been a little uncomfortable with the praise.

"You know..." She paused, her eyes growing soft as her mind drifted thoughtful. "You know who you remind me of right now?" She only waited a beat before she continued. "Khenda."

"What?" He blinked in surprise, his heart thumping in his chest at the mention of his beloved friend.
"You do," Maddie leaned closer. "Remember? Every time you would complement her on the work she was doing in Bendal, she would always redirect the praise to 'the team'. Just like you're doing now. But we both know that it was her influence and her leadership that made it happen. Just like it was yours that brought Invictus together."

"Wow..." His voice cracked as her words washed over him. "I don't know what to say to that..."

"Good," Maddie smiled even wider. "I'm proud of you Captain. And she would be too. And I know that things have been crazy around here and really...baby focused. But I want you to know...I'm incredibly proud of you."

"Thank you," Harry smiled, his cheeks flushing. "That means a lot to me, Maddie. Thank you."

Okay," Harry clapped his hands together, his mind at work as his eyes looked over all of the items they had set out on the counter of their bathroom. "Bath time."

"Bath time," Maddie nodded as she held Lilli in her arms, bouncing her just a little as Harry arranged the bottles on the counter, moving the plastic tub closer to the sink. "Think it'll go easier this time?"

"Yes..." He nodded, turning a wide grin to her as he shrugged. "I don't know. She's awfully slippery."

"Yes she is," Maddie smiled down at Lilli, adjusting her around. "You're a slippery little girl when you're all wet and bubbly."

"You know, I think maybe last time it was the angle of the tub. I think if we leave it up on the counter instead of putting it in the big tub, we'll have better leverage."

"Sounds reasonable to me," Maddie nodded. "Maybe this time Lilli will get more of a bath than you."

"Easy," his eyes met hers. "You know...if you'd be more comfortable, we could always ask your mother..."

"We could," Maddie nodded. "She is just down the hall but..."

"You want to do it," he supplied for her, understanding and on board.

"I do," Maddie smiled, taking a breath and letting it out with a sigh. "You'll stay though?"

"Absolutely," he nodded without question. And then, as he reached out to turn on the water, a thought struck him. "Hold on..." His hand pulled back and he looked up to Maddie. "I have an idea."

"Yeah?" She lifted her eyebrows, kissing the soft red wisps of Lilli's hair. "What's your idea daddy?"

"Well..." He moved in closer to her, his hands reaching out to take Lilli from her. "I would be happy to show you Mum. But you...you're going to have to take off your clothes."
"Henry." Her arms folded over her chest as Harry grinned down at his daughter.

"We're going to get in the shower," Harry explained quickly. "I think that maybe it might be easier to just...give her a shower." He turned to Maddie with an easy smile. "I can hold her while you soap her up. What do you say Mum?"

"Well," Maddie thought it over for only a second. "It's not the worst idea you've had."

"Yeah?" He lifted his eyebrows, a smirk already pulling at his lips.

"Yeah," her lips curled up right along with his.

"Good," he nodded to her. "Now take off your clothes."

"Ha..." She bit her lip as she shook her head. "I'll start the water. YOU take off your clothes Captain."

"Yes Ma'am," Harry laughed, letting Maddie scoop their daughter from his arms before he pulled his t-shirt up over his head. "Your mum enjoys bossing me around Lilli-bean," he leaned over to kiss her cheeks before tugging at his shorts.

"Don't listen to him little miss," Maddie cuddled her close as she reached into the shower to turn on the water. "He likes it too..."

"It's true," Harry sighed, moving to her side. "Okay...I'll go in while you take her clothes off and then you can hand her over?"

"Got it," Maddie nodded, watching him as he moved past her, not even pretending not to look at his ass.

"I know what you're doing," he called out to her as he stepped into the streaming water.

"Sorry!" She laughed, moving over to the counter where a large fluffy towel was laid out. "I couldn't help it!" She rolled her eyes at herself as she laid Lilli down, pulling off her little clothes, her diaper. And in a soft, sweet voice, she spoke to Lilli. "I just couldn't help it. Okay little one...let's go to daddy." Lifting a naked and alert Lilli up into her arms, Maddie moved quickly to the warm shower as Harry opened the door and held out his arms. "You ready?"

"Yes," he nodded, smiling at Lilli as she opened her eyes wide, squirming in Maddie's hands. "Are you going to come in and take a shower with daddy?"

"Hold on tight to her..." Maddie's hands eased Lilli into his, but didn't quite let go. "She gets really slippery..."

"Yes I remember," Harry's smile was focused on his daughter. "I have her Maddie. I swear I won't drop her..."

"I know..." Maddie's laugh was nervous, knowing she was being ridiculous for being so worried.

"You can let her go," Harry looked up to her. "I have her. I promise."

"Okay," Maddie nodded. "Okay..." Her words, her reassurances were more for her than anyone
"Okay." With a deep breath, she let go.

"There we go..." Harry pulled Lilli into his chest, his arms moving protectively around her. Bouncing her lightly in his arms, he moved them both into the water, careful to keep her face from the stream, watching her closely for any upset. After a moment, he grinned, his eyes flashing up to Maddie who still stood at the door, watching. "You know what...I think she likes it."

"I think she does," Maddie nodded, happy and relieved

"Now come on mum," Harry waved his hand at her. "Come on in. Bring the soap."

"Ha..." Maddie bit her lip, her cheeks flushing just a bit. "I don't know Harry."

"You don't know?" His gaze turned confused. "What do you mean you don't know?"

"I...ha..." She laughed at herself, looking down at the floor, out at the wall; anything to avoid his eyes. "This is going to sound ridiculous to you but..." She took a long, deep breath. "I just had a baby and my body is...."

"Madeline," he started before she could even finish.

"Soft," she cut him off. "Soft and squishy and nothing is in the right place and..."

"You're right," Harry spoke up, causing her eyes to snap up to his. "You're absolutely right."

"I..." She sputtered.

"That does sound ridiculous."

"Harry..."

"Absolutely ridiculous." His eyes were fixed on her as he held onto their daughter. "You had a child Maddie..."

"Yes I know."

"Like four days ago!" He shook his head, moving closer to the door.

"I know..." Her voice was a whisper as her emotions shifted. She felt a bit out of sorts, awkward and sad and happy and...tired. "I know."

"Love," he called to her, wanting her to look to him, wanting her to take on some of his confidence. "Everything is supposed to be a little out of place right now..." He was being so sweet with her. "You gave our daughter a wonderful, warm place to live for nine months...it'll take a little while for that to even out."

"Harry..." She felt tears in her eyes as her voice cracked.

"And, if you don't know already, I'm beyond impressed, overly awed, at what that amazing body of yours has done and I love every single squishy part of it..."

And it worked. His words made her laugh. "Jesus." She rolled her eyes.
"I do," his lips spread into a grin as he held out his hand. "Now please, Lilli needs to be cleaned and I think it'll be so much easier with the two of us..." His eyes met hers and he nodded his head toward the streaming water behind him. "If you really must, you can wear your clothes but..."

"No..." Maddie let out a breath, frustrated with herself, with the way she felt, with her momentary lack of confidence. "No, no. I'll come in just...give me a minute."

"That's my girl," Harry smiled up at her and then down at Lilli. "And you're my girl too. Yes you are..." He drew her up closer to him, kissing her cheeks. "Daddy is a lucky, lucky man, with such beautiful, amazing girls at home..." He kissed her again. "Now as soon as your mum gets in here, we're going to clean you right up."

"Okay..." Maddie spoke to herself, taking another deep breath before she began to pull off her clothes; laying them in a pile before she moved to join her husband–her amazing, sexy husband–in the shower with their daughter.

When Maddie returned home from her one week doctor appointment with Lilli, Harry was there waiting for her. Hurrying towards the door, he had a wide smile on his face, his hands reaching out to take the baby carrier from her.

"My girls are home!"

"Yes we are," Maddie smiled as she eyed him. "And so are you..." She shut the door behind her and watched as he lifted the carrier up, peering in at Lilli. "I thought you were going to go to the office this afternoon?"

"I was," he shrugged, setting the carrier down on the table and reaching in to take Lilli out. "But I called Thomas and he sent me a few things over and I'm working here instead."

"Aw honey," Maddie's smile was endearing as she shook her head at him. "You know you're going to have to go back to work eventually."

"Eventually," he eyed her with a smirk. "But not today..." Lifting a wiggily Lilli up into his arms, he cooed down at her. "No, no. Not today Lilli-bean. Not today." With a kiss to his daughter's cheeks, he stood tall and leaned to kiss Maddie. "Hi love."

"Hi Captain," she smiled against his lips.

"How was the appointment?"

"Good," Maddie nodded, her eyes darting away just a bit. "Lilli is perfect."

"Well we know that," Harry chuckled as they moved into the living room. "Any news?"

"Well," Maddie's arms crossed over her chest as she dropped into the large, stuffed chair. "She's apparently a hungry little goose." Maddie sighed. "And I'm not producing enough milk for her. So...the doctor suggested we supplement with some formula in a bottle."

"Oh really?" Harry's eyebrows lifted as he looked up to her. "How often?"

"Just once a day," a small smile pulled at her lips. "He said just one for now. He suggested I let
you have one of the late night feedings." Though she winked and grinned, Harry could see that something was a little off, that her eyes were a little distant.

"Well I would be happy to take one of the late night feedings," he smiled down at Lilli before looking back to Maddie. "You don't seem as excited about it..."

"Yeah..." She sighed, rolling her eyes at herself. "I don't know. I feel...I feel a little...disappointed in myself I guess."

"Maddie..."

"And," she cut him off. "And I feel silly for feeling that way. But I can't help it." Taking a deep breath, she shook her head and moved forward in her chair. "BUT. I am excited that you get to feed our little monster," her smile was genuine, brightening her eyes as she looked up at him. "I think you're really going to enjoy it daddy."

"I think so too," he watched her for a moment, sweet and protective. "You okay mum?"

"I am," she nodded, catching his gaze reassuringly. "I will be. I promise."

"Okay," he nodded, taking her at her word. "Okay then. Now, which shift would you like me to take? Three am?"

"Ha!" Maddie clapped her hands together. "You're really up for three am?"

"Ah love," he held on to Lilli as he leaned in to kiss Maddie again. "I'm up for anything you need."

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"She is absolutely beautiful," Charles smiled down adoringly at his granddaughter as he cradled her in his arms.

"Isn't she," Harry stood just over his father's shoulder, a matching smile on his face. "She looks just like her mother..."

"Yes," Charles nodded, glancing up to Hannah who sat across from them. "Does she look like Madeline when she was a baby?"

Hannah nodded, taken with the scene in front of her; these two men fawning over this tiny little baby. "She does. I have some photos at home that look almost exactly like her."

"Is that so?" Charles lifted his eyebrows, turning his smile back to Lilli.

"I would be happy to send over copies if you would like," Hannah offered.

"Yes. I would love to see them," Charles nodded happily. "Thank you very much."

"Of course," Hannah agreed, making a mental note as Maddie rejoined them.

"I'm sorry," she took a deep breath and moved into the room, smiling as she looked around. "I didn't mean for that call to take so long.."
"Not a problem." Harry looked up to her. "How is Kyle?"

"Great," Maddie moved to a chair next to her mother. "He saw pictures of Lilli, loves her name, wants to meet her..."

"Did you tell him we'd be out in May for your mother's graduation?" Harry asked

"I did," Maddie nodded, reaching for her drink. "He's happy we're coming."

"I'm happy you're coming," Hannah piped up, thrilled that they would there to share in her moment, that she would be able to show off her granddaughter.

"It will be great to take her to the farm, show her the land..." Harry smiled as he thought of it.

"Mmm," Maddie agreed. "You know, we should take her out to Highgrove; the fresh air, the gardens..."

"Well we would be happy to have you any time you like," Charles turned a bright smile to Maddie. "Any time at all." He bent to kiss Lilli's head. "Now, would you like to see what we have in these boxes for you little darling?" He turned to Harry with emotion and memories in his eyes. "Would you like to open up the boxes? See what your mother left for you?"

"Of course," Harry nodded, looking over at the boxes his father had brought over. As Charles handed Lilli over to Hannah, Harry moved the boxes next to the couch and took a seat next to his father. Lifting the lid off of the box, his features softened.

There was a quiet sort of sweetness in the air as Harry began to pull items out, looking them over and setting them aside. There were a few soft, little blankets, a handful of toys; rattles and a stuffed bunny. There was a framed painting of the nursery rhyme "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" with beautiful pastel stars painted in a soft sky. As Harry pulled the items from the box, Charles told him the stories he knew; that the painting had been in Diana's room as a child, that it had been one of her favorites. There were a few books with worn little pages and Diana's childhood signature in the front covers.

The second box contained mostly clothes; sweet little bonnets, a tiny pair of shoes, some sleepers and a few outfits; one of which was a delicate little white eyelet dress with matching little pants with ruffles. As Harry held it up to Maddie, his eyes were bright and full of emotion as he looked through his mother's belongings.

"You know..." Maddie reached for the dress as she smiled at her husband. "This might be perfect for the family photo we're taking tomorrow."

"Yeah?" His eyebrows lifted, his voice soft.

"Yeah," Maddie nodded. "It looks like just about the right size for her..." She had to blink at the tears that welled in her eyes. "But only if you're okay with it. I know it's old and full of memories."

"No, no," Harry shook his head, swallowing back a lump in his throat. "I would love that. I would..." He turned to look at his father. "Is that okay?"

"Oh Henry," Charles' hand was warm on his shoulder. "Of course it is. These are yours to do with what you like."
"What about Will and Arthur and..." Harry cleared his throat.

"I spoke with your brother and he was in absolute agreement that it should be yours, that it should be Lilli's," he turned his smile to his granddaughter nestled in Hannah's arms.

"Well okay then," Harry nodded, turning to look at his daughter; his eyes sliding up to meet Maddie's and she could see just how big this moment was for him. "I think the dress would be perfect for the photo tomorrow."

"Yeah," Maddie smiled over at him, her arms bringing Lilli in closer as her own emotions swelled. "I think so too."

"I think she's listening to me Maddie." It was a Sunday afternoon and the cold outside had chilled the windows. But inside there was a fire burning and Harry sat on the couch, looking down at Lilli who was laying in her boppy pillow on the ottoman in front of him.

"Oh yeah?" Maddie called out from the entryway as she pulled on her coat, readying to take her mother to the airport.

"Yes..." He grinned down at Lilli, her eyes following him as he nodded. "Yes I do. I think you're listening to me. Are you listening to your daddy? Are you?" He couldn't help the way his voice slipped slow and sweet, even though he knew he would catch rounds of mocking if anyone overheard him. He didn't care. Lilli's tiny little smile was impossible to withstand and at only a few weeks old, she had him completely ensorcelled. As he smiled wide at her, his fingers tickling along her sides, he sighed. "I swear she's listening to me Maddie."

Maddie's hand was soft on his shoulder as she returned to the room, buttoning up her coat and wrapping her scarf around her neck. "She is listening to you Captain," Maddie glanced over at the two of them, smirking at the look on Harry's face. "In fact, I think she's laughing at you."

"Are you laughing at your father?" He leaned in close to her, his fingers walking up her tiny little body, making her smile more. "Are you laughing at me? That's okay if you are. You can laugh at me..."

"Goodness," Maddie shook her head, loving the way he was with Lilli; reveling in the happiness she brought to the both of them. "Are you two going to be okay while I take my mother to catch her flight?"

"Of course we are," Harry spoke to Lilli first before turning to look up at Maddie. "Of course we are." Scooping Lilli up into his arms, he rose to his feet, following Maddie back to the entryway. Hannah's suitcases were already lined up by the front door. "You know...I was reading the baby book today."

"Yeah?" Maddie chuckled as she reached for her purse. "What did you learn?"

"That she prefers her mum's face over any other..." Harry's voice dipped low as he moved in close, his lips seeking hers. "See. She's only a few weeks old and already so much like her father."

Maddie chuckled as she kissed him back. "Very nice." She kissed him again. "You'll be here when I get home?"
"I will be. Though...we might both be napping."

"Okay," Maddie pulled back from him just as her mother began down the stairs. "Well I'll be quiet when I come in."

"Thank you," Harry winked at her before turning towards Hannah. "Okay grandma...would you like some last minute snuggles before you have to go?"

"Ugh," Hannah groaned, smiling as she took Lilli from Harry's arms. "I just want to take her with me. Can I please just take her with me?"

"Mum?" Harry lifted his eyebrows to Maddie who laughed and shook her head.

"No, no. Not this time. But we will be there in just a few short months."

"Not short enough," Hannah sighed, looking over Lilli, trying to memorize her smile and her cheeks and her eyes; how she felt and how she smelled. "You two should be very proud of yourselves. She's absolutely perfect."

"We are proud of ourselves," Harry joked. "And I agree. I'm not sure we could have done any better."

"No, you couldn't have," Hannah grinned up at him. "And you've both done so well being first time parents. I'm just...incredibly impressed."

"Well, we've loved having you here," Harry's hand ran over her shoulder, sincerity in his smile. "And you are absolutely always welcome back. I hope you know that."

"Thank you," she smiled as she leaned to kiss his cheek. "You're an amazing father Harry. Lilli is very lucky to have you." Before Harry could respond, she turned to Maddie. "And you...my goodness Madeline. What a wonderful mother you are."

"Mom..." Maddie felt her emotions building in her throat.

"You are," she held her daughter's eyes. "You have this remarkable natural ability. I'm so proud of you."

"Are you trying to make me cry?" Maddie laughed as she waved her hands at her eyes.

"No, no," Hannah laughed too. "I just want you both to know that. Even on those sleepless nights, even when the crazy piles up...you're doing very, very well."

A soft knock at the door cut into the sweet moment.

"It's time to go," Hannah grew teary, her face dropping to kiss Lilli's forehead. "Keep being a good, sweet girl for your mom and dad, okay little one..." She kissed her again. "I'll see you soon." She hugged her tight and close. "I love you so much." And then, with a smile and a sigh, she handed Lilli over to Harry, kissing his cheeks one more time before she let him go. "Okay." She wiped at her eyes and turned to Maddie. "We should go."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, offering her mother's hand a comforting squeeze before she leaned in to kiss Lilli and then Harry. "I'll be back."
With one last round of "I love you's" and promises to be together soon, the door was opened and Maddie, Hannah and her luggage were whisked away.

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When Maddie slipped back into their home after a tearful good-bye with her mother, she was quiet with the door, soft with her steps; knowing they might both be napping. Setting aside her purse and her keys and hanging up her coat, she peeked around the main floor before taking to the stairs. As she made her way down the hallway, she could hear them—or more rightly him. Slowing as she approached the door to the nursery, she stopped in the doorway, and the scene inside melted her heart.

Settled into the rocker, with his feet propped up on the ottoman and a drifting Lilli nestled into his arms, Harry spoke to her in his low, deep, soft voice. "So the Prince went to see this magical doctor. He spent time with her; talking to her and laughing with her and before he could even tell her about his broken smile, she had fixed it..." Maddie's hand pressed to her chest, in effort to keep her swelling heart in place as she recognized Harry's fairy tale. "Before he knew it, the Prince was smiling. And it was wider and bigger and happier than he had ever smiled and he knew..."

"What did he know?" Maddie's voice was quiet as she called out to him, his eyes and his smile lifting instantly to her.

Without blinking, he continued. "That he had to spend the rest of his life with her."

"Ah," Maddie nodded, moving over to sit on the ottoman, her hands running warm along his legs. "The Prince and the Magical Doctor?"

"You recognize it," he grinned, wanting to draw her in, wanting her to be closer to him.

"I do. I do." Leaning closer, she looked down at their sleeping daughter, so peaceful in Harry's big, protective arms. "Did she like it?"

"She loved it," Harry nodded, smiling down at Lilli. "Of course, I added in a few dragons."

"Yeah?" Maddie chuckled. "Did she like the dragons?"

"She loved the dragons," Harry assured her. "In fact. I think we might have a little dragon-slayer on our hands."

"Yeah?" Maddie's eyes were amused—and tired—as she smiled up at her husband.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Your mother made it to the airport fine?"

"She did," Maddie sucked in a breath. "I'm going to miss her."

"Me too," Harry agreed. "And so is Lilli."

"And..." Maddie moved a little closer to him, her hands running higher towards his knee. "And it will be nice to be just the three of us."

"Yeah?" Harry's eyes lit up just a bit.
"Yeah."

"You know. I could put Lilli in her crib and maybe you and I could go crawl in our own bed and do a little snuggling of our own..." His eyebrows wagged as he offered. "What would you think of that?"

"Hmmm..." Maddie's smile warmed. "I think I would like that."

"I think I would too." Holding tight to Lilli, Harry pulled his feet from the ottoman and stood, moving soft and slow as he took Lilli to her bed. Easing her down to the soft quilt that was spread out, he was careful as he let her down, as he let her go. Pausing to make sure she was fine, to watch her settle, he smoothed his fingers over her soft hair and turned around to face Maddie. With an outstretched hand and a wide smile, he nodded his head to the side and lifted his eyebrows. "Come on Mum...join me?"

Slipping her fingers into his, she let him pull her up from the ottoman. And as they slipped from Lilli's room, she let him wrap his big, strong arm around her. And though she was tired, though she was overwhelmed in the most wonderful of ways with all that was going on around her, she felt centered and strong and anchored. To Harry and this wonderful little family they had created.
So much had happened in those first few months of Lilli's life. Slowly the world began to learn more about her. The reaction to her name was mixed though most of the world sided on the lines of a touching tribute. The reaction to her first pictures was far from mixed. Though most of the world had seen the quick snapshot Harry had taken with him to the Invictus Games, when the first photos of the family were released, the world seemed to eat them up.

Maddie had called on Andrew Bradley, the photo-journalist who had taken in the trek to the North Pole with her, to come to their home to do the honors. After he had chosen not to capitalize on Maddie's reunion with her soldier husband, she had decided that she trusted him. So when Thomas asked if they had anyone in mind, Maddie was quick to answer and as usual, Harry was in easy agreement. So he had come to Kensington Palace where he had lunch and drinks, where he met the new little Princess and caught up with the couple. And when he left, he had taken many photos that Maddie and Harry would print for themselves. Along with one adorable shot of the new family that they would share with everyone else.

And the world fell deeper in love with the tiny red-headed baby girl in her late grandmother's dress and the parents who clearly adored her.

As time went on inside the Sussex household, as Lilli began to settle into her new home, into a new routine that--thankfully--included longer spells of sleep, Maddie and Harry began to settle into their new roles and all of the stumbles and bumbles that came with them.

Harry struggled when it was time for him to return to royal duties. He had managed to hold them off for a long while, postponing his return to public life at least twice. But eventually he ran out of passes and it was time for him to head back out. Though it helped that he was on his way to an event that benefited Sentebale, it didn't help that while he dressed and readied for it, his wife and his daughter were cuddled up in their bed, smiling up at him as he moved about the room.

"Ohhhhh look Miss Lilli," Maddie's smile was as warm as her voice as she spoke to her daughter. "Look how handsome daddy is."

"Maddie," Harry groaned, his eyes finding hers in the mirror as he finished the buttons on his crisp white shirt.

"He looks very handsome doesn't he," Maddie winked at Harry and smiled down at Lilli who cooed in her arms. "This is one of mommy's favorite suits...do you like it little one?" When Lillie responded with her own little gurgle, both of her parents melted.

"Okay that's it," Harry turned away from the mirror, finishing up the button on his sleeve as he moved over to the bed, his hands reaching out to scoop Lilli up from his wife. "Hi there Lilli-bean," his entire face lit up as he lifted her up into his arms.

"Careful," Maddie warned, beaming up at them. "I fed her not too long ago and she may very well ruin that clean white shirt."

"I don't care," Harry shook his head, his fingers tickling and teasing her stomach, her legs kicking in response. "I have a hundred of them in the closet."

"A hundred?" Maddie chuckled, her knees pulling up towards her chest, her arms wrapping
around her legs as she watched Harry with Lilli.

"Well more than one," he narrowed his gaze on his wife for only a moment before his smile cracked through. "You know I hate leaving you two. I absolutely detest it."

"I know it," Maddie nodded. "But it will only be a few hours and Lilli will be asleep through most of it."

"I know," he sighed, bending to kiss her soft hair, taking in the sweet smell of her before he turned back to Maddie. "I just wish I could have a little more time."

"I know you do Captain," Maddie's hands rubbed his arms before she took their tiny little baby back from him. "And we wish you could crawl back into bed with us too, don't we Lilli."

With a shake of his head, Harry pulled himself from his girls and back to his preparations. "I knew this would be difficult. I just hadn't realized just how difficult."

"I don't even want to think about what it's going to be like," Maddie shook her head as she smiled down at Lilli. "No I don't." Looking up to Harry then, she asked. "Speaking of that...when exactly is it that I'm expected to go back out?"

"When are you expected?" Harry lifted his eyebrows as he pulled on his suit coat. "You aren't."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean..." He fixed the collar on the coat, turning back around to face her. "I mean that nobody has a time expectation for you. You can take as long as you like; two months, six, ten...a few years..." He shrugged and pulled at his sleeves. "You decide when you go back."

"Really?" Maddie's forehead creased. "Are you sure about that?"

"Of course I'm sure about that," his tone was a bit haughty; certain. "What good is...all of this if my wife can't stay home with our daughter for just as long as she wants..." With a smug smirk on his face, he bent to kiss her. "You tell Thomas when you're ready to go back."

"What if I'm never ready to go back," her eyes slipped flirty as she kissed him again. "What if I want to stay home and have baby after baby after..." Harry's lips drew her words to quiet, grinning proudly as he kissed her over and over again.

"That's the dream Madeline," he kissed her once more before pulling back. His hand smoothed over Lilli's hair as he bent to kiss her. "You be good for mum while I'm out Lilli-bean..." He laughed as she kicked her legs, as she squirmed in Maddie's arms. "I'll be back very soon." He turned his lips back to Maddie's. "I love you...both of you..." With one more kiss for each of them, he stood back, taking a few steps towards the door.

"Bye daddy," Maddie called after him. "We'll miss you..."

And when he reached the door to their room, he turned back to wave, to take in the scene just once more. And the sight of them, of his girls, cuddled up in their bed--it made his heart ache to leave them. Pressing one had to his chest, he waved at them with the other and then, regrettably, he slipped from the room and went off to his event.

While he was out, Harry was bombarded with questions about Lilli and Maddie, overwhelmed by
the outpouring of congratulations and loaded up with all sorts of stuffed items to take home to his daughter. In the end, the night was a great success and he was quite happy that he had finally stepped back out, that he was there for the event. But when he finally made it home, when he peeked in on his daughter as she slept, when he gently kissed his wife as she slept, he was fairly certain that leaving them was never going to get easy. But that was the price he gladly paid to have this to come home to.

Maddie's adjustments were more personal, her struggles more intimate in nature. As Lilli grew bigger, as the time passed since she had been born, Maddie was slowly gaining her body back. It was hard at first, to feel so out of place, to feel so out of sorts. Nothing really seemed to fit. Her maternity clothes quickly became too big while her pre-baby clothes were still too tight. And even as her weight began to return to normal, her body was different, softer.

But that wasn't the source of her struggle. She knew that her body would return and that even if it didn't, she would be okay with that. As she became more active, as she began to eat normally again, she felt more and more herself—even when she suggested to Harry that she might call up her former trainer and begin running again. Her husband had found no small amount of humor in that.

The truly difficult moment for Maddie came when Lilli was about five weeks old. After two nights of breast soreness and one frustrated night of nursing, Harry insisted Maddie go in and, in her sleepless upset, she had gone. And though the doctor had answers for her, they weren't quite the answers she wanted and when she returned home, her face was sad and her eyes welled with tears and when Harry pressed, she let out a frustrated puff of air and rolled her teary eyes. "My milk is drying up," she hated that it made her want to cry, that it made her voice crack. "Apparently it's something that happens..." She wiped at her eyes and took a deep breath. "I can't nurse Lilli anymore..." She tried to shake it off, tried to make the tears stop. "And I know it's ridiculous for me to cry right now and that you probably think I'm being silly and I know that it's not that big of a deal but...but I wanted to be able to feed her longer and...I...I hate that I won't be able to and before you make fun of me..."

"Shhh," Harry shook his head, reaching for her, pulling her to him. "I'm not going to make fun of you. I swear it. Come here..." He hugged her close, keeping any inch of a smile from his face. "I'm sorry love. I'm sorry." And he didn't make fun, not even a little bit. He held her while she cried, kissed her while she sniffed away her tears and that night, when they readied for bed, he flashed her that cheeky grin of hers and offered her the possibility of her first full night of sleep since Lilli had been born.

"Think about it...I can get up with her and you can stay in bed..." He was cautious as he held out the offer. "It's the one silver lining of it all...an entire night of sleep..." He wagged his eyebrows. "What do you say love?"

And because she was physically tired, because she felt emotionally exhausted, she bit her lip and nodded. "Yes." If he was willing to try it, she was too. So that night she climbed into their bed and she kissed him goodnight and she closed her eyes with every intention of letting Harry take complete care of Lilli while she slept until morning.

And she did. When Lilli woke at ten, she felt Harry slip from bed. When she woke at one, she turned over on her pillow as he tended to her. But when she cried out at four, Maddie who had had more sleep that night than she had in weeks, was awake. And when she turned to look at
Harry, when she saw his mess of red hair, his tired eyes, and his warm smile as he told her to go back to sleep, she couldn't ignore the pull in her heart.

"Harry..." Her voice was soft, her hand warm on his arm as she sat up. "Let me."

"You sure?" His eyebrows lifted, his body poised and ready to go.

"Mmmm," she nodded, her fingers smoothing over his arm as she leaned to kiss his shoulder. "Thank you for tonight..." She kissed his cheek. "But I'll go now...I want to."

With her robe wrapped tight around her, she padded down the hallway to Lilli's room. After changing her and warming a bottle, Maddie sank into the rocking chair and, snuggling Lilli close, she brought a bottle to her lips and when she began to drink, Maddie felt a release of tension roll from her shoulders.

And she felt tears spring to her eyes. Maybe she wasn't nursing, maybe it wasn't exactly as she had hoped it would be, but she was absolutely feeding her daughter and it was just as warm and wonderful and sweet as it had been before. Pressing a kiss to Lilli's head, she breathed relief and she smiled. "There there, love...Mommy's here."

As Lilli sucked on the bottle, her little eyes drifted closed and Maddie's heart swelled. And all at once she felt silly and happy and thankful. She had this perfect little baby and this amazingly wonderful husband asleep down the hall. And that, above all else, was what was important.

"Can I just say..." Maddie called out to Harry as she breezed back into Lilli's nursery from their bedroom. "Inviting the Bishops over for dinner was an excellent suggestion."

"Yeah?" Harry glanced up at her as he finished changing Lilli, scooping her up into his arms.

"Yeah," Maddie sighed with an easy smile. "I took a shower--a long shower. I did my hair and my makeup and I put on real clothes and..." Her train of thought paused as she stopped in front of him. "Wow..."

"What?" His expression shifted quizzical.

"I was just thinking..." While one of her hands reached to tickle Lilli, her other ran up Harry's arm. "You must miss this version of me."

"Which version is that?" Harry lifted his eyebrows with a light chuckle.

"The showered version," Maddie laughed. "The clean version. The dressed and made up version." She shook her head and sighed. "I know I haven't been as put together as I used to be and here I am getting dressed up for Bishop and Ella and you've had to see me covered in drool and spit up."

"Ha!" Harry's laugh was loud, causing Lilli to blink and look up at him. "You're Mum is crazy Lilli-Bean..." He leaned a little closer, his voice lowering to a bit of a whisper. "She's beautiful but she's crazy." Lifting his smile to Maddie, he nodded his head for her to lean in. "Come here..."

Moving in closer, she watched him with narrowed eyes but when he kissed her, longer and deeper than they had kissed in a little while, she felt her body warm. "Mmmm..." She smiled against his lips. "What was that for?"
"For every single version of you..." He kissed her again. "Makeup, drool, sweats and heels..."

"That's quite an image," Maddie rolled her eyes, her cheeks turning pink.

"Come on," he kissed her once more before pulling back. "I love you."

"I love you too," she took a deep breath and reached for Lilli. "Okay little miss...why don't you come to mommy so daddy can go change his shirt."

"You don't like my shirt?" Harry's eyebrows lifted.

"I do," she nodded. "But you have some formula on it."

"Yeah?" He looked down and laughed, moving towards the door. "How do you feel about this version of me?"

"Ha..." Maddie laughed, watching him walk away. "I think it's my favorite."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry shook his head, pulling his shirt off as he made his way back to their room as the doorbell rang out.

"Okay Miss Lilli," Maddie hugged her close. "The Bishops are here. Are you excited?" As if on cue, Lilli cooed and kicked her feet, bringing laughter to Maddie's lips. "I feel the same way little one. The same way."

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"My God," Bishop shook his head as he stared down at Lilli who was snuggled up on her blanket, stretched out in his lap. "She's already grown so much!"

"I know it," Maddie nodded in agreement. "She's been making all these faces lately..."

"Just at Harry?" Bishop wagged his eyebrows at his best friend, his index fingers wrapped up in Lilli's tiny little hands.

"She likes it when I sing to her," Harry grinned.

"Who doesn't," Bishop laughed, turning wide, smiling eyes back down at Lilli as Maddie snickered.

"Oh-kay..." Ella's voice called out as she returned from the kitchen moving slowly as Buckie toddled along with her. "The champagne is open..." She smiled down at her son. "And Buckie thought we should bring along this hand towel."

With a wide, one-toothed grin, Buckie ambled into the room waving a white towel in his hand. Making his way to Harry who happened to be the closest, he reached out to the couch. "Hey there!" Harry leaned over to look at the little boy. "What do you have there little man?" With a sweet giggle, Buckie waved the towel more enthusiastically, bringing laughter to the room. "Is that towel for me?"

"No!" Buckie called out with another giggle. "No! No! No!"
"Ha!" Harry clapped his hands. "He sure knows how to say that."

"He hears it from his mum all the time," Bishop teased as he looked up at his wife.

"Cause he's so much like his father," Ella winked as she leaned to kiss him before turning her smile to Maddie. "Okay my friend. It's time for some champagne."

"Oh wow..." Maddie sighed into a soft laugh. "I don't know. Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've had a drink?"

"About nine months..." Ella shrugged. "And six weeks. Here." She held out a glass. "It's long overdue."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, taking the glass even with leery eyes. "I don't know. Lilli's still waking up every three hours and..."

"And her father isn't so bad at the bottle thing..." Harry cut in, warm and loving as he looked to his wife. "Have a drink, love. In fact, have several. I'll take care of Lilli tonight."

"I don't know..." Maddie shook her head, her lips curling up in a grin.

"Yes you do," Ella sighed, sinking onto the couch next to Maddie with her own glass. "Come on Mum. Let the boys take care of the babies. Let's you and I have a drink."

"Or several?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows and then her glass.

"Or several," Ella nodded, her smile pulling even higher, clinking her glass to Maddie's before they both took a drink.

"Oh wow..." Maddie laughed, leaning back into the cushions of the couch. "That tastes amazing...I think I just might have several."

"That's my girl," Harry winked at her before turning his attention down at Buckie who was smacking his hand against Harry's knee. "And what can I do for you?"

"Up!" He called out, hitting his hand on Harry's knee again. "Up!"

"So demanding..." Harry laughed as he lifted Buckie up from the floor, bringing him right into his lap.

"So much like his mum," Bishop tossed out.

"You know," Ella took a sip. "If you weren't holding that precious little girl, I would throw this pillow at your head."

"Ah yes," Bishop nodded, smiling down at Lilli. "And you...just like your father...are saving me from bodily injury inflicted by only the most beautiful of women..."

Maddie snickered into her glass. "Jesus, Bishop. I've missed you."

"Yeah?" He flashed his grin up to her. "Keep on drinking love."
"Oh my God..." Maddie's voice drew out the words, her smile wide and lazy as she looked at Buckie, snuggled up on his dad's shoulder as the Bishops prepared to leave later that night. "He's so freaking cute." Her cheeks were pink from the bottle of champagne she and Ella had finished.

"Easy," Bishop teased in a quiet voice, not wanting to wake his sleeping son. "I'm married."

"Ha!" Maddie's hand muffled the sound of her snicker. "I was not talking about you."

"Well you can never really be sure," Bishop winked at her as he helped Ella drape a blanket over Buckie.

"Yes you can," Harry narrowed his eyes at his best friend.

"Alright..." Ella sighed, happy with the way Buckie was tucked under the blanket, running her hands through her hair as she reached for her jacket. "I think we're good."

"Just look at him," Maddie nudged Harry in the side. "All curled up with that hand towel..." Her cheeks hurt from grinning.

"Ha ha ha..." Ella laughed along with her best friend, trying to keep her own tipsy laughter underwraps. "I'm sorry about that. He just couldn't seem to let it go."

"No worries," Maddie shook her head, her head tipping to the side to take one last peek at the little boy.

"I'll wash it and return it," Ella mimicked Maddie, her eyes full of love as she looked at her son, at her husband.

"He can keep it," Maddie shook her head. "Consider it a trade...for getting me tipsy tonight." She turned to Ella with soft eyes. "Thank you for getting me tipsy tonight."

"Ah honey," Ella grinned, opening her arms and waving Maddie into them. "I'll get your sweet ass tipsy any night." And the way Ella said the words, the soft twang that she added to her voice, made Maddie giggle—which, in turn, made Ella giggle.

Which made Harry roll his eyes in only the sweetest, mocking way. Pointing his thumb at the two girls, wrapped up in each other's arms as they giggled and said their good-byes, Harry lifted his eyebrows to Bishop, "Are we ever like this?"

"No way," Bishop shook his head. "We've never been this good looking."

"True," Harry agreed, amused and content at the easy way his wife was smiling, the way she was relaxing.

"Okay," Ella finally pulled back, kissing Maddie's cheek. "We should get this guy home, get him to bed."

"Now you're talking," Bishop grinned, leaning to kiss Maddie's cheek, saying his good-bye to Harry. After one more round of hugs, after another expression of thanks, the Bishops promised to have the Sussex's over for dinner in a couple of weeks and then, with sleeping Buckie held close and tight in his father's arms, they slipped out the door and on their way home.

Harry shut the door behind their friends and turned a wide, easy smile to his wife who was leaning
back against the wall, her tipsy smile lighting up her face. "You had a good time tonight?" He crossed his arms over his chest.

"I had a great time tonight," she nodded. "Thank you for inviting them over." She took a deep breath and nodded her head towards the stairs. "And thank you for looking out for Lilli tonight."

"You're welcome," he moved towards her, standing tall in front of her as he bent to kiss her. "Speaking of Lilli...I'm going to go check on her. Do you want to finish that bottle of champagne? It looked like there was just about a glass left in it."

"Do I dare?" Maddie giggled.

"Might as well," Harry shrugged, kissing her again before he pulled back. "Go on. I'll be right back."

"Okay," Maddie sighed, watching him walk away from her. "Bring back the monitor..."

"Got it," he called back to her before taking to the stairs. With a deep breath Maddie turned from the room and made her way to the kitchen, intent on finishing off the bottle.

And that's just where Harry found her, in the middle of their kitchen, leaning against the island as she finished her drink, as she looked out at the mess left behind by their dinner with their friends; plates in the sink, empty champagne glasses, Lilli's freshly cleaned bottles drying on the counter. When she heard him enter the room, her eyes and her smile lifted up to him.

"How is she?" Maddie asked.

"Perfect," Harry answered without hesitation and Maddie couldn't help but be taken by just how in love with their daughter he was. "She's passed completely out...just as I'm sure her mother is going to be very soon."

"Ha, ha," Maddie rolled her eyes, watching him as he sat the monitor on the counter next to her, moving to stand in front of her. "Thank you for checking on her."

"Of course," he nodded, grinning as he looked down at her, at her empty glass. "Would you like me to open another bottle?"

"No, no," Maddie shook her head, setting the glass down behind her. "I've had enough for tonight."

"Mmm..." He nodded in a non-committal way, loving the smile on her face, loving the warmth in her eyes.

"Hey Harry..." She turned her eyes up to him, her fingers reaching out towards him, landing on the soft fabric over his stomach.

"Hmm?" He noticed the look in her eyes, the flush to her skin.

Without answering, without so much as a word, her fingers wrapped around his shirt and tugged him closer. With a grin and no need for further direction, Harry dipped his head and brought his lips to hers.

And Maddie sighed into his mouth, she leaned into his body, and it felt glorious. As Harry's
mouth opened over hers, as his hands moved easily on either side of her, she felt amazing. She felt warm and excited and alive.

Her hands moved up his chest and over his shoulders before her arms wound around his neck and drew him closer. And he went. Leaving the counter behind her, his hands moved to body, wrapping tight around her as the heat between them spiked.

With a breath that was deep and heavy and collective, they moved together; their bodies pressing close, their mouths opening wider, their tongues teasing and dancing and it had been so long since she had felt like this. It had been so long since she had felt these feelings stir, since she had felt this heat pulse through her body.

She wanted him and, from the way he was pressed against her, from the way he was kissing her, the way he was holding her, she knew that he wanted her too.

"Harry..." She breathed into his mouth, her hands moving up into his hair.

"God Maddie..." He groaned, his hands running over her greedily, taking in the curves of her hips, the shape of her waist, and daring to rise to her chest, already aching for him to touch her.

"Mmmm..." She moaned, her head tipping back as his palm rounded over her breast, his lips kissing hotly at her exposed neck.

"You feel amazing," Harry spoke against her skin, trying his damnedest to bring his mind back, to get his body under control.

"My God," she laughed, her fingers squeezing in his hair, tugging at the wild strands as she bit at her lip. "Do you have any idea how much I want you right now?"

"Ha..." Harry shook his head, taking a deep breath and trying to put some distance between them. "How much longer before you can have me?"

"I have my appointment next week," she nodded her head, taking deep breaths, trying to calm herself.

"Thank God," he groaned with a grin, reaching out to smooth her hair from her face. "Care to join me in a week of cold showers?"

"Ha!" Maddie laughed louder. "Absolutely." She nodded, her eyes raking over him as her hands moved down his chest, over his stomach. "Or..." She grinned, her eyebrows wagging.

"Or?" Harry was confused.

"Or..." Maddie's smile turned cheeky, her fingers reaching the band on his jeans and tugging. "Or maybe I could..." As her tongue tipped out to wet her lips, her finger ran down over the bulge in his pants. And then, holding his gaze, she began to move down.

Though Harry groaned, though he felt his blood heat up, he reached out to her, his hands wrapping around her arms, stopping her in her journey to her knees. "Hold on..."

"Hold on?" Maddie's eyes narrowed in confusion, a light laugh bubbling from her lips. "Don't tell me you no longer like..."
"Oh no," he shook his head. "I do...very much." He laughed and took a deep breath. "But there's no way that the first time we're...intimate...after Lilli is going to be with you on your knees in the kitchen."

"Booo..."

"Come on," Harry chuckled, kissing the pout on her face. "Let's go to bed. You're going to need to sleep off this hangover."

"Maybe I won't have a hangover," she sighed as Harry took her hand, pulling her with him out of the kitchen.

"I don't know if you're that lucky love," Harry tossed a grin back at her.

"Well I landed you..." She giggled, tugging on his fingers. "I must be pretty damned lucky."

"Alright," Harry laughed, rolling his eyes. "I think you spent way too much time with Bishop this evening."

With another giggle and another sweet sigh, Maddie followed her husband up the stairs to bed. Her night had been wonderful and even if it wasn't ending exactly the way she had hoped, it was still damn near perfect.

The day that Maddie was given the greenlight from her doctor to resume sexual activities, she wasn't even embarrassed when her smile stretched her cheeks. She thanked the doctor and felt like she was floating the entire trip home. She knew it was crazy; they were both still working on relatively little sleep, they still had this tiny baby girl who demanded all of their attentions. But she was excited at the thought that maybe, just maybe, she would be able to make love to her husband that night.

She had missed it, and so had he. And this new wonderful addition to their family, the miracle of their daughter had not diminished their drive for each other--in fact it only fueled it. Maddie's cheeks flushed as she drove through the gates of Kensington, her body warming as she recalled the way he had been looking at her since she delivered Lilli, the soft, sweet love in his eyes. She was out of the car and up the walk and inside the house in a flash, not entirely sure her feet touched the ground.

"Harry?" She called out, dropping her keys and her sunglasses on the stand next to the door. "Greta?" She called for the Nanny they had finally settled on, the young woman who had risen above the rest of the applicants, who had wowed her with her interview. Though they hired her full time, they wouldn't really need her full time for a little while longer. But Maddie had thought this afternoon would be a perfect time for her to spend a little time with Lilli before it became so much more than that.

Hearing no replies, Maddie stepped further into the house, looking around for a sign of something. She found it in a handwritten note on the table in the foyer. "Took Lilli on a walk on the grounds. We'll be back shortly. Adam is with us.--Greta." Maddie smiled, happy with the people they had chosen to surround their daughter; Greta and Adam, Lilli's very own PO. Setting the note back on the table, Maddie stepped further into the house, taking in a deep breath and feeling only slightly at odds, having nothing at the top of her list to do.

And then she saw it; Harry's keys. Harry's shoes. Harry's suit coat. Harry was home.
And damn if that didn't make her blood pulse faster.

"Harry?" She called again, tipping her head up as she called up the stairs. "Harry!"

Hearing nothing, she moved towards the hallway, towards the back of the house where their joined offices were. "Harry..." She called out, her smile growing wider and wider as she closed in on his door.

There he was; sitting behind his desk, his tie tugged off, his shirt sleeves rolled up. She could tell he was on a business call, his head bent over a file folder as he talked on the phone. She watched him for only a moment before she let her presence be known, before she stepped into the office and lightly cleared her throat.

Harry's eyes left the papers in front of him and flashed instantly up to her, his smile brightening the second he saw her. With one hand covering the receiver, he whispered, "Greta took Lilli for a walk in the garden..."

"I saw the note," Maddie whispered back, stepping further into the room as Harry turned back to the phone call.

Watching him work did nothing to tamper down just how much she wanted him. As she moved in closer, as she rounded the desk, Harry glanced up to her and, catching the look on her face, couldn't seem to look back down at the papers on his desk.

"Sure..." Harry answered the person on the other end of the phone, his head nodding as he watched Maddie step up to him. "That's fine..." His lips curled higher as he looked up to her, his hand covering the phone once more. "How was the appointment?"

"Mmmm..." Maddie smiled, stepping even closer, into the space between his knees. "It went well. Really well."

"Yeah?" His eyebrows shot up. "What? Sorry. No, no," Harry shook his head, his attentions clearly struggling to divide between the business call and his wife who took another step closer, his wife who pushed at his shoulder, forcing him to sit back in his seat. With a deep breath, he tried to focus on the conversation. "If you think it's best..."

"You want to know what I think is best?" Maddie whispered, seemingly unable to control herself. For all she knew, it was the Queen on the other end of the phone. But even as he shot a narrowed, warning glance in her direction, she moved forward and climbed right into his lap, her knees settling on either side of him.

With a groan, Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, would you repeat that one more time?"

With a naughty grin, Maddie leaned in, bringing her lips to the soft skin below his ear and kissing him there. Feeling him tense underneath her, feeling his free hand wrap around her arm, she waited for him to push her back. But when he didn't, she grinned and whispered, "The doctor said I can have you again..."

With a cough, Harry's hand tightened on her arm and she leaned back, wanting to see the look on his face. And she wasn't disappointed. His eyes had darkened, his smile had drawn a bit hazy and she felt him pull in a deep breath.

And Maddie was hooked; so in love with him, so overwhelmed with lust for him. Her hand
reached out, running down his strong chest, down his flat stomach and right to the already growing bulge in his pants. And without taking her eyes from him, she pulled her bottom lip into her teeth and in the most innocent voice she could find, she asked, "Can I have you?"

"Jesus," Harry groaned. "I'm sorry." He spoke into the phone. "My apologies. Would it be okay if I called you back? I would imagine only...ten minutes?" His eyes glanced up to Maddie, to the way she was looking back down at him. "Maybe twenty..." His eyes swept down over her, his desires mounting exponentially. And then, with a blink of his eyes and quick, "Thank you," he ended the call, tossed aside his phone and he moved in on her.

His arms encircled her, pulling her body tight to his as his lips tipped up, catching hers in a hot, heavy, insistent kiss. A kiss that didn't seem to end; even as she sank into his lap, even as he groaned into her mouth, even as his hands ran hotly over her body, desperately trying to gather her as close as he could get her.

"Did the doctor..." Harry breathed against her skin as his mouth kissed across her jaw. "Did she really say..."

"She did," Maddie nodded, her hands in his hair, holding him to her neck as he kissed down. "She said I could resume all normal sexual activities and..."

And Harry's mouth was back on hers; kissing her for all he was worth. And it was glorious; amazing and hot and glorious. And Maddie was certain they were about to resume all normal sexual activities right there in his office chair.

Right up until she heard the front door open, until the sound of Greta's voice called out into the home, "We're baaaack..." She was so sweet and kind and as Maddie pulled her mouth from Harry's, she wanted nothing more than to slap her.

"Oh my God..." She breathed, pressing her forehead to Harry's as he tried his level best to calm down.

"Ha..." He shook his head, his hands moving softly over her arms, a smirk working its way to his lips. "I don't think I can stand up."

"Mmmm..." Maddie grinned, pleased to hear that. "You stay here. I'll go..." With a quick kiss to his swollen lips, she moved to stand up.

"Ugh," he groaned. "Don't go."

"I have to," she took in a breath, standing tall and smoothing her hands over her hair, over her clothes. "I'll go get Lilli; feed her, get her ready for bed. You finish that call..."

"It might take a while," he warned, knowing the conversations he was having could end up being an all night thing.

"It's okay," she winked at him as she neared the door. "I'll meet you in bed tonight?"

"Good lord, yes," Harry nodded enthusiastically.

And then, with a steadying breath he reached for his phone and he watched Maddie step from his office, her voice already calling out, "Greta! I'm home...." And he turned his attentions back to his phone call—or at least he tried his very best.
As it always seemed to do with new parents, the evening slipped away from them. Maddie thanked Greta, made plans for the next day for a few hours and then she took over with Lilli. As Harry worked the hours away in his office, Maddie gave Lilli a bottle before laying down on the floor to play with her a bit. Though Harry breezed through the living room, bending to kiss them both, he grabbed a quick bite to eat and was back to work, offering apologies to both of his girls before he left them in the living room.

But Maddie didn't mind, not entirely. She spent the evening with her darling little girl; cuddling and singing and dancing in the nursery before she took her to the bathroom; bathing her and zipping her up into her comfy jammies. And just as she was about to settle in to the rocking chair and give her another bottle, Harry stepped into the room. He was tired from the conversations, his mind exhausted from it all. But when he saw sweet little Lilli kicking her legs up at her mother, he couldn't help the smile that graced his face.

"I'm really sorry," he stepped into the room. "I didn't think it would take nearly this long..."

"Everything okay?" Maddie turned her smile to him.

"Yes," he nodded. "The phone call took longer than I expected and then it lead to another. And another..." He shook his head. "But I'm done for the night."

"Good," Maddie sighed, turning to look down at her happy little girl laying on her changing table, her hands waving in the air as she smiled and cooed. "Your little miss managed to get me all wet with her bath water before she spit up on me..."

"Wow..." Harry chuckled, leaning over Lilli, his finger reaching out to her hand. "Did you get your mum all messy?"

"She did," Maddie nodded, tickling her daughter as she sighed. "I'd give anything for a bath."

"Well, look no further," Harry stepped closer, his hands reaching to lift Lilli up. "Why don't you go take a bath and I'll give her a bottle and rock her..."

"Yeah?" Maddie lifted tired eyebrows.

"Absolutely," Harry nodded. "Go. Relax. Feel better." He leaned to kiss her cheek. "I'll be in in a bit."

"Well okay," Maddie grinned, excited at the thought. "Okay Miss Lilli. You be a good little girl for daddy." She bent to kiss her. "And I'll see you in a few hours for another bottle. Okay..." She squeezed Harry's arm and then, with a bright smile, she headed off towards their bathroom, towards their enormous tub.

When Maddie finally emerged from her bath, clean and refreshed, she slathered on some lotion, slipped into her soft cotton t-shirt and a pair of boy-shorts that made her feel cute but not like she was trying too hard. Stepping out into their bedroom, she saw that Harry hadn't returned quite yet. Switching on the monitor in their room, she could hear him singing to Lilli; soft and low. And deciding to wait for him, she crawled into their bed; intent on resting just a little bit while he finished up with their daughter, intent on staying awake--ready for some private time with her husband.
But when her head hit the pillow, when her warm, soft skin slid in along the crisp, clean sheets, when the long day caught up with her, when it all seemed to catch up with her, her eyes grew heavy and her breathing grew slow and before she could even think to stop herself, she had drifted off to sleep; the sound of Harry singing softly to Lilli in the background.

When she woke, it was only an hour later but it felt much longer. Though she felt rested, it was a bit disorienting. All of the lights were on and, as she sat up and looked around, her husband was nowhere to be found. Rubbing at her eyes, she pulled back the blankets and stepped out of bed. Turning off the lights as she left the room, she went off in search of Harry.

She didn't have to search long. Quietly, softly, she stepped into Lilli's nursery and her heart melted. There in the rocking chair was her husband, sleeping just as soundly as his daughter slept in the bed next to him. He must have been just as tired as she was, just as exhausted from it all as she was. Picking up the bottle from the floor, pulling the burping cloth from his shoulder, she sat them both on the dresser and, after checking Lilli to see that she was tucked in and well, Maddie turned her attentions to her husband.

"Harry..." She whispered his name, her fingers gentle as she stroked his cheek. "You can't sleep here Captain," she leaned in closer, her hand sliding down to his shoulder, shaking him slightly as she tried to wake him. "Your back will hurt and your neck will ache and..." He moved then, just slightly. His hand swatted at her, his nose crinkling up in a way that was so adorable and reminded her so much of Lilli, it made her heart swell, her hand pressing to her lips to stifle her laughter. Taking a breath, she leaned closer, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Harry..." She whispered. "Come on daddy...let's get you to bed..."

When he moved this time, it was slower; quieter. His eyes blinked open and as he registered where he was, as he realized what was happening, he smiled.

Warm and sweet and easy, he smiled up at her. "I fell asleep?"

"You did," she nodded, her grin pulling higher as her fingers rubbed at his scruffy cheek. "But it's okay. I fell asleep too."

"In the bathtub?" His hands were warm as they moved to her arms, as he sat up a bit.

"No, no," she shook her head with a soft laugh. "I made it to bed at least."

"Good," he nodded, taking a deep breath as he looked over at the crib. "She's sleeping?"

"She is," Maddie looked too. "She's knocked out, just like her dad."

"Says her mother, the snorer," he tossed a wink up to her.

"I don't snore!" Though her voice was whisper soft, she pressed her hand to her chest in mock astonishment.

"Sure, sure," he nodded, his hands smoothing over her arms as he continued to wake up, as his senses drew back to him.

"Come on Harry..." Maddie took a step back, her hand moving to grab hold of his. "You're tired, let's go to bed."
"Okay," he agreed at first, his head bobbing into a nod. But then, as he looked up at her, as he felt her fingers squeeze his, he stopped. He stayed put and he pulled at her hand, bringing her back to him. "Wait..."

"What is it?" She turned back to look at him, instantly catching the look in his eyes. "Harry..."

"Did the doctor really say..."

"She did," Maddie grinned. "Why? You want to do something about it Captain?"

Without any words whatsoever, Harry answered her question. With wide, sweet eyes, he tugged on her hand and brought her closer. His neck stretched up as he drew her down. And when his lips caught hers, there was a slowness, a dreamlike quality that hadn't been there earlier in his office.

But it was just as hot and just as passionate and it made Maddie's entire body awaken.

"Come here," Harry whispered against her lips as he kissed her. And she went, slowly and quietly and with breath held in her lungs, Maddie climbed right into his lap, the chair rocking below them.

And his arms moved around her; strong and warm and making her feel comfortable and loved and alive. As his hands pressed her body to his, Maddie's face angled over his, her fingers moved into his hair and she sank into him.

Into his mouth, into his arms, into his lap. It was like he was magnetic and she a precious metal; she couldn't be pulled from him. She wanted it so much.

"Harry..." She breathed into his mouth, her hips moving over his, her body instinctually moving her towards this moment she had been craving.

There were lots of things he wanted to say to her; how much he loved her, how much he adored her, how he would never be able to get over the awe he still felt deep in his heart whenever he thought of her pregnant with Lilli, whenever he thought of her bringing that sweet little baby into the world. There were so many things he wanted to say; how unbelievably sexy she was in that soft t-shirt and boy shorts, how every single change that had happened to her body only made him want her more, only made his hands ache to reacquaint themselves with her curves and dips. So many things he wanted to say--and the complete inability to put voice to anything.

Because she was there, in his lap, holding him close and kissing him back and as he tried to wrap his mind around the fact that he could very well be making love to her again that night, he couldn't find words. All he could do was hold her to him, all he could do was rediscover the way her hips turned, the peaks of her chest. All he could do was kiss her back, to sink into this moment where he could have his wife.

As her hips moved over him again, as his fingers slipped up under her t-shirt, he had the smallest presence of mind to remember where they were. With a low groan, he pulled his mouth from hers and with a breathless voice, her reminded her. "Lilli..."

Maddie's head nodded next to his, her voice throaty as she agreed, "let's go to bed..."

And Harry didn't need to be told twice. With his hands firm at her hips, with her arms wrapped around his neck, he held onto her and she held onto him and he stood, moving them both from that chair in their daughter's nursery. Maddie's legs moved around his waist, thankful for his
strength, for his broad shoulders and his muscular arms--because she was pretty sure if she had had to stand up and put any space between them, it would have ended her.

But he had her, there in his arms, in his heart. Harry had her. With long, confident strides, he carried her from Lilli's room, down the hall and back to their room. To their bed.

As he kicked their door shut behind him, he finally let out the loud groan that had been building inside of him since she had stepped into his office early that evening. "My God...I want you so much..." He reached their bed then, his legs hitting the mattress.

"Please..." Maddie sighed, pulling her lips back to his. "Please Captain. I want to have you...I want to feel you..." Her hands ran down his chest, pulling at the buttons of his shirt. As his lips caught hers again, he leaned over, lowering her down onto the mattress and then, standing tall, he finished what she had started and he pulled his shirt off, tossing it over his shoulder as he moved onto the bed.

Biting at her lip, even as her smile tugged wider, Maddie scooted back on the bed, loving the way Harry looked as he settled on his knees there between her legs. His hands were hot and firm as they ran over her legs, down over her calves, up around her knees, down her thighs. And when his fingers teased up under her boy-shorts, her hips arched up off the bed, her ass wiggling just a bit, wanting him closer; wanting his fingers higher.

"Jesus you're gorgeous," Harry shook his head, his tongue tipping out to wet his lips as he moved over her, his hands sliding up her body as he stretched out. And when his mouth found hers again, the want between them had inflated. Her mouth opened up under his, her tongue reaching for his. As his body stretched out over hers, as he pressed her down into the mattress, Maddie's hands moved up his arms that rest on either side of her. They moved up over his shoulders, around to his back and they pushed, drawing him closer to her.

And when she felt him between her legs, when she felt him hard and stiff, even through his pants, she gasped into his mouth and her hips moved underneath his. "Harry..." She called to him in want, in need, in this wild crazy desperation she hadn't realized lived inside of her.

His hands weren't quite sure where they wanted to be--because they wanted to be everywhere all at once. The air between them grew heated, feverish, as he touched her. His hands danced up over her stomach, palming her breasts, thumbing over her nipples that pressed hard against the soft t-shirt she still wore. They were hot against her skin as they skimmed up underneath it and they were insistent as they pulled it up and over her head, tossing it off in the general direction of his own.

And when he returned to her body, his mouth moved directly to her chest, opening up over the soft roundness of her; his tongue flicking against her. As his mouth began its slow destruction of her wits there at her breasts, his hands slid down her body. They were warm over her stomach, tight on her hips and then they were tugging; wanting her naked beneath him more than he wanted anything else in that moment.

And when his mouth left her chest, when it left a trail of long, hot, wet kisses down her stomach, she wasn't sure she would be able to take the kind of madness she knew he could deliver. "Harry..." She breathed, she moaned, she reached for his head, for his hair, and she tugged. And when he looked up at her from between her legs, his eyes bright, his eyebrows lifting in question, she had to swallow back the lump in her throat. "Get up here," she ordered with another soft tug at his hair. "I want you inside of me..." Her breath was shallow and heavy as he moved back over her. "I need you..." Her hands moved to his pants, to the button and the zipper. "I need you
baby..." She whispered, her eyes looking up at him through heavy lashes. "Deep inside of me..." She pushed at his pants, at his boxers. "Please Harry."

With a groan, Harry did as she was pushing him to do; his hands took over for hers at his pants, pulling them off his legs and kicking them to the floor, his boxers going right along with them. And then he moved right back to her. Her hands were strong on the side of his head as she pulled him up to her, her legs wrapping around his waist, her heels on his back bringing him closer.

And her lips—kissing him absolutely senseless. It was amazing, just how quickly things between them could get so heated, how much they wanted each other. Even after all of it; the late nights, the dirty diapers, the spit up, the crying, the aches and pains and the moments where it all just seemed too much.

They still wanted each other. In fact, they wanted each other more.

"Maddie..." Harry breathed into her neck, his fingers strong at her hip. "Condoms?" He hadn't even thought about how he might be needing them, hadn't thought about having them handy.

"No, no," she shook her head with a chuckle, her hands in his hair as she turned to look at him. With a sweet smile, she kissed him. "I'm back on the pill. We should be fine..."

"Good..." Harry exhaled with a bit of a rough laugh, moving back to center; back to focus. Kissing her lips, his eyes met hers and he lifted his eyebrows. "Are you sure, love? Because if you need more time or..."

"Oh for God's sake Harry!" Maddie sighed, her hips moving up towards him, her breath catching in her throat. "I've had enough time and I'm tired of waiting and please, baby...please...would you just..."

There was no need for her to finish that sentence, no need to continue with her demands. With his hand cupping her cheek, his thumb smoothing over her puckered mouth, he pushed into her; long and slow and as deep as he could possibly get.

Maddie's head tipped back into the pillow, her breath sucking into her lungs as the sweetest sensation coursed through her body. With her eyes pressed closed and a wide, pleased smile on her face, her tongue tipped out and her hands moved up his arms.

"Like that?" He asked and she knew that voice enough to know that there was a smirk on his face even before she opened her hazy eyes to see it for herself.

Biting her bottom lip, she nodded. "Just like that." Her hands flattened out on his shoulders, smoothing down over his back and when they reached his ass, when she squeezed him inside of her, a groan fell from his lips and his eyes grew dark.

And he moved. Very slowly, very calmly, he moved nearly all the way out of her and then, as he exhaled the breath he seemed to be holding, he moved back in.

Just as slowly, just as heavy. And when he was all the way back inside of her, Maddie's breath came out in a gasp and her hips turned as if on reflex. She wanted more; she wanted so much more of that. But Harry didn't move, he stayed still—deep inside of her. And when her hips moved again, his hand smoothed down and held her still. Maddie's eyes flashed up to him, catching the look in his eyes, the emotion filled smile on his lips. "You want slow and romantic?" She whispered, her heart swelling in her chest as his body settled against hers. "At two in the morning?
With our daughter asleep down the hall bound to wake up soon..."

"Yes," Harry answered; so full of certainty, so full of love. Bending to kiss her, his lips were slow and hot against hers. "I want slow and romantic..." He moved out of her again, pushing back in just as slowly as before. "Especially at two in the morning..." Back out and back in. "With our daughter down the hallway..." His head bent to kiss her again, his tongue and his hips working together to slowly, achingly, drive her mad.

And he did. He drove her deliciously mad there in their bed that night. He was slow and steady and driven and when he finally pushed her over the edge, he was quick right behind her, seeing stars behind his eyelids as he held onto her, as he let go. Afterwards they cuddled up close together and they drifted off to a much-needed sleep and, when Lilli woke less than two hours later, they both rose from bed to attend to her.

And they were both smiling; wide and easy. As Lilli settled into her new life, into her new home, her parents were settling into theirs.
"So..." Kate's words were directed at Maddie though her smile and her eyes were focused on Lilli who laid wide awake and smiling in her lap. "When are you leaving for the states?"

"Thursday," Maddie smile as she watched the two of them. Sitting in the gardens at Kensington while Arthur played, the two of them were catching up and enjoying the fresh air of Spring. "There's a pinning ceremony for the new nurses on Friday and Graduation on Saturday." A deep pride was evident in her eyes and in her voice as she spoke of her mother's upcoming graduation.

"Are you ready to go see your grandma, Lilli?" Kate spoke to the happy little girl staring up at her. "I bet grandma is ready to see you again."

"No joke," Maddie laughed, watching Arthur as he toddled around, scooping up a toy, inspecting it and tossing it back to the ground as though he were looking for one in particular. "She's been trying to talk us into coming earlier."

"You can't?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "Harry has a few meetings this week and on Tuesday we're going up to Norfolk to look at another place."

"Norfolk?" Kate's smile widened. "Really?"

"Mmm," Maddie nodded with a matching smile.

"It would be wonderful if you had a place in Norfolk," Kate sighed, looking from her niece to her son and back again. "Convenient and wonderful."

"Yes," Maddie laughed. "Well, it would be wonderful if we could just find a place."

"You've been looking a long time."

"We have," she sighed with a shrug, leaning back and planting her hands in the grass. "Just this last week we've looked at six or seven..."

"I know," Kate's smirk turned less amused. "I've seen the pictures."

"Ugh," Maddie groaned thinking of the cameras they'd had following them on a few outings. "It's been a little much recently. I'm not sure what exactly it is they're wanting..."

"No?" Kate lifted one well-manicured eyebrow. "The paps were heavier for us right after Arthur was born. I think maybe they want a new picture of little Lilli here..."

"Ah..." Maddie's smile slipped soft as her head tipped to the side, looking over at her daughter. "Well she is quite beautiful." The last photos of Lilli had been the family picture they had released and that had been a little while. With the Christening still coming after their trip to Colorado, she supposed Kate was right. They were looking for new pics of Lilli.

"She is," Kate nodded happily, making sweet faces at the baby. "And I'm sure they want to see you too. It's been awhile..."
"I suppose it has," Maddie sighed again, helpless against the way their lives were.

"When are you coming back out?"

"After we return from the states," she explained. "Trooping the Color, The Ascot...polo..." She couldn't help the smile that tugged at her lips as the image of Harry riding entered her mind. "We'll ease back in with those and then hit it hard again; some stuff with The Prince's Trust...Bendal..."

"Well, at least you get some good quality down time with your family before it starts up again."

"Yes," Maddie nodded, excited for their trip.

"And...hopefully...before that you'll find a place in Norfolk. So Little Miss Lilli can be closer to her Aunt Kate. Wouldn't that be wonderful?" She cooed down at the baby who happily cooed back. "Yes. Yes it would!"

The nice spring weather had held out for their trip to Norfolk. As Harry drove them further from London, Maddie sat in the passenger seat, watching with an easy smile as the sun shone through the ruffled leaves on the trees, as it highlighted the large, sprawling grassy hills they passed.

"We're almost there," he glanced over to her, his eyes shaded behind his sunglasses.

"Mmm," Maddie smiled to him, content to watch the countryside pass, content with the peaceful silence that surrounded them. This really was the first time they had spent this much time away from Lilli and as much as she loved their daughter, it felt good to have an afternoon where Harry was just hers again. "Now you said it was Thomas who told you about the place?"

"It was," Harry nodded, his eyes shifting back to the road as he took a slow turn. "Old family friends," he explained. "Apparently when she agreed to raise their family in the country, he agreed that when they retired, they would sell the house and buy a sailboat."

"They're going to sail?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows.

"Around the world," Harry answered, slowing down as he reached the entrance; there among the trees that lined the road, was a tall brick and wrought iron gate. It was clearly old but well kept and stood tall and steady as they drove through it onto the private drive.

"Oh wow..." Maddie's mouth fell open as she leaned forward, pulling her sunglasses up to her head in order to get a better look. As they drove further into the property, she was in awe of how beautiful it was. Acres of sprawling land, scattered with large, old trees that had been there for centuries she guessed. There was a ribbon of water running through the land, the trickling blue cutting into the deep green.

"There's a carriage house up front and a lake around behind the house," Harry's arm moved in front of her, pointing out her window. Maddie turned to look as they crested a hill and her eyes grew wide.

"My God...Harry...the house..." She shook her head, her smile softening. The house was beautiful; large and opulent, no doubt. But understated and...beautiful. She knew right away that Kyle would have something to say about the architecture, and Charles would have something to
"There are barns in the back," Harry continued to tell her what he knew as they drove closer and closer. "Plenty of large trees to build treehouses and forts and such..." Maddie sighed as her smile deepened, reaching to roll down the window. "There's room for a garden, or delphinium if you'd like," he turned to look at her, catching her with her head half out the window, her eyes closed as she breathed it all in. "Or...corn."

"Corn?" Her eyes opened, confusion twisting up her brow. "Did you just say corn?"

"Checking to see if you're listening," he grinned across the car. "You like it don't you."

"I like the way the air feels in my lungs," she sighed, settling back into her seat as he pulled the car up to the house and put it in park. "Let's just hope they haven't 'updated' it too far into the future."

"Come on," he nodded his head towards the house. "Let's go see."

By the time Harry rounded the car, Maddie was out. With her sunglasses back on her eyes and her hand held up to help with the shade, she took it all in. She looked as far as she could see, taking in the trees and the water and the long grass. She took in long, slow deep breaths of the fresh crisp air as she brought her gaze closer; the long drive, the trees that lined it, the wildflowers that had barely begun to sprout up. And when she turned to face him, the sun was bouncing off his bright red hair, illuminating him with warmth.

"There are horse facilities..." He shrugged casually, taking slow easy steps towards her. "Just in case you were wondering. There's a tower at the end of the property for exploring..." His finger stretched out to tuck a wayward strand of her hair back behind her ear. "A pool..."

"A pool?" Maddie's eyebrows shot up, her smile slipping higher.

"Mmm," he nodded. "And a yard in the back for Lilli..."

"Room to plant a tree?" Maddie reached out to him, her hand running down his strong arm to his hand, tangling her fingers with his.

"Plenty," he squeezed her hand. With a light tug, he drew her with him towards the house. As Harry reached into his pocket for the keys, Maddie's eyes settled on a small engraved sign fixed to the house just next to the door. "Is this what it's called?" She glanced back at Harry.

"Hmm?" He looked up to the sign and smiled, nodding. "It is."

"Foxgrove?" She thought about it for a minute, the way it sounded, the way it felt coming out of her mouth. "Foxgrove..." Harry chuckled at the look on her face, as though she were weighing the merits. "I like it."

"Good," he shook his head.

"Why do they call it Foxgrove? Do foxes live here?"

"I don't know," Harry shrugged, unlocking the door with ease. "Though I suppose they will if we move in..."
"Please," she rolled her eyes at her husband's stab at humor, shaking her head at him as he pushed open the door.

"Come on love," he reached for her hand. "Let's take a look around."

Together they stepped inside and a rush of warmth welcomed them. Maddie had never really been one to believe in love at first sight. Anytime somebody asked her if she had fallen in love with Harry the moment she met him, she would laugh and roll her eyes. It was absurd, to think that you could know at first glance.

But. Later in life, if she was asked about Foxgrove, about when she knew that was the place for them, if she were feeling honest, she would answer...that very first moment they stepped into the foyer.

It was a beautiful, immaculate home, one that had been preserved. One that had been restored. Though she was about to find out that the kitchen had been remodeled, bringing in state of the art appliances, though she was about to find out that the master bedroom already had a gigantic tub, though she was going to learn how easy it would be to install the same sort of room-to-room sound system they had at Kensington—it hadn't been updated into the future. It was still the same sort of tall elegance she imagined it had been the day it was built.

"It's...enormous," Maddie breathed the word, her eyes widening as she looked up at the tall ceiling above them, at the massive staircase in front of them.

Clearing his throat, Harry nodded and moved closer. "There are eight bedrooms and..."

"Eight!" Maddie's wide eyes turned up to him, the beginnings of a smirk pulling at her lips. "Wow...I mean...if we give each of the babies their own room, where would we sleep?"

A twinkle took over his eyes, his smile crinkling up the corners as he held her amused gaze for a moment. "You want to look a little closer?"

"I do," she nodded and stepped further into the house, ready to explore those eight bedrooms, ready to find the library, to sit in the large empty tub as she tried to goad Harry into joining her.

And, only after they had taken in the house from top to bottom, only after they had taken a long, slow walk on the grounds, only after Harry had turned to her with that charming, easy smile of his–only after he caught that satisfied look in her eyes did he ask.

"So...."

"So..." They were standing back where they had started, sunglasses back in place as the light shone down on them, igniting a new pattern on the land around them. "Can we afford it?" She glanced over at him.

"We can," he nodded easily, his feet shuffling on the gravel below them. "It's a better bargain than most of the places we've looked at, because of the lack of updates."

"I love the lack of updates," she nodded, turning her eyes back to the house, the land. And then, with a deep breath and a bite to her lower lip, she turned back to him. "I think we should make an offer."
"Yeah?" Harry's eyebrows rose softly, his smile pulling higher.

"Yeah," Maddie nodded, letting out a breath she had been holding. "I mean....I've been wanting a place to finally plant some corn."

"Ha!" Harry's hands clapped together as he laughed, as he moved in on her. Gathering her into his arms, he hugged her tight. "Do you really like it?"

"I love it," she hugged him back, feeling warm and safe and at home. Pulling back just enough so that she could look at his face, she asked, "and you? Do you like it?"

"I really, really do," he nodded quickly. And he looked so handsome, there in the slight wind, in the streaming sun. He looked warm and golden and certain.

"Good," Maddie leaned up to kiss him. "Then maybe you should make a call and make an offer..."

"I'll do it right now," he kissed her once more and let her go, pulling his phone from his pocket and heading back inside.

Maddie watched him step into the house, watched as he took the necessary steps to secure them this wonderful piece of the English countryside and then she turned back to look out at the land, to breathe the air and she hoped that someday soon, this would all be theirs.

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"So I'm thinking..." Harry's voice was low as he glanced to Maddie across the car. They had been peacefully quiet on their way out of Foxgrove, both of them settling into this new possibility.

"Yeah?" She let the corner of her mouth turn up in amusement, in a way that tinged on sarcasm.

"Yeah," his voice and his eyes narrowed at her for only a second before his hand reached out to hers. "We're not expected back in London for a bit, no?" He pulled her fingers over to him. "Greta and Lilli are set?"

"They are," Maddie nodded, studying the smile on his face, loving the way his fingers played with hers. "Why? What did you have in mind Captain?"

"A date," he dropped a kiss to the palm of her hand. "Maybe we stop off and have some lunch, a few drinks...do some shopping for our new home..."

"Shh..." Maddie pressed her fingertips to his lips, her eyes growing wide. "You don't know that, don't say that. You'll jinx us."

"Ha!" His head tipped back in laughter. "You don't believe in that."

"I don't not believe in it," she shook her head at him. "But, if I'm being honest, I am a bit hungry."

"Oh?" Harry's eyebrows lifted, warming at the thought of more alone time with his wife. "So you'll go out with me? To lunch and drinks?"

"And shopping," she reminded him with a gentle pinch to his side. "Yes. I think it sounds lovely."
"Fantastic." His other hand smacked the steering wheel happily.

"Do you know where to go out here or..."

"I think I do," he nodded with a smile. "I think I have just the place."

And he did. Navigating them off their course just a bit, he found a pub that fit his liking. Though their waitress did a double-take, blinking as she recognized the couple, she hid it well and showed them to a booth in the back. With a thank you and a smile, Maddie slid into the booth. With a nod of thanks, Harry slid in next to her. The waitress was back quickly with their drinks, hurrying off to put in their food order.

Harry, lifting his glass from the table, turned his smile to his wife. "To Foxgrove."

"To Foxgrove," Maddie agreed, her smile pulling hopeful.

"May the next owners be young and beautiful and witty..."

"I thought you wanted us to be the next owners," Maddie gave him a wink and clinked her glass to his. "May they be happy..."

"May they be that," he nodded, taking a long sip of the cool brew. With a deep breath and a sigh, Maddie did the same, sinking back into the booth, leaning in a little closer to him.

"Do you think they'll accept the offer?" Her eyes looked into her glass, her mind drifting back to the home they had toured, the land that she already, almost loved.

"I do," Harry nodded, his voice quiet. With a shrug, he stretched an arm around her shoulders and drew her to his side. "I think they want to sell the place. I think we made them a fair offer and...as hard as the words are on my lips....I think this might be a moment when who you are helps nudge things in our favor."

"Who I am?!" Maddie snickered, pressing her hand into her chest.

"Mmmm...." Harry spoke into his glass. "Nobody cares who I am anymore. Not since the wedding, certainly not since Lilli." His eyes lit up as he said her name, as his thoughts drifted to her, even as he scanned the place looking for the cameras that had been more present since his daughter had come into the world.

Though words of protest were on Maddie's lips, her mind drifted with Harry's and she let them go. "You know she's going to love Foxgrove; the land and the water and the treehouse you're going to build..."

"Hey..." He pressed a soft finger to her lips. "I thought we didn't want to jinx anything..."

Maddie's lips curled into a smile and then kissed his finger. "You're right. I'll wait. I'm just...excited is all."

"I know," Harry took a deep breath, his fingers smoothing over her cheek before his hand fell away from her. "I am too." He took a quick sip. "If it's any comfort at all, I think we'll have something of an answer before the end of the day."

Just then the waitress returned with their food and a soft smile for the both of them. As their
attentions turned to their food, their focus shifted.

"Before I forget..." He swallowed and glanced over at her. "Thomas wanted a list of the Godparents we've selected so that he can have everything ready for the Christening when we get back from Colorado."

"Mmmm," Maddie nodded as she took another bite of her food; chewing, swallowing, and smiling up at him as she reached for her glass. "Well. I talked to Kyle and he's in. Did you talk to Peter?"

"I did," Harry nodded. "So that's it then. Kyle and Peter, Bishop and Ella..."

"And Collins," Maddie smiled, leaning back in her seat as she sipped at her drink. "Is it strange at all that we have four men and one woman?"

"Ha..." Harry chuckled. "Maybe. Maybe I'm surrounding my little girl with big, strong, intimidating men..."

Maddie snickered, her eyes rolling back as she nudged him. "Maybe you're crazy."

"Maybe," he grinned into his drink.

"Should we add another woman?" Maddie moved back to her food. "Make it a little more even?"

"We could," Harry shrugged. "We could add Amy or Autumn..."

"Or Kate," Maddie's eyebrows lifted moments before her eyes shifted over to him. "We could add Kate."

Harry turned to look at her, a sweet smile on his lips. "Kate?" His voice lifted up at the end.

"Yeah," Maddie grinned at the look on his face. "You know her? Tall, brunette, gorgeous. She's married to your brother, future Queen..."

"I know who you mean," His laughter settling into a sigh. "We don't have to have an even mix you know. It can stay the way it is...Do you want Kate to be Lilli's godmother?"

"You know, I think I do," Maddie nodded. "She's been an amazing support to me and she would be wonderful to Lilli, giving her great guidance and lots of love and...what about you? Would you be okay with Kate?"

"I would be more than okay with Kate," Harry nodded. "She would be a great influence for her."

"Plus, she's an incredibly strong woman and, when she wants to be, she is pretty intimidating," Maddie nudged him.

"Ha!" Harry clapped his hands together. "Yes she is."

"Do you think your brother would mind? If we asked her and not him?"

"Nah," Harry shook his head. "We can always give him one of the other seven."

Maddie nearly snorted at that, her hand muffling her laughter as she sighed, leaning closer to him.
"So ambitious."

"Damn right," he winked.

Together they settled into silence, into their food; into thought. After a few more bites, a few more sips, Maddie turned her eyes up to him, resolved.

"I would like to add Kate to the list," her voice was soft and easy and certain. "If it's okay with you."

"Do you want to ask her or shall I?" He didn't even blink before answering, giving his consent.

"I would like to," Maddie nodded. "But will you talk to your brother though? To make sure it's fine?"

"Sure," he laughed. "It will be fine, but yes. I'll talk to him."

"Thank you," Maddie took another drink and settled back into the booth.

"No problem," Harry finished a bite, holding up a finger as something came to mind. "Oh! One more thing from Thomas. Collins is in for the Bendal trip."

"Really?!" Maddie's eyes went wide–almost as wide as her grin.

"Thomas confirmed it this morning," Harry nodded, pleased with the news himself.

"That's amazing," Maddie shook her head. "It's...it's fantastic. I'm glad they were able to make it happen."

"Me too," Harry agreed. "I can't think of anyone who deserves to be at the opening of the new Center than Collins. Christ, he dug through the rubble of the old one to pull you out..." He gulped at the memory, reaching for his drink.

"You're right," Maddie nodded, her fingers laying comfortingly on his arm. "He should be there."

Finishing off his drink, Harry sat the glass on the table and, with memory hazing over his eyes, he turned a sad smile to his wife. "I wish that she could be there." His voice was soft and laden with emotion.

"I know," Maddie whispered. "I wish that too."

There was a moment of silence as thoughts of Khenda filled the space between them. Then Harry took a deep breath and drew her closer to him, turning to press a kiss to her temple. "Maybe she will be."

Hugging her arms around him, Maddie nodded. "She will be."

Maddie and Harry had finished their lunch, finished their dessert and were well into shopping the small stores when they discovered they were being followed. Harry saw them first, snapping away as Maddie browsed through an antique shop. With a steady hand on her waist and a sober nod, Harry let her know their new 'friends' had found them. With a small, tight smile, Maddie moved
toward the back of the shop, away from the windows.

After paying for the items Maddie had picked out—a few old cookbooks and some antique postcards, they gathered their bags, slid on their sunglasses and stepped out into the flashes, heading for the car and promptly leaving their day in the country behind as they returned to London.

Much to both of their delights, their offer for Foxgrove was accepted before they had even returned to the city to sign the official paperwork. The couple had been ready to sell, ready to leave. And the fact that their place was going to the Duke and Duchess somehow made it better for them—just as Harry had guessed. So they agreed to the offer and the process to turn over ownership of Foxgrove began.

With a purchase in motion and Godmother Kate tearfully on board, Maddie and Harry prepared for the beginning of their summer and, first and foremost, their trip to the states.
"Okay Lilli-bean," Harry spoke softly to his daughter as he pulled her from her car seat and into his arms. They had flown into Colorado overnight, allowing them all a bit of sleep before they hopped in the cars and headed for Hannah's house. "Now I want you to remember...this weekend is about your grandmother. There are people who are going to try to make it all about you..." He grinned down at her, his fingers tickling her belly. "But it's not. No, no."

"What are you saying to her?" Maddie snorted in laughter as she rounded the car, overhearing his warnings.

"Reminding her that this weekend is about grandma," he flashed a quick wink to his wife before leaning to kiss Lilli.

"Sure it is," Maddie laughed, pulling the diaper bag up over her shoulder, hearing the door to the house open. "Right up until grandma sees her."

"So about thirty seconds then?" Harry's grin pulled higher as his mother-in-law spotted them

"Oh my goodness..." Hannah called out, down the steps and hurrying towards them with a beaming smile. "She's here!" She clapped her hands as she slowed to a stop in front of Harry. "She's here..." She sighed, bending to stroke the baby's cheeks. "Oh Lilli...you've grown so big since I last saw you! And so beautiful..." She sucked in a breath and looked up to Harry with wide, hopeful eyes. "May I?"

"Of course," he nodded, handing her over to Hannah who scooped her up and cuddled her close.

"There we go..." Her movements were natural, easy; bouncing her softly as she kissed her head a few times. "Perfect..." She looked up to the others then. "And I'm happy to see you too."

"Sure you are," Maddie rolled her eyes, leaning to kiss her mother.

"It's okay," Harry shook his head, leaning to do the same. "We're fine taking second place here."

"Well that's good," Hannah winked at him, leaning to kiss Lilli again before turning to the team unloading out of the second vehicle. "Good Morning Jim!" She called out to the small group behind Harry and Maddie.

"Good morning Ma'am," he waved his hello.

"Feel free to sweep the house and settle in," she started up the walk. "We'll just be out here in the swing."

"Thank you Ma'am," he nodded, turning to give direction to the rest of the security detail with him.

"Well then..." Harry turned to Maddie, stretching his arm around her shoulders. "Looks like Granny's weekend is over."

"Are you kidding," Maddie chuckled, falling in step next to him as they followed along. "Looks like it's only beginning. And, seeing the way Lilli took to Hannah, the way Hannah took to Lilli, Maddie couldn't have been more right.
The undivided attention and showers of affection didn't end there. As the rest of the family began to trickle in in preparation for the nurses Pinning Ceremony, Lilli was passed from loving arms to loving arms. Maddie's cousins were practically lined up to hold the newest member of the family.

"Honest to God, Maddie," Kyle called out as everyone began to gather in the living room, ready to go. "My Goddaughter is perfect. She's just...perfect."

Maddie turned to look, catching the adoring way Kyle was looking down at her daughter. "Well of course she is," she grinned as she moved over to them. "She's half me and half Harry."

"Of course," Kyle rolled his eyes only slightly, knowing that was coming from her. "She does really look like you though. Do you think that means the half that's Harry is going to be her personality?"

"Don't panic us yet Kyle," Harry called out from where he was straightening his tie in the mirror. "We've got a few years before that really surfaces."

"Now that's not true," Maddie flashed a smile to her husband. "I've seen pictures of your...personality at a much younger age."

As Harry laughed, he shook his head and smoothed his hands down over his tie. "Let's not pretend that you weren't quite the personality as a child."

"That's the truth," Kyle was sarcastic as he cuddled Lilli closer. "Either way, Lilli is just..." He shook his head and smiled up at Maddie, his humor replaced with something softer; something a bit blissful.

"Alright, alright," Dena groaned, nudging Kyle in the side. "Are you going to share the baby or are you going to hog her all night."

"I think I'm going to hog her all night," his answer was matter-of-fact, his smile sweet and sarcastic as he kissed Lilli's head and relinquished her to his sister-in-law. "Are we going out or..."

"I think we're coming back here," Maddie finished packing Lilli's bag and lifted it up to her shoulder. "Mom's heading out to celebrate with some of her classmates. I think we're all coming back here. I'll put Lilli down and we can a few?"

"Great," Kyle agreed easily, ready for some relaxed time with the group, eager to catch up with Maddie and Harry.

"Alright..." Hannah's voice came from the staircase before her smile did, drawing the room's attentions in her direction. "Everyone ready to head over?" As she reached the landing, as she turned to smile out at her family, she was met with love and admiration and the most wonderful warmth.

"We're ready," Maddie spoke softly, her emotions tugging at her heart, at the smile on her face and the tears in her eyes. "I'm so proud of you mom..." She moved over to her side, leaning to hug her, to kiss her cheeks. "We all are."

"Okay..." Hannah grew shy, timid, when she saw the tears welling in her daughter's eyes. "Now, now. None of that. Let's all take a deep breath and go load into the motorcade and get on with this...show."

Maddie held her mother's eyes for a moment before she surrendered, not wanting to force her into
emotions she wasn't ready to feel yet. And then she nodded, clearing her throat as she turned back to the group. "You heard Nurse Forrester," she winked at the cousins. "Let's go."

As a patter of laughter surrounded the room, the family began to file out of the house and into the awaiting cars.

"I solemnly pledge myself before God and in the presence of this assembly, to pass my life in purity and to practice my profession faithfully. I will abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous, and will not take or knowingly administer any harmful drug. I will do all in my power to maintain and elevate the standard of my profession, and will hold in confidence all personal matters committed to my keeping and all family affairs coming to my knowledge in the practice of my calling. With loyalty will I endeavor to aid the physician in his work, and devote myself to the welfare of those committed to my care." As Hannah recited the Florence Nightingale oath with her fellow graduates, Maddie wiped at the tears that came to her eyes. Harry, holding a happy Lilli in his arms, reached for his wife's hand, squeezing her fingers tight in his; knowing that this was one of those moments. Full of pride and emotion in the most wonderful of ways.

As the ceremony drew to an end, as the applause rang out for the newly pinned nurses, Hannah's family rose to their feet and applauded. Hannah shook hands on her way back to them, received congratulations and well wishes as she moved through the crowd. And though there were people who clearly recognized both Harry and Maddie, nobody made the attempt to meet them. Even Harry was pleasantly surprised with the lack of semi-sneakingly taken snapshots.

After Hannah kissed and hugged her family, after she smiled embarrassingly for the smattering of photos they all wanted to take, she took a deep breath and turned to Harry.

"Somebody wants to meet you," Maddie spoke under her breath, lightly nudging Harry in the ribs.

"Oh God," Hannah groaned, wishing she could disappear.

"No, no," Harry shook his head, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. "Don't be embarrassed. Come on mom," his smile pulled wide and charming. "Introduce me around. It's your night, I'm game. Let's do this."

With Lilli happy in her arms, Maddie watched as Harry stood tall and happy next to her mother as she introduced him to her professors, to her friends. He shook hands and made jokes and in the end, Maddie wasn't the only one in the room who was in love with him.

After Harry and Hannah made their rounds, they returned to the group. Graduation was the next day but that night Hannah was going to go out with her classmates. And as she had a few drinks with her friends, the cousins piled back in their cars and headed back out to the house where they were going to have a few drinks of their own. Maddie took a hungry, sleepy Lilli up to their room where she fed her and rocked her and smiled as she watched her drift off to sleep, snuggled up in her little pajamas with a cute little pucker on her lips. Nestling her into her bassinet, Maddie turned on the baby monitor, picked up the handheld and made her way downstairs towards the already riled up group of people she called her family.

Stepping back into the living room, they had all dispersed; food was being passed, drinks were being poured and somebody--she guessed it was Kyle--had already pulled out the cards, ready to
"Maddie!" Harry was the first to spot her, most likely because he had been watching the stairs, waiting for her to come back. "Hey there stranger," Harry was at the bottom of the stairs, pulling her into his arms; gathering her close to his warmth.

"Hey there," Maddie's smile narrowed in on only him.

"How's Lilli?" His hands ran over her back.

"Passed out," Maddie laughed. "She had a big day, met a lot of fans."

"She did," he nodded, chuckling as he bent to kiss her.

"She wasn't the only one," she gave him a soft push against his chest, her eyes dancing as she looked up at him through lowered eyelids. "Hey...are you wearing a new shirt?" Her hand ran over the fabric on his chest.

"I am!" He perked up, nodding excitedly, stepping back so he could show her. Maddie stifled a giggle at how happy he was.

"Daddy," Maddie read the big broad letters across his chest. "Established in 2017," she read the smaller writing. "Aw Harry! That's a great shirt!"

"I know!" He nodded emphatically.

"Where did you get it?"

"Where else?" He lifted his eyebrows, smoothing his hands down the front of his shirt as he looked at it.

"Jenna..." Maddie smiled, taken with the sweet natured relationship Jenna and Harry had developed.

"Jenna," Harry nodded, leaning in to kiss her once more. "It's my favorite so far."

"Mine too," Maddie agreed easily. "Speaking of Jenna, where did she go?"

"Upstairs to get more wine."

"More wine," Maddie's face lit up, her eyebrows wagging. "I was hoping there would be more wine." Harry's response was a low chuckle, a shake of his head, and warm hands that tightened around her waist. "What?" She cocked her head to the side. "You aren't a fan of tipsy Maddie anymore?"

"Oh no," He shook his head quickly. "I'm a great big fan of tipsy Maddie. She tends to be exceptionally...frisky." His voice dropped low on the last word.

"Ahhh..." Maddie nodded knowingly. "You like it when I'm frisky."

"You know I do," he bent to kiss her, pushing her body in closer to his, wishing in that instance that they were alone.

"Mmmm..." Maddie smiled against his lips, wishing the exact same thing. "While I'm happy to hear that..." She kissed him again, her hands sliding down his back, closer to his waist. "You should know that I started my period this morning and...any friskiness...is probably going to be..." Her eyes blinked flirtatiously, her hands skimming around to his stomach, tickling towards the top
of his jeans. "One sided." She held his eyes as her hand teased lower.

"Maddie..." He groaned, shaking his head as he battled his desire to let her continue and his reflex to pull her hands away from him.

"You don't...mind...do you?" She leaned in to kiss him again; slower.

"I don't mind," he shook his head, forcing his lungs to breathe in; deep and slow. "Though..." With regret, he pulled her hands up between them. "Here? In the living room? With your cousins watching?"

Maddie bit her lip, her eyes dancing as she smiled up at him. "Fair point." She nodded, surrendering for the moment. "Maybe later?"

"Definitely later." He nodded enthusiastically, smiling as she leaned up to kiss him, sighing as she smacked his ass and stepped away.

"See you later Sussex," she tossed a wink his way and turned her wide grin to Jenna who was returning down the stairs, wine in hand.

"Later..." Harry breathed, turning his own shy smile back to the group. Clapping his hands together, he took a deep breath and made way for the bucket of iced beers sitting on the table; back to the revelry with Maddie's family.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^"You don't mind Harry?" Kyle's eyes were fixated on the cards in front of him, his jaw tight as he spoke to Harry.

"Huh?" Harry glanced up from his own cards, his lips curled up in the beginnings of a smile.

"Being married to someone so..." Kyle's jaw clenched as the people around the table chuckled. They had been playing poker for hours, drinking as they did.

"So..." Maddie, who was sitting directly across from him, was grinning widely at his obvious irritation at her winnings.

"Vindictive," the word dripped from his mouth as his eyes lifted to hers; narrowed and dark. "Someone so blindly competitive. Someone so...fierce..."

"Nah," Harry shrugged lightly, shaking his head as the others laughed. "I don't mind so much."

Maddie giggled, bouncing in her seat as her fingers played with the stack of chips in front of her, most of them having just belonged to Kyle.

Mumbling under his breath, Kyle looked back down at his cards and then back up to her. "Someone so ruthless in her quest to be on top." His lips smacked on the last word, his eyes shifting over to Harry who seemed to be having a hard time holding in his laughter.

"No," he took a deep breath and let it out slowly, smirking as he did. "I actually like that she wants to be on top."

With that, the laughter exploded around him. Maddie turned wide eyes and an even wider smile to him as his cheeks flushed red.

"No, no," he held up his hand, shaking his head at her cousins. "That's not what I meant..."
"Sure, sure," Jenna held her stomach as she laughed, her cards face down in front of her.

"We know better than that," Amy rolled her eyes, reaching for her drink.

"Well I didn't not mean that either..." Harry tossed a wink over to his wife as he patted Kyle on his shoulder. "Come on man, you can't set me up like that. It's not fair."

"You wanna know what's not fair," Kyle sat up straighter, his focus narrowing in on Maddie.

"No," she shook her head, tossing her cards in the middle of the table. "In fact, I don't want to know what's not fair so bad that I'm just going to fold here..."

"What?" He snapped back from his anger, shaking his head. "You can't just fold."

"I can," she snapped back from his anger, shaking his head. "And I did."

"But..." He blinked, looking around the table as everyone else began to toss in their cards, as the game began to fold entirely around him. "Wait! I haven't had the chance to win back my money and..."

"Oh honey," Amy turned an amused frown to her husband. "It's nearly midnight, we've been playing for hours and, let's face it...." She sighed and shrugged. "You're not going to win back your money. At least not tonight."

"Amy!" He turned abject shock to his wife.

"She's right brother," Gary slapped him on the back. "You're done tonight."

"I can't believe this bullshit," he tossed his hand to the table, pushing back as he shook his head. "I can't believe you!" He pointed his finger at Maddie who blinked her eyes in mock innocence.

"Believe it," she couldn't help the victorious grin that spread across her face. She loved winning; loved it even more when it was against Kyle.

"You're so..."

"Ambitious?" She offered.

"I was going for pushy," he countered.

"Zealous?" She held out her hand to him.

"Combative," he waved it away. "And aggressive and..."

"And the answer is no," Harry stepped up, his arm moving around Maddie's shoulders. "I don't mind being married to any of those things..." He turned a smile down to her. "Good job baby."

"Thank you," she turned a beaming smile up at him, leaning up to kiss him.

"Oh fuck it," Kyle pushed back from the table even further, groaning as he gave in. "I can't win here..."

"Not against Maddie apparently," Jenna couldn't help the jab as laughter roared around the room. And when Kyle made a move as though he were going after her, she shrieked out a giggle and ran behind her husband as Gary held up his arms to protect her; the room laughing as it went down.

"Come on," Amy grabbed her husband's hand, pulling him with her towards the stairs. "It's time
to take me to bed.”

"Ugh," Kyle groaned, letting her lead him to the door. "I guess I can't complain about that."

"You better not," Amy laughed, tugging him closer.

"Alright," he sighed, putting his arms around his wife as everyone gathered their purses, their jackets; readying to leave. Glancing at Maddie over Amy's head, he nodded to her. "You still want to take the Four-Wheelers out tomorrow?"

"Yes," Maddie nodded happily, still wrapped up in Harry. "After Graduation and the party. I think we'll all come back here and we can head out."

"Perfect," Kyle nodded, holding the door open for Amy as they all filed out. "Give me a chance to reclaim some of my dignity."

"Ha," Maddie laughed, watching as they all piled into Gary's SUV. "Not likely."

Kyle's smile slipped away, his eyes narrowing at her as he shook his head. "I think I'm ready for you to go back to London."

Maddie's head tossed back. "I love you too Kyle."

"Goodnight," he grumbled, offering a smile and a wave before he climbed in with the rest of them.

"Goodnight!" Maddie called out as she and Harry waved their good-byes. Gary, the only sober one in the bunch, rolled his eyes at the laughter in his car and drove them back to his house where they would be staying the night.

"My mother called," Maddie's voice was soft as she stepped out onto the back deck, planning on joining Harry on the lounger. "She'll be home in about an hour."

"Wow..." Harry's eyes were hazy; tired and tipsy and happy. "She's out late tonight."

"She is," Maddie chuckled, standing next to his chair as she offered him one of the two beers in her hand.

"Thank you," he took it, taking a drink as his eyes turned up to her. She looked beautiful. He loved the way the moonlight shone through her mussed up hair, the way her eyes danced as she smiled down at him. Catching the flush in her cheeks, the pink that seemed to cover her neck, he suddenly felt warmer there in the spring night air. His hand reached out to her, his fingers tickling the skin just behind her knee as they wrapped around her leg. "Hi there..." His voice was low and husky and it brought heat to Maddie's already flushed skin.

"Hi," she grinned, biting at her bottom lip as she looked down at him. Their eyes stayed locked together, their smiles speaking volumes even in their silence. When his fingers began to walk slowly up her thigh, she lifted the bottle in her hand to her lips, taking a long, slow drink; her eyes never wavering from his.

"Lilli?" He whispered her name, his eyebrows lifted in question.

"Fast asleep," Maddie answered, nodding to the monitor she had set on the table. His fingers reached the hem of her shorts, his smile twisting slightly naughty. Maddie, taking another long
drink from her bottle, leaned to set it on the side table and then snatched his fingers up from her leg. "You know...there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about..."

"Oh?" His eyebrows lifted, his eyes widening as she moved then, situating herself firmly and directly in his lap.

"Mmmm..." She nodded, settling in closer. As her hands moved to his chest, his slid up her thighs to her hips, his body adjusting under hers. "You like it when I want to be on top?"

Their shared laughter moved their bodies closer together.

"I do," he nodded, his hands tightening their hold. "I really do. Though...you do know that I meant..."

"I know what you meant," she grinned, leaning into him as her mouth sought his; kissing his soft, warm lips in a slow, sweet way that was meant to goad him closer.

"Good," he breathed against her mouth, wanting desperately to take control of the moment, of her mouth.

"You know...you were great today..." Maddie sighed as she settled in closer; her chest resting against his.

"Oh?" His eyebrows lifted, his lips in a lazy smile. "At the poker you mean?"

"The poker?" Maddie's face twisted up in amusement. "No! You're terrible at poker!"

"What?" His head pulled back from hers, his eyebrows knotting together. "I am not!"

"You are!" She laughed, leaning to kiss him even as he pulled further away from her. "You know you are!"

"I am not!" His hands moved to her arms, making a show of pushing her away. "I killed Bishop two weeks ago and..."

"Bishop?" Maddie snorted. "Bishop's terrible. Do you have any idea how much money I've taken from Bishop?"

"Tons."

"Tons!" She nodded. "Maybe he's not the best one to site when trying to show how good you are at poker..." Her eyebrows raised in challenge but he was already giving in, much happier to let her win this argument and hold her closer. Not that he minded the arguing either.

"Maybe not," he shrugged, choosing his route. "So...what were you talking about?"

"Today," she smiled. "At the pinning ceremony."

"The pinning ceremony?" His hands moved back over her, smoothing down her back, over her hips, her legs.

"Mmm," Maddie nodded, leaning into him. "Letting my mother tug you around, introducing you to her professors and her friends..." She snickered as she remembered. "It was incredibly sweet."

"Well..." He sighed, his arms circling her waist, drawing her closer. "What can I say? I'm incredibly sweet."
"Ha!" She smacked his chest lightly. "Yes you are."

"It really wasn't that big of a deal," he shrugged, his lips reaching up to kiss hers. "You would do the same for my father...Come to think of it..." He chuckled, pulling back to meet her eyes. "You do."

"What?" Her forehead crinkled as she looked up at him.

"Parade around, smile and shake hands..." He shook his head with another laugh. "You do that already."

"Huh...well, when you put it that way, I suppose I do."

"I suppose you do."

"Well," Maddie's face moved closer to his, her voice dropping softer. "Here's to parading around..."

Her lips were already brushing his as he echoed her words, "Here's to parading around."

With a quick rush of breath between them, they were kissing. Harry, stretched out in the lounge chair with Maddie nestled in his lap. His arms were strong around her as her mouth moved over his; kissing and sucking and nipping at his lips, her tipsy-induced friskiness bringing a moan from her and a groan from him.

"You know..." She breathed between kisses, between nips. "You just get sexier..." Kiss. "And sexier..." Nip. "And sexier..." Long, slow kiss. "You just get sexier the longer I know you..."

"Ah come on," he smiled against her lips, blushing slightly as she pressed closer. "That's the wine talking."

"Hmmm..." She grinned, shaking her head as her mouth moved from his lips to his jaw. "No, no...I mean it. Today...meeting people with my mother..." She kissed down to his ear, nudging it with her nose. "Tonight...telling Kyle you loved my crazy competitive side..."

"I do," he groaned, his head tipping back as her mouth moved down his neck. "Jesus. I really do."

"I know you do," she nodded, her tongue tracing down his throat to that soft dent where his collarbones met. "And here you are...all mine..." She lifted up, her hands running hotly over his chest. "Wearing this amazing t-shirt..." She cocked her head to the side and flashed him a sexy smile. "Daddy."

"No, no," he laughed as he shook his head, his hand lifting to her face; his fingers cupping her cheek as his thumb smoothed over her pink, pouty lips. "You can't do that. I want Lilli to call me that some day. I want our other children to call me that..." He took a deep breath and smiled up at her. "Please don't make Daddy naughty."

"Sorry," she gave in, her heart warming at this request, even though it put a pause in the heat of the moment. He wanted to save that for their children--she couldn't fuss about that. Sitting up tall in his lap, she let her hands run down his chest; moving slowly towards the hem of his shirt, towards the warm skin she knew was underneath, towards that red patch of hair that always seemed to get her blood pumping hot. "How about..." She bit her lower lip, purposefully moving her ass in his lap. "Captain?" Her voice was low, sexy.

"Now see," his hand ran down her neck to her chest, rough over her breast as he sat up to kiss her. "You can make that as naughty as you want."
"Mmmmm..." She smiled against his lips, her tongue teasing out, wanting desperately to tangle with his. Thankfully he wanted that too, his mouth opening under hers; letting her in as his hands drew her tight against him.

It didn't take long—to heat her entire body.

It didn't take long—for him to want to tear off her clothes and make love to her.

Even after years of marriage, even after a new baby and all of the craziness that followed their lives, it didn't take long for them to fuse together; their mouths, their bodies. In no time, she was moving over him. In no time, he was grasping at her.

"You are..." She gasped, pulling her mouth from his, pushing at his chest, forcing him to lay back. "That day in Bendal, you were scruffy and relaxed and just about the sexiest man I had ever seen in real life..." Her hands moved back down his chest, pushing up under his shirt without pause; her fingers smoothing over his hot skin. "I wanted you so much then...in the hot sweaty summer in the desert..." She caught the look in his eyes; desire and heat and want and need and a tiny bit of awe at her words. "But you're sexier now..." She shook her head, smiling as she leaned to kiss his lips, her hands dragging his t-shirt up his chest, exposing his stomach. "You are," she kissed his mouth lightly, a flicker of want in her eyes as she smiled up at him and began to move. "That's not the wine talking..." She paused, taking a breath as her eyes looked up to him as he watched. With his breath held in his throat and his hands loose on her shoulders, he watched her as her tongue tipped out between her lips, watched as she ran a hot, wet stroke from his belly button to the waist of his jeans. As his hips moved reflexively up to meet her, his blood gushed through his veins and she looked up to him with lust-heavy eyes and the sexiest smile. "But maybe this is..." In the next blink of her eyes, her hands moved to his jeans.

"Maddie..." He groaned, his eyes pressing closed, his head tipping back against the chair. Her fingers were quick with the button, swift with the zipper and before he could catch his breath, she was pulling his jeans down his hips, her fingers and her smile moving to the band of his boxers, tickling his skin as she slowly pulled at them.

"Jesus..." He breathed, his eyes snapping open as the cool air met his hot, swollen cock. He looked down at her just in time to see her head dipping down. But before she could pull his boxers from him completely, before her mouth could take him down, before he lost himself to this moment, he caught her head in his hands; his fingers pushing into her hair.

"Maddie..." He called out to her.

"Captain?" She arched one eyebrow, her smile making his toes curl.

"We're...ha..." He took a breath and glanced around. "We're outside...on your mother's deck..."

"We are," she nodded, her hand sneaking into his boxers, her fingers wrapping around him. "Did you want to move inside?" With a wicked gleam in her eyes, her hand stroked over him.

"No," he shook his head, breathing the word. "No. I don't want to go inside...Maddie..."

"Did you want me to...stop?" Without taking her eyes from him, she bent down and ran a wet, hot tongue along the underside of him and his whole body moved; pushing a moan from his lips.

"No!" He shook his head from side to side, swallowing before he could speak again. "No..." His thumbs smoothed softly at the side of her face, his eyes meeting hers as he surrendered to her, to this moment. "No Maddie, I don't want you to stop."
With a smile, with his hands fisted into her hair, Maddie sighed happily--relief mixed with excitement and then with her eyes fixed entirely on his, she tugged his boxers lower on his hips and she dipped down and took him all the way into her mouth.

And the groan that fell from his lips only made her want this--and him--more.

It didn't take long to take down Harry that night on the deck. She had been flirting with him all night; all day in fact. That was part of their foreplay; the banter, the winks, the teasing touches, the snark. And when she had slipped her hand between them earlier in the living room, making thinly veiled promises about 'later', he had been thinking about 'later' ever since.

And now here they were; him sprawled out on the lounger on the deck, his mind growing fuzzy, his senses on overload and his eyes unable to look away from her, from what she was doing to him.

Just the act of watching her, watching her lips wrap around him, watching her tongue tease his head, watching her look up to catch him watching. And the way she smiled up at him, the way she smiled around him, it took all he had not to explode right then and there.

"Maddie..." He called down to her, his hands in her hair torn between wanting to push her closer to him and wanting to pull her away, wanting to slow her down, wanting to savor this feeling.

"Mmmm..." She moaned around him, her efforts increasing as he pushed against her. Her hands tightened around him, her mouth dropping lower, her tongue flicking out against him. As her motions increased, his breathing grew quicker and heavier and just when she knew he was close, she pulled him completely from her mouth with a pop.

"No!" He cried out, his eyes flying wide, his hands gathering her closer.

Her eyes sparkled with pride, her grin wide and teasing. "No?" She cocked her head to the side, her hand stroking up him; firm and achingly slow. "But...we're outside..." Her eyebrow lifted. "On my mother's deck..." As her eyes dropped down to look at him pulsing hot in her hand, she licked her lips and asked the question she knew the answer to. "You sure you don't want to go inside? Sure you don't want me to...stop?"

"No," he shook his head quickly, swallowing as he tried to catch his breath. "God Maddie..." His hands tightened in her hair, his eyes pleading with her as his thumb ran over her swollen lips. "Please don't stop. Please..."

Before the last word was out of his mouth, she had taken him back into hers. With his hands gripping into her hair, Maddie moved over him; fast and steady and deep and soon--very soon--Harry began to lose it.

His hands tightened in her hair. His hips bucked up to meet her. His toes curled and his back arched and his eyes pressed closed.

"Maddie..." He breathed, wanting to warn her.

"Mmmm..." She responded with a moan.

"Oh God. Maddie..." He tried once more, wanting to be clear.

"Yes," she nodded, her words mumbled around him as she spoke. "Come on Harry..." She ran her tongue up his length, flicking lightly on the underside of his head, watching him squirm underneath her. "Please Harry..." Her eyes were wide as she looked up at him, meeting his lust-
filled eyes with a pleading smile. "Come in my mouth..."

In a moment, he fell apart. His orgasm slammed into him, taking him down in a heartbeat. With a deep, heavy groan, his hands pushed her head back down over him, plunging deep into her mouth as she held onto him, as she smiled and moaned her encouragement.

As she took in every single bit of his wild release.

He had watched her for just as long as he could, fighting to keep his eyes open as heat ran through his body. But when he finally collapsed back into the lounger, when he finally let his eyes close as his lungs fought for breath, he could see bright flashes of white behind his eyelids and the rush of his pulse rang out in his ears.

"Jesus Christ..." He managed between breaths. "Maddie..." With one hand still in her hair, his other ran over his face, trying to bring himself back. As his senses returned, he could hear Maddie's soft laughter, he could feel her moving back up his body, planting soft, wet kisses as she moved. Her hands were gentle as she pulled up his boxers, slow as she pulled up his jeans. With one last, long slow stroke of her tongue from his navel to his breastbone, she finally looked up at him.

Pulling down his shirt, she rested her hands on his chest and her chin on her hands and the look on her face was nothing short of satisfied. "Captain..." She grinned.

"Good God," Harry laughed, shaking his head as he released the fist of hair he still held onto. Smoothing over her hair, his fingers traced across her cheek, down the slope of her nose to her pouty, perfect lips. "This mouth..." He shook his head, his smile tired and lopsided.

"Not bad?" She lifted her eyebrows.

"Amazing..." He corrected with a breath. "You're fucking amazing."

"Yeah..." She sighed, her head tipping to the side. "I'm really glad you think so."

"I do," he nodded, his hands moving back to her head; soft and gentle as he encouraged her closer. "Come here love..." With a sigh and a smile, Maddie moved up to him, her body stretching out over his as she snuggled in close. "I love you..." He bent to kiss her. "And thank you," he kissed her again; slower, softer.

"You're welcome," she kissed him back, sweet and easy as she tucked in even closer. Her eyes turned up to the night sky as his arms moved around her. "It's beautiful out here tonight."

"It is," he nodded his agreement, not even bothering to look up from her.

"Just think," Maddie's voice was soft and quiet. "Hopefully we'll soon be able to lay out on our own deck of our own house in the country and look up at the stars...just like this..."

"Mmm..." Harry nodded. "Only on that night, I have every intention of making it you who's calling out my name."

"Oh." Maddie's lips pulled higher. "Well. I look forward to that."

"You should," he chuckled at her expression, leaning to kiss her once more; stopping when he saw her mouth stretch into a yawn. "Baby are you tired?"

"I suppose I am," she laughed at herself, her arms stretching out overhead. "It's been a long day, a long night..." She sighed and shrugged. "Maybe I'll head up to bed; check in on Lilli on my way."
"Okay," he nodded, his hands smoothing over her shoulders, over her back.

"You coming with me?"

"Maybe in a minute," he smiled down at her, his finger tapping the end of her nose. "Thanks to you, I'm wide awake."

"Ha!" She laughed as she sat up.

"Maybe I'll stay here for a minute or two? Finish this beer?" He nodded to it, lifting his eyes to her in question.

"Sounds good," she rose to her feet, his fingers sliding down her arm to her hand; holding onto her fingers. "You'll be okay?"

"Absolutely," he grinned, pulling her fingers to his lips. "I'll be up soon I promise."

"Okay," she nodded, leaning to kiss him once more. "I love you Captain."

"Oh I love you too," he held her close for one more and then let her go; his eyes and his heart full of love and warmth for her as he watched her scoop up the monitor and walk back inside through the sliding glass doors.

Only after he could no longer see her, did he settle back into the lounger and turn his eyes up toward the sky.

It was a beautiful night; in every single connotation of the phrase and he was overly content in his life at the moment. Laying there, looking up at the stars, hidden away at his in-laws out in the country. With all of the possibilities that lay ahead of them; Foxgrove, Lilli growing, more children...he smiled and blushed and sank further into the chair. Years and years with Maddie—it all made him so happy.

Mesmerized by the stars, by the thoughts that drifted through his mind, Harry must have stayed out there on the deck much longer than he planned because before he knew it, he had company. The sound of the sliding doors snapped his attention back to the present, his head turning to look and his smile pulling high.

"Well, well, well," he chuckled. "Look who's finally decided to come home."

"Ha..." Hannah laughed, stepping out onto the deck and shutting the door behind her, happy to see her son-in-law. "Waiting up on me are you?"

"Practicing," Harry sat up with a light shrug and a teasing grin. "And just where have you been young lady?"

Ignoring his question, she moved out to the couch across from him, her hands reaching for her stash of cigars as she passed by. "You know..." She sank into her seat, her fingers working from memory as she arranged her ritual. "Fatherhood looks good on you Harry."

"Thank you," Harry's heart warmed at the compliment. "It feels good on me."

"I can see that," she nodded, holding out a cut cigar in offering. "Care to join me?"

"Of course," he took the cigar from her, reaching for the lighter as she cut her own. He waited, lighting hers first then his. "Did you have fun tonight?"
"I did," she nodded, taking a puff and settling back into the cushions of the couch; her smile was wide and tired. "How about you? What are you still doing up? And out here?"

He was thankful for the dark night, hopeful it hid the blush he knew flushed his cheeks. "I don't know," he shook his head. "I was just...thinking."

"About anything in particular?"

"No," he smiled over at her. "The girls..." He nodded towards the house. "Foxgrove..."

"The future," she offered, nodding her understanding.

"But how about you?" He redirected the conversation. "What's next for you Nurse Forester?"

"Hmmm..." She grinned at the title, taking a deep breath as her eyes flitted down to look at the cigar in her fingers. "Actually...I've decided to go on to some more training."

"More school?" Harry's eyebrows lifted, this being the first time he had heard of this.

"Well, more training," she nodded, sitting up a little. "I'm going to specialize."

"In..." He waited; curious.

"Oncology," she answered with a small smile, her eyes hazing over just a little. "When Maddie's father was sick, we had some amazing nurses working with him; administering the chemotherapy, helping us navigate it all..." She fidgeted a little, shrugging as her feelings tugged her in a variety of directions. "I thought I might be in a unique position to help other families," she lifted her eyes to his, full of emotion. "I thought I might be good at it."

"I think you'll be great at it," he reached out then, a reflex really, and his hand closed over hers. "I think that's an amazing thing to do Hannah." He patted her hand. "Does Maddie know?"

"No," she shook her head. "I'm not trying to keep it from her, I just haven't had the chance to tell her. Maybe tomorrow."

Harry nodded his head, relaxing back in his chair, knowing his wife would be touched by the idea. "She gets it from you."

"Gets what?" Hannah waited.

"The need to help," he answered easily. "The drive to serve others. She's had it since I met her, certainly before that. And so do you."

"Well I don't know about that," she seemed a bit embarrassed, her eyes shifting from his.

"I do," he kept his eyes on hers. "You have it, she has it...God willing, we'll pass it on to Lilli..."

"You will," Hannah nodded. "Lilli will be a remarkable young woman. I know it. I can tell."

"Yeah?" Harry chuckled. "How can you be so certain?"

"Well," she shrugged, taking a puff of her cigar. "I was right about Maddie."

"Yes you were."

"So I must be right about Lilli."
"You must be," he took a deep breath and looked back up the sky for a moment before taking one last puff of his cigar. "I think maybe it's time for me to head to bed..." He lifted his eyebrows to her. "Now that you're home safe and sound."

Hannah snickered, nodding her head in agreement. "Sounds good to me."

Rising to his feet, he snuffed out his cigar and bent to kiss her cheek. "Goodnight Mom."

"Goodnight Harry," she kissed his cheek, patted his arm, and watched as he retired back to the house, back to his girls.

And her eyes turned up to the sky.

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Getting everyone up and out the door to graduation the next morning was a chaotic flurry but they made it well in time for graduation. Where the Pinning Ceremony had been more personal, more intimate, the Graduation Ceremony was large and much more public.

Maddie, Harry, and Lilli found their seats in the massive arena where graduation was held, surrounded by Maddie's family and their protection officers. They were easily recognized in the audience and it really was only a matter of time before cellphone photos of the little family made it to the internet. Not that Maddie could blame them—not really. With Harry dashing in his suit and Lilli happily bouncing in her daddy's lap, Maddie could hardly fault those who dared to snap a few shots.

They sat through the lengthy ceremony; listened to speeches, listened to the school's fight song, and finally watching as the graduates made their way across the stage to receive their degrees.

Maddie bit her lip and held back tears when they called her mother's name and as she shook hands with the University President, Harry and Lilli were clapping wildly beside her.

It was a wonderful moment for Hannah, for the family, and Maddie could not have been more proud.

And later, at the reception they held in Hannah's honor, she lifted her glass and toasted her mother; saying just that—how very proud she was of her accomplishments, to be her daughter.

It was some time later, after cake and punch and lunch and celebrations, when Hannah sat down at the table with Maddie and Harry while Kyle threatened to run off with Lilli who slept peacefully in his arms.

"So..." Maddie looked from Harry to her mother, reaching out to take her hand. "We had a hard time deciding on a gift for you."

"Oh Maddie," Hannah rolled her eyes, waving her other hand dismissively. "You didn't have to..."

"Shush," Maddie shook her head. "We're going to mark the occasion and you really can't stop us."

Hannah looked from her daughter to Harry who nodded in agreement. "She's right. You can't."

"Anyway..." Maddie chuckled at the looks exchanged between the two of them. "We couldn't decide what would be best and then we remembered the last time you were in London. You said that you wanted to travel more, that you hadn't done so as much when you were younger and you felt like you maybe missed something." Maddie's smile was warm as she took a breath and looked
to Harry. "So we've decided to give you the gift of travel."

"Travel?" Hannah was a bit confused, looking between them. "You're sending me on a trip?"

"Yes," Harry nodded. "Kind of."

"Kind of?" She laughed.

"Well, we want you to decide where you want to go," Maddie explained. "It can be one destination, or two..."

"Or three," Harry cut in.

"We want you to pick the places you want to go and then...we're going to send you there."

"You're going to just...send me, wherever I want to go." Her eyes blinked as it began to register.

"We are," Maddie smiled wide.

"What if...what if it's Japan?" Hannah lifted her eyebrows.

"We have a friend who travels there quite often," Maddie held out her hand, thinking of Bishop. "He'd have great recommendations."

Hannah smiled, her mind beginning to work. "What if...what if it's...Antarctica?"

"Harry's been there!" Maddie pointed to him, her face lighting up.

"Chilly," he nodded along. "But some spectacular views."

"Okay," Hannah laughed at the two of them, at the idea of their gift. "What if it's...Kansas?"

Maddie's face screwed up. "Well, that wouldn't be my choice but...hey. It's your gift."

"Alright," Hannah nodded, her smile growing softer, her eyes more serious. "What if...what if it's...Bendal?" Her eyes slid right up to her daughter's as she put it out in the open.

"Bendal?" Maddie blinked, shocked.

Harry sat up taller in his chair, leaning closer towards them almost reflexively. "You want to go to Bendal?"

"You know I think I do," Hannah turned her smile to him.

"But..." Maddie stammered. "But why?"

"Why?" Hannah laughed into a sigh. "Why not? It's this far off, exotic place..."

"Exotic?" Maddie shook her head, the beginnings of a laugh on her lips.

"And it's been this incredibly important place to you..." She looked from Maddie to Harry. "To both of you. I think...I think I'd like to see it."

"Wow..." Harry put words to the astonished look on Maddie's face. "I can't say I'm not surprised but if that's where you want to go then..."

"No," Maddie cut in, her head shaking as she looked from her mom to Harry.
"No?" A puff of a laugh pushed through Harry's lips. "What?"

"No." She repeated.

"What do you mean no?" Hannah was confused.

"I mean..." Maddie struggled to collect her thoughts, her feelings. "I mean no. I mean...Bendal is...not exactly the safest place on the planet."

Harry looked to his wife then, his eyes wide with amusement; his smile tugging up the corner of his mouth. "It's not the safest place on the planet?" He blinked, trying to follow her thought process. "We decided she could pick...anywhere she wanted to go..."

"But..."

"But only if it's a safe place?" He laughed. "And since when do you think Bendal isn't a safe place to be?"

"Harry, be real," Maddie's eyes narrowed in on her husband. "It's not the safest place to be and you know that. I was shot there! And then the earthquake left everything in this state of chaos and..."

"Oh my God," he ran a hand over his astonished face. "I wish you could hear yourself right now. No..." He laughed. "I wish you could hear yourself a few years ago when you insisted on going back there..."

"Look, this isn't about me," Maddie pressed a hand to her chest.

"You do know we're taking Lilli there in a few months," Harry gestured over to their daughter, his voice full of the irony that came with this moment.

"Yes. I know." Maddie's eyes narrowed. "And you do know that Lilli has a team of armed officers surrounding her ready to kill anyone who tries to harm her. But my mother..."

"Speaking of your mother..." Hannah spoke up, inserting herself into the moment. "Hi." She waved her fingers. "I didn't mean to cause a fight..."

"You didn't," Maddie shook her head, her eyes turning to her mother. "It's just that Bendal is a place of unrest, it has been for a very long time."

"Sure," Hannah nodded thoughtfully. "But..." Maddie opened her mouth, ready to contradict whatever was coming next, the nervousness in her stomach winning out over her sensibilities for the moment. "Can I just say something?"

Maddie's lips pressed together in a move that Harry recognized as her trying to physically keep her opinions to herself. "Of course," she nodded, taking a deep breath, trying to ignore the way Harry snickered at the obvious effort it took for her.

"Madeline..." Hannah reached for her daughter's hand, throwing her off just a bit as she turned soft. "For years Bendal has been this place of such...mystery..." Her eyes widened as she said it. "It's this place that was your home for years, this place you went to recover from losing your father, this place that YOU said made you whole again. It's this place where you gained your confidence back, where you cleared your head. It's where you met Harry..." Maddie's eyes shifted to her husband, welling up with the emotion that came naturally when she thought of all that had come into her life because of it. "I know that it's had its...dangerous moments but it's also had some really great ones," Hannah squeezed Maddie's hand. "It's so important to you and to
Harry...I mean my goodness, you had Bendal dancers at your reception in London," she laughed at that, watching the smile warm on Maddie's face as she remembered. "You can't really blame me for being intrigued, can you?"

Maddie's eyes stayed with Harry's for a moment, letting her memories settle before she shook her head, swallowing as she looked down at her mother's hand holding her own. "No..." She took a deep breath. "I suppose I can't."

"Can I make a suggestion?" Harry spoke up. Maddie looked up to him, nodding. "Maybe she goes to Bendal when we go."

"What?" Maddie blinked. "We'll be...working. We can't really..."

"No," Harry shook his head. "I know we can't. But...Collins will be there. He'll be there for the opening and when we're working, he can show your mother around, he can take her to some great places and you know Collins would never let anything happen to your mother..."

"I suppose that's true," Maddie surrendered with a soft nod.

"And when we're not working," Harry's smile pulled higher. "We can spend time with the both of them..."

Maddie was giving in, they could both see that. So they gave her a moment, letting her process it all, letting it settle; both of them knowing her well enough to do that. "I just..." She took a deep breath and looked to her mother. "I worry about you is all."

"Ha!" Hannah laughed loudly, her free hand pressing to her chest. "Says my only child who ran away to the African desert for YEARS!"

All three of them laughed at that.

"You know," Hannah sighed. "I think Harry has a great suggestion."

"I know," Maddie groaned, her eyes flashing to her husband who couldn't help but wink at her frustration.

"He's actually quite smart," Hannah offered.

"Jesus, mother," Maddie laughed, rolling her eyes. "You know I'll never hear the end of that."

"Never," Harry smirked.

"Fine," Maddie took a breath, sitting up taller in her chair, her hands moving to hold Hannah's. "You want to go to Bendal, then...you go to Bendal. But. I would feel so much better about it if you would come this summer...when we're there, when Collins is there."

Hannah's face lit up making Maddie's heart warm, making her regret the brief fight she put up. "I think that sounds like a deal to me." She held her hand out to Maddie to shake.

"Deal," Maddie sighed, shaking her mother's hand before she moved to hug her.

"Congratulations mother..." She kissed her cheek.

"On graduation?" Hannah asked, hugging her daughter tightly. "Or on winning this particular round."

"Both," Maddie laughed. "Both."
"Alright Sussex," Kyle called out to Maddie as he stepped out of his car, shutting the door behind him with a wide smile. "You ready to head out?"

The party had drawn to an end and as usual, the casual, family after-party had moved to Hannah's house. They had all had a few moments to come down from the busy morning, changing into casual clothes, relaxing. And now, as they all gathered in the large backyard, Maddie glanced over to her husband whose grin widened at the look on her face.

"I've just been waiting for you Princess," she called back to Kyle, rising from her chair as Harry laughed, shaking his head.

"Princess? Really?" He looked up to her, snatching her hand before she could leave him to go with her cousin. "From you?"

"Alright," she rolled her eyes, leaning down to kiss him. "Do you mind if I go out on the four-wheelers with Kyle?"

"Not at all," Harry shook his head, kissing her again. "I'm going to stay here with the rest of them. I think we're going to play horseshoes...Gary?" Harry looked over to him.

"Yep," Gary nodded, reaching into the cooler near his feet for another drink. "Horseshoes."

"And Lilli?" Maddie gestured towards the house.

"She's napping," Harry patted the monitor sitting on the table next to him. "But your mother was going to take her into town with her when she woke up for some...light shopping."

"Light?" Maddie snickered; amused.

"I'm sure there will be a few toys involved," Harry grinned.

"Come on Madeline!" Kyle called back to her from his path to the big garage where the four-wheelers were parked. "Kiss your boyfriend good-bye and let's go...Princess!"

"Go on," Harry patted her ass. "Go get him."

Leaning in to kiss him once more, she pulled on her sunglasses and turned to follow him to the garage. "That's my husband you're talking about!" She yelled as she caught up with him. "And in our country he can have you drawn and quartered."

Kyle turned to face her as she jogged up to his side. "Really?" More intrigued than worried.

"Nah," Maddie shook her head. "But that would be something, huh?"

"Huh." Kyle nodded, his arm moving around her. "You do know it's been raining more than normal around here lately. You're probably gonna get dirty."

"I'm not afraid of a little dirt Kyle," she nudged him playfully in the ribs. "Never have been."

"Too true," he laughed, glancing behind them, back up to the lawn where everyone was gathering; already laughing and drinking. "Hey...what about your shadow?"

"My shadow?" Her eyebrows drew in. "Oh! You mean Arthur? What about him?"
"He doesn't have to come with us?"

"Nope," Maddie shook her head. "We're on private property, that they've already checked out and..." She patted her pocket. "I have a panic button on me just in case."

"Just in case of what?" He pulled open the door to the garage.

"In case you piss me off," she grinned, walking past him into the garage. "So unless you want to be tackled and pinned to the ground by my buddy Arthur...you had better watch yourself."

Laughing, sure she was only half serious, Kyle shook his head and followed her inside. "You're so full of shit sometimes."

When Maddie and Kyle pulled up in back of her mother's house nearly an hour later, they were greeted with much of the same scene they had left. Her mother's car was gone, presumably off shopping with Lilli. And in the yard was a handful of her cousins and Arthur who had a rather concerned look on his face.

"Hey..." Maddie took in a few breaths, turning the ignition on the four-wheeler and pulling off her helmet. "Whooped Kyle's ass again." With a laugh, she looked to the people on the patio, stalled by the sober expressions that greeted her.

"Please," Kyle called out, taking off his own helmet and laying it on his now abandoned seat. "When you cheat like you did..." His voice trailed off as he noticed what Maddie had. "What's going on?" He looked right to Amy.

"I don't know," she shook her head, glancing back at the house and then to Maddie. "Did something happen?" Maddie blinked, something in her stomach twisting as she looked from face to face. "Where's Harry?"

"Inside," Gary nodded towards the house. "We were at the horseshoe pit when he got a phone call and came straight to the house. He tried to call you..."

"My phone is charging in the bedroom," she explained, looking to Arthur. "Did something happen? Is Harry okay? Lilli?!" Her eyes tripped frantic as she thought of her daughter.

"Yes Ma'am. They are both fine. The Duke is inside and your daughter is safe with your mother in town." He was quick to reassure her. Clearing his throat, Arthur moved over to her. "I was just heading out to find you. Can you come inside with me for a moment Ma'am?"

"Ma'am?" Jenna looked more concerned than Maddie felt comfortable with.

"Sure..." She nodded nervously. "Is everybody okay or...." He allowed only a small nod, only a tight smile as he reached out to her elbow, encouraging inside. "Arthur, what's going on..."

"I'm sorry Ma'am," he shook his head, starting them both towards the house. "Your husband wanted to be the one to speak with you first."

"First?" She swallowed the bundle of nerves working up her throat. Catching the look in his eyes, she nodded and turned back to her cousins who were understandably concerned.

"Sorry guys, I'm just..." She pointed to the door as she moved along with Arthur, her mind racing as scenario after scenario played through her head.
"We'll be here," Jenna called out to her.

"Let me know if you need anything," Kyle's voice was strained as he joined the rest of the group.

Maddie nodded but didn't turn back around. Her eyes and her thoughts were trained forward; on finding Harry and figuring out what the hell was going on. Pushing through the door, she stepped into what felt like a security meeting. Every member of her and Harry's detail, save Arthur, were at her mother's kitchen table. She could see them all working around it; some on phones, some on laptops and she knew instantly--something was wrong. And whatever that something was, it was big.

"Where is he?" She looked to Arthur who knew exactly who she was talking about. Nodding his head towards the stairs, his voice was low and serious, "up in your room on the phone with The Prince of Wales."

"Okay," Maddie gulped and headed straight up. She didn't bother knocking on the closed door, didn't think twice about walking in and when she did, she saw him standing by the window on the other side of the desk that sat in the corner. Even with his back to her, she could see that he was tense. She could see it in his neck, in his shoulders, all the way from across the room. Though the phone was pressed to his ear, he must have been on hold.

The only talking she could hear was his tight voice groaning under his breath. "Where the hell are you Maddie..."

With a fresh wave of nervousness settling over her, she blinked and called out to him; soft and wavering. "I'm here."

Shocked by the sound of her voice, he spun around to face her and as her eyes scanned his face, she saw it.

The red cheeks. The small, dark eyes. The way his jaw was set; hard and blunt.

He was mad. No. She shook her head once--he was furious.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, thinking this was directed at her. "I was out with Kyle and I didn't take my phone and..." She pointed at where it sat on the nightstand. "I didn't mean to..."

"It's not you." His voice was clipped but quiet. "Would you shut the door?"

"Yes..." Even though he had said that the look on his face wasn't for her, she was still nervous as she closed the door and returned quickly. "Arthur said you were on the phone with your father..."

"On hold." He stood tall and a bit ominous there behind the desk, the knuckles of his fingers nearly white as he pressed the phone to his ear.

"Is everyone okay?" She blinked as she spoke, knowing that wasn't it; sure that he would have come out with it already.

"Fine. Everyone's fine." Harry nodded, though his eyes darted away from hers, making her believe that maybe not everyone was okay.

"Harry..." Her head tipped to the side, her voice shaky as she put her hands on the desk separating the two of them. "Please. What the hell's going on? Arthur looks nervous, the officers downstairs are frantic and you look like you're going to kill somebody..."

"I am." His eyes snapped to hers, his voice heavy and strong. "I am going to kill somebody." And
there was something in his eyes, in the way he bit off the words that made Maddie think—he really, actually meant it.

Watching him closely, her head started shaking, her stomach somersaulted. "Why?" It came out weak, nearly a whisper. "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry," Harry's eyes grew heavy as they looked at her, turning down as a new emotion joined the anger that resided there. "I..." He gulped back something and took a breath. With his phone still pressed to his ear, he looked down at the laptop on the desk between them; open and alive. Maddie's eyes followed his, having really just noticed it sitting there.

And as he turned it around to face her, she swore she saw his hands shake.

She glanced once up at him, confused and concerned and even a little bit scared. Even though she had no idea what was going on, not a single clue what he was about to show her, something deep in the pit of her stomach had set off all of her red flags. Her heart was pounding in her ears and her stomach was churning.

And then she looked down at the screen.

The pounding in her ears stopped and her stomach dropped to the ground by her feet. And even though she knew exactly what she was looking at—her brain couldn't quite seem to process it.

She blinked and blinked again and that single split second seemed to take twenty and everything around her seemed to be tilting off center.

Because there on the screen was a tab opened to some vague website she had never heard of and on that webpage was a picture.

Of her and Harry.

From the night of the Pinning Ceremony.

On her mother's deck.

"Oh my..." She couldn't finish the words, could barely breathe. As one hand held tight to the desk, bracing her in case her knees gave out, her other hand moved to her throat that seemed to be growing tighter and tighter.

The photo she couldn't seem to tear her eyes from was grainy and obviously taken from a distance but there was no doubt, no question at all, about what was happening. Harry was laid out on the lounger with her head in his lap and his fists in her hair and the look on his face...

Maddie's eyes snapped up from the picture, needing to look away, needing to just not see it for a second. She didn't know what to think. She didn't know what to feel. Her mind and her spirit were a clustered, jumbled mess that threatened to make her sick.

In some distant corner of her mind, she could hear Harry call out to her. "Maddie..."

But she shook her head, holding up a finger as though she were asking him to wait, to give her just a second before she had to take this in any further.

"Is this..." She swallowed in attempt to bring moisture to her dry mouth. Biting her lip to keep it from trembling, she took a breath. "Is this real?"

"Yes." Harry spoke through clenched teeth. "It's real."
"And it's..." Her eyes blinked back this sudden rush of tears she felt rising as she swallowed again. "My God, Harry. Is this really on the..." She looked down at the screen, at the website. "Jesus Christ, Harry...is this on the INTERNET?!" She sounded flustered and desperate and before she could stop herself, she was bending back down to the screen, scrolling through the page with shaky fingers.


"Oh my God..." Maddie felt a panic taking over as she lowered to the chair next to her, leaning even closer to the screen as she scrolled. The horror continued as she found more pictures.

Him on the lounger with her standing next to him.

Her settling into his lap.

Kissing him.

Leaning into him.

As the color in her face drained, leaving her white and in shock, the color in his systematically rose and he was red from his throat to the tips of his ears.

With wide, shaky eyes and bile building in her stomach, she looked at pictures of her pulling up his shirt, of her moving lower and lower in his lap.

They were all there; every single moment of that night, all of them taken in sequence as she... "Oh my GOD. Harry! How did they GET these? Who TOOK them?!

"I. Don't. Know." His words were short and harsh and just scary enough that it drew Maddie's focus away from the screen and up to him.

"But..." She shook her head, not wanting to see them, but unable to look away. "But I'm...and you're...and it's..."

"I know." His hand clenched into a fist, his lips barely opening as he spoke.

"We're in my mother's backyard!"

"I know."

"It's nighttime and it's....it's PRIVATE property!"

"I know!" His voice rose, his fist pounding on the desk below him, startling her enough to shake her anger; giving way to something else.

Her hands drew back from the computer and the tears that had gathered behind her eyes began to press forward and when she looked up at him she looked sad and scared. "Harry..." Her voice wavered and her hands trembled.

And it was the only thing in the whole world that could have drawn Harry back from his murderous edge. His shoulders eased and his jaw loosened and, hanging up the phone, he sat it down on the desk and moved around it--going directly to her. He closed the laptop as he stood in front of her, lowering down so that he could look in her eyes. His hands were soft as they moved to her face, his fingers smudging away her tears as she cried.

"I'm sorry Maddie..." He shook his head, moving as far to comforting as he could get while rage
still pulsed through his veins. "I'm so sorry this is happening."

"Is..." She sniffed and wiped at the tears, trying to pull it together to get her mind around it all. "Is it really happening? Is it...God Harry. Are those pictures...out?"

"Yes," he whispered, his hands smoothing down her shoulders to her arms, settling in her lap as he nodded. "That is the website that published them first but..." He swallowed and took a breath. "But the story is spreading like mad and..."

"There's no way to STOP them?"

"No." He shook his head and looked up at her with sadness and anger and a tiny bit of helplessness. "It's happening. It's...even if we get them to take them down, even if...fuck..." He tried to breathe through the fury he felt when he thought of it. "They're out there; the pictures. It's too late to take them back. It's happening."

"People are going to...see me..." She pointed to the laptop, her eyes teary. "Giving you..."

His nod was heavy, his eyes dark. "People have seen you, giving me..."

And suddenly she felt nothing, nothing except this deep, gross feeling in the pit of her gut like she had been punched, like she had been kicked. Her hands moved away from him to her stomach and she wasn't over-exaggerating in the least when she groaned, "I think I'm going to be sick."
"People are going to...see me..." She pointed to the laptop, her eyes teary. "Giving you..."

His nod was heavy, his eyes dark. "People have seen you, giving me..."

And suddenly she felt nothing, nothing except this deep, gross feeling in the pit of her gut like she had been punched, like she had been kicked. Her hands moved away from him to her stomach and she wasn't over-exaggerating in the least when she groaned, "I think I'm going to be sick."

Taking her very seriously, Harry reached for the wastebasket, sliding it over in front of her.

Maddie offered him a small smile before it twitched and faded. Dropping her head between her knees, she took a few long, slow breaths before she looked back up to him. "Who?"

"Who?" Harry's eyebrows lifted, watching her closely.

"Who's seen them?" Her hands pushed her hair back out of her face. "Who told you?"

"My father called." Despite his anger, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "The media usually calls the palace before they print...stuff like this..." The bite in his voice was back. "But this isn't Britain and they didn't call. They just fucking put them up."

"Can they do that?!"

"Ha..." Harry shook his head. "I don't know. There is a team of people working on legalities right now and a team of people working on security and a team of people..."

"That's a lot of teams," Maddie's voice was dry and empty.

"It is." Harry's hands rubbed at her legs, at her arms. "Maddie...are you okay?" His eyes glanced to the wastebasket.

"Ha!" Her head tipped back bitterly, shaking as it did. "Those teams of people..."

"Yeah?"

"They've all seen these?" She nodded to the laptop.

His head dropped as he nodded. "Yes. They've all seen them."

"Arthur? Jim?" The tears began to creep back up as she thought of these people who she respected, people who respected her, seeing this private, intimate moment between her and her husband. "Thomas?"

"Yes," his voice was hoarse. "They have to look at them to figure out..."

"Your father?" She felt the lump in her stomach rising. "Gran?"

"Yes," Harry's hand moved to his chest, over his heart that hurt so much for her, for them.

"My..." Maddie's voice broke as she asked, "my mother?"

"I don't know," he moved in closer. "Jim contacted Ryan who's out with her and Lilli. They're on their way back right now but I don't know what she knows."
"I think I'm going to be sick," she whispered again, her hand gripping the basket next to her, her mind unraveling as she thought about telling her mother, about telling her family.

"I know," Harry breathed.

"Is he mad?" Maddie seemed to grow even quieter as she looked up to Harry. "Your father? Is he mad at us?"

"No," Harry shook his head, a small smile spreading over his lips. "He's not mad. We're not...in trouble. We're married and we were on private property and..." He trailed off with a tiny hint of a laugh. "We're not in trouble. I promise."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, wiping at her eyes before she moved to squeeze his hands. "I'm sorry Harry."

"YOU'RE sorry?" He sat back in surprise. "What in the hell do YOU have to be sorry for?!!"

"For this!" She yelled, waving her hand at the laptop. "You...you TOLD me! You warned me...we were outside...I should have listened. I should have..."

"Stop," Harry cut her off, his expression stern. "Stop it right now. You did nothing wrong here. We did nothing wrong. This isn't our fault. This is...this is wrong and illegal and immoral and so far from your fault." He leaned in closer to her, his hands moving to tug her chin up so that she would look at him. "Don't be sorry for this. This isn't your fault Maddie. Okay?" He waited a minute, held her gaze. "Okay?"

"Okay," she whispered, giving him as much of a nod as she could. "What happens now?"

"Well..." He took a deep breath. "Everyone's working on it, on getting them down, on stopping them from spreading. They're trying to figure out who took them, from where and HOW. Security is understandably concerned how somebody managed to..." He bit his lip and shook his head. The truth was, he wasn't completely sure what happened next.

"What do we do?"

"We..." He exhaled. "We should probably tell your family...if you want to. They're going to find out eventually but..."

"Fuck..." Maddie glanced towards the door, thinking of the crowd gathered downstairs.

"We lay low," he drew her hands closer to him. "We stay inside while we figure this out."

"Do we have to leave for London?"

"Not necessarily," Harry shrugged. "My father would like us behind palace walls, if only for security concerns. But he hasn't ordered us back yet. I think we'll have more answers soon." As Maddie nodded, they grew quiet for a while; both of them processing it all, negotiating these feelings, these violations. Holding tight to the other, they ran through that night, they tried to come to terms with a fallout they couldn't even begin to imagine. It was the ring of Harry's phone that cut into the heavy silence.

"I'm sorry," he bent to kiss her hands. "That's my father."

"No, no," Maddie pulled her hands from him. "You answer. I'm going to...fuck..." A twisted, bitter smile tugged at her mouth. "I'm going to go tell my cousins what's going on."
"You want to wait and I'll do it?" He offered, reaching for the phone. Even in the madness of the moment, it made Maddie love him even more.

"No," she shook her head. "Talk to your father. I'll be downstairs when you're finished."

"Okay," Harry nodded and watched her take a few steps away from him before he called out to her. "Maddie?"

"Mmm?" She turned back to him.

"We're going to find out who did this," he stood tall, his expression cold and serious. "And then I'm going to kill them myself." Without flinching, without blinking, he turned his attention to the phone in his hand.

The moment Maddie stepped from the room and shut the door, she could feel the dread and mortification setting in. For those few minutes in that room, it was just her and Harry and the laptop. But now, out here in the open, it wasn't. It was so much bigger than that and she was about to go downstairs and widen the circle of people who knew that she had performed oral sex on her husband just outside the sliding glass doors of her mother's house, on the back deck.

"Fuck..." She whispered to herself, trying not to think about just how fast this story was spreading, just how many people were looking at the back of her head and Harry's... "Stop." She pressed her eyes closed for a second. "Just stop."

As she stepped into the living room, her cousins had moved inside, situated around the room, flipping through magazines or tv channels as they chatted. The moment Maddie moved into the mix, they drew quiet, looking up at her with empathetic eyes and wavering smiles.

"Oh God," Maddie stopped short, her heart thumping in her chest. "You already know don't you." She scanned the room, her hands pressing to her stomach as it turned.

"I'm so sorry Maddie," Jenna spoke first, trying for a smile as her hands fidgeted nervously in her lap. "We didn't mean to...but we were waiting and worried and I pulled out my phone and it's...it's all over and..."

"It's okay," Maddie held up her hand and shook her head. She really didn't want to know how easy it was for them to find out. Looking down at the floor, she tried to gather her breath, tried to will the pink from her cheeks. "So you've...you've seen them?" She looked first to Jenna who looked down at her hands and nodded.

"We've seen them."

"Okay." Maddie sucked in a breath and looked up at the ceiling. "Fuck. Okay. All of you?" She looked around the room.

"Not me," Derek spoke up from the corner. Maddie looked right at him, her question in her eyes. "I've been trained to kill people," he shrugged. "Just hearing about it makes me want to kill somebody. I don't think it's smart for me to SEE them."

"Well Harry's forming a hit mob upstairs," Maddie cracked a small smile.

"I bet he is," Derek's jaw tensed, his arms crossing over his chest as he shook his head. "This is bullshit Maddie."
"Yeah..." She sighed, sinking into a chair. "I know."

"Do you know how they..." Amy trailed off, not sure what she was asking.

"No," Maddie shook her head. "At least not right now. There are literally teams of people working on... on all aspects of this." She let out a laugh and sucked in a breath. "You know except for the humiliation that seems to have taken over my soul." Her head fell forward into her hands, her voice muffled as she spoke. "I can't believe this is happening. Everyone's going to see them. Everyone." As she pulled her face up from her hands, her eyes fell on Kyle who stood across the room from her, leaning back against the bookshelf.

Catching her eyes, catching the way she teetered so close to the edge, he knew she needed something from him—the anchor they had always been for each other. So, despite the way this actually made him want to yell and scream and cry for her, he did what she needed from him. He nodded his head and gave her a smile.

"Well..." He took a deep breath and pushed away from the shelf, his eyes watching her as he moved closer. "I suppose it could be worse."

"Excuse me?" Maddie was flabbergasted, her breath puffing out in a mix of a sob and a laugh. "There are pictures all over the internet of my husband's cock in my mouth!" She could see the room flinch at the harsh way she put words to it all.

"Well you can't actually see his..."

"Because the back of my head is in the way!" Maddie yelled across the room to her cousin.

"Maddie..." He started.

"My father-in-law has seen them. The QUEEN has seen them. Jesus...my mother is..." Maddie shook her head. "Please. Tell me how it could have been worse."

Kyle nodded, not turning away from her glare; the only one in the room who dared step up to her when she was this upset. With a deep breath, he did his best to bring her back from her edge. "Well, for starters...it could have been somebody else's cock."

"Jesus," Amy groaned from her chair, her face flushing red.

"Kyle really?" Jenna shook her head.

Stunned silent, Maddie could only watch as Kyle continued.

"Or it could have been somebody else's mouth." He waved his hand at her, her face growing redder; warmer.

And then, from his quiet spot in the corner, Gary caught on; leaning forward, he offered, "or he could have looked less...pleased."

Maddie's eyes snapped to Gary as Kyle's lips curled up.

"Or bored," Kyle supplied. "He might have looked bored."

As suspense seemed to hang in the room, Maddie gulped back her urge to scream and with a calmness that spoke only of the fire waging in her core, she bit out her words. "I don't know what to say..." She shook her head. "I...I can't believe..." As the little bit of humor in the moment began to fade, as the reality of it all swayed back in her mind, she could feel the tears in her eyes begin to
"You know what I can't believe?" Gary spoke up this time, taking his turn at diverting her attention. "I can't believe you two were right out there on that deck." All eyes shot up to him as he pointed to the back of the house.

"Excuse me?" Maddie blinked, her tears retreating as she looked up at him.

"Ouch! Hey!" Gary dodged a smack from his wife. "I'm just saying, every time you two come to Colorado, you can't keep your hands to yourself. Maybe next time you step inside, huh?" Though his words sounded harsh, the tone in his voice, the grin on his face told a different tale. He was trying to meet her at this edge she was at, just like Kyle was. They were trying to hold onto her and, despite it all, she knew that.

"Come on Maddie," Kyle spoke up. "Don't let this unravel you...."

"Easy for you to say." Maddie sniffed, wiping at her eyes as she looked to him. "You don't have to explain it to my mother..."

"True," Kyle nodded, his smile soft and sympathetic. "Though...if you want me to, I can."

"Ha!" She laughed through her tears; touched by the offer. "Will you include all of your reasons why it could have been worse?"

"If it helps," his smile pulled higher, relieved to see a tiny bit of her surviving this. "You going to be okay?" His voice was low, as though they were speaking privately, as though there were nobody else in the room.

With a steady gaze, she blinked at her tears and as honestly as she could, she shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. This is...far from over."

"Yeah," he nodded, understanding that as much as he possibly could. "Yeah."

The sound of tires on the gravel outside alerted them to Hannah and Lilli's return and the upset in Maddie's stomach returned, drowning out the momentary reprieve they had given her.

"You want us to go?" Gary nodded towards the door.

"No," Maddie shook her head, rising to her feet and wiping at her face. "I want you to be here when I tell Harry how good it was that he didn't look bored."

Before Gary could banter back, before any of them could really laugh amid the sick way they all felt, the door was opening and Hannah was stepping into the house; Lilli in one arm, bags of toys in the other. She looked a bit scattered and Maddie guessed correctly that she knew something was up; though she wasn't sure just how much she knew.

Until her eyes met hers and she watched a light pink sweep over her mother's cheeks.

"Oh God," Maddie whispered. "How do you know? How can you already know?" She watched as her mother sat down her bags, avoiding her gaze. "It can't be in magazines already..."

"It's not," Hannah answered, taking a deep breath as she stood tall, turning a smile to her granddaughter. With a sweet expression and a lighthearted voice--all for the sake of the baby--she explained. "I was in line at the grocery store and that nasty Margaret Roth was in line behind me and she said to me, in that damn snotty voice of hers, Oh Hannah, I just love what you've done with the deck..." Hannah had to swallow back the lump of nerves in her throat as she looked up to her daughter. "And I had no idea what she was talking about because Margaret Roth hasn't been
over to this house since well before your father died and..."

"Mom..." Maddie took a step towards her, wishing that above all else, she could have kept her mother out of this moment in her life.

"Susie Poitz was working," Hannah shrugged, bouncing Lilli in her arms. "She told me there were pictures on the internet and when I pushed, she pulled out her phone and..."

"Oh God," Maddie's hands pressed to her stomach, the urge to vomit rushing back, her face flushing white with just a tint of green.

"Oh Madeline, my goodness. Don't let it make you sick." Hannah shook her head at her daughter as she moved further into the house. "You think you're the only woman on the planet to give her husband a blow job?"

Maddie's eyes snapped up, wide and shocked as she looked right at Kyle who lifted his eyebrows, amused. "Mother!"

"You're not," Hannah continued on, rolling her eyes at the surprise that rumbled around the room. "We've all done it and..."

"Mother!" She looked then to her daughter who seemed obliviously happy in her grandma's arms.

"Jesus..." Gary groaned, shaking his head wishing he weren't nearly as sober as he was in that moment.

"And even after all of this eventually blows over," Hannah's shoulders shrugged. "Women will still continue to do it..."

"God willing," Kyle muttered, catching a glare from his wife.

"Hell," Hannah cracked a small smile. "Maybe they'll increase in popularity."

"Not a word," Amy spoke before her husband could.

"Maddie..." Hannah's voice softened as she moved over to her daughter, catching the tears in her eyes, the waver in her lip. "Come on darling...I know this is..." She shook her head, not sure what word she wanted to assign to it. "But don't make yourself sick over this. It's going to be okay...look at me..." She pulled at her daughter's chin, bringing her eyes up to hers. "It's going to be okay. I promise." She smoothed her hand over Maddie's head, sweeping back her hair like she often had as a child. "Now. Your daughter is hungry and in need of a nap and maybe you could use some cuddling?" She lifted her eyebrows.

Maddie nodded, sniffing and swallowing and pulling herself back together. "Okay." She forced a smile and held her hands out to her daughter. "Come here Lilli...let's get you something to eat."

And her mother was right; as she almost always was. Having her daughter back in her arms seemed to ground her in a way that nothing else could have. Knowing that her cousins were there, ready to pull her back from that dark ledge she had been eyeing since Harry had shown her the pictures—knowing that her mother wasn't upset, that she wasn't flustered about it all—it went miles to keep Maddie anchored to the earth even though it would be so easy for her to drift.

Maddie was still there in Lilli's room, still holding her sleeping body in the rocking chair when Harry emerged from their room. With a soft knock on the door, he stepped inside and looked over
to his wife and his daughter.

Maddie looked up to him with a smile; a weak smile, but a genuine one. "Hi..." She whispered, lifting the fingers of one hand to wave at him.

"Hi," he whispered back looking exhausted and a bit defeated.

"How did you know we were here?"

"The monitor," he nodded his head back towards their room. "I could hear you singing."

"Lucky you," Maddie's smile tugged higher, bringing the slightest chuckle from Harry. "You want to hold her?" Her gaze shifted back to Lilli. "It really helps."

"Of course," Harry stepped further into the room, moving over to scoop his daughter up into his arms, sighing as a wave of relief washed over him. "You were right," he smiled down at Maddie, adjusting Lilli in his arms, cuddling her close. "Great idea."

"It was my mother's," Maddie leaned back in the rocking chair, watching the two of them with adoring eyes.

"Your mother is home?" His jaw tensed as the events of the day drifted back to him.

"She is."

"Did you..." He lifted his eyebrows, understandably nervous.

"I did," Maddie nodded, sighing as she rolled her eyes. "Actually Margaret and Susie did but...she knows."

"Margaret and Susie?" Harry shook his head.

"It's not important," Maddie looked down at her hands. "She knows."

"Okay..." Harry took in a deep breath. "Okay. And?"

"And..." Maddie's head leaned back in the rocking chair, her lips curling into an amused smile. "And she...well...she's guessing that blow jobs are probably going to increase in popularity."

"I..." Harry's eyes were wide, blinking as he heard her words. "What?"

"Exactly," Maddie's smile pulled higher, her finger pointing to him. "That's almost my exact response. And..." Maddie took a deep breath, her hands moving to the arms of the rocker as she rose to her feet. "And Kyle and Gary have come up with a list of ways this could have been worse..."

"Worse?" Harry's eyebrows rose sharply.

"Mmm..." Maddie nodded, moving over to his side, her hands moving down over his arms as she smiled down at their daughter.

"You want to let me in on that list?"

"Actually I think I would rather be there to watch when they do," she took a breath, smoothed a hand over Lilli's soft red hair and looked up to him. "You ready to fill me in?"

"No," he shook his head, holding Lilli closer. "In fact, I would rather never talk about this
again..." He exhaled with a slight groan, moving over to Lilli's bed. "But..."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded, watching as he nestled Lilli down into her bed, covering her with her blankie, leaning to kiss her head.

And then he stood up; her husband--tall and steady with his broad shoulders squared and his eyes focused on her. Without any more words, he held out his hand to her. And without any response, she put her hand in his. With loving glances back at their daughter, they slipped from the room and shut the door behind them.

"You know, if it's any consolation," Maddie's voice was soft as she held onto his hand, turning to face him there in the hallway. "Derek's ready to kill somebody too...if you need reinforcements."

"Ha." His laugh was bitter, his eyes flashing with the anger that had been tampered down by holding his daughter. "I'm not sure I'll need reinforcements but I appreciate the sentiment."

"Yeah..." Maddie nodded, the sick feeling in her stomach returning. "Do we know anything more?"

"A little," he leaned back against the wall and cleared his throat. "They tracked down the owner of the website that published them first." Harry shook his head. "Some start up in Nebraska."

"Nebraska?" Maddie's face scrunched up and it surprised her that this was really the first time she really stopped to contemplate just how close somebody had to come to them to get those photos. The realization made the hair on her arms stand up tall. "But...that's a few hundred miles from here..."

"Apparently," Harry nodded, his hand rubbing at the tension in his neck.

"God Harry..." She shook her head as she looked up at him, her eyes a bit scattered. "Somebody drove here from Nebraska and..." Her fingers pressed to her lips as her mind began to spiral out; thinking about how close they had come, how near they had been to her and Harry, how near they had been to Lilli. How long had they been waiting? Where had they been waiting? How much had they seen? How much had they witnessed?

"Hey..." Harry reached out to catch her hand, recognizing the unravel of her mind, knowing the questions that must have been running through her mind. "I swear to you that whatever questions you're asking yourself right now, there are a team of professionals who have already asked them and are already working to find out the answers and are making sure that this doesn't happen again..."

"I just..." She looked down at the floor. "This is the first time I've ever stood in this house and felt..." She sucked in a rush of breath. "Unsafe."

"No," Harry was pushing against the wall, shaking his head as he moved. "Please don't." His hands moved to cup her face. "Listen. Jim and Arthur have been around the perimeter of this property more than once. They've called in local police for patrols."

"They have?"

"Yeah," he nodded, trying his best at a relaxed smile. "You think Arthur's going to ever let something happen to you? To Lilli?" His eyebrows shot up, both of them knowing the answer. "And Jim...Jim is pissed. He's...pissed. And you don't want to mess with Jim when he's pissed."

Maddie let out the breath she was holding, trying to trust his words, to trust the system around them. "I've seen Jim pissed..."
"No you haven't," he shook his head, happy to see her easing up.

"The night in the mountains, when we snuck out the second floor window and I sprained my ankle..."

"Nope," Harry shook his head, his arms crossing over his chest. "That was worried. Pissed is...pissed is scary."

"And he's pissed now?" There was a part of her that seemed to enjoy that thought.

"Raging," Harry nodded.

"Good," she swallowed back the nerves that stayed on alert. "Does that mean we're taking a road trip to Nebraska to kick somebody's ass?"

Harry held her gaze for a moment, weighing the seriousness in her question, trying to check his own instinctual urge to break something. "Is that what you want to do? When we find them?"

Maddie's eyes flashed wide for just a second. "You're serious."

"Dead serious," he nodded; his voice quiet and calm in a way that made her a little anxious.

"Is that what you want to do?" She whispered, watching the stress in his neck, in his jaw.

"Somebody was within meters of my wife and my daughter," his eyes grew darker as he spoke. "They tracked my family down like..." He looked away from her for a moment. "There are pictures of my wife all over the internet with..." He couldn't even say it, the words and the image making his blood boil. "And it's not done. It's not over. It's going to get bigger before it gets smaller and the things that are going to be said..." He turned his eyes back to her; hard and angry. "What do I want to do? When we find them?" He shook his head. "I don't know that I should be the one to make that decision."

"Okay..." Maddie reached out to him then, her hands wrapping around the flexed muscles in his arms, her voice soft as she drew him to her. "Hey...look at me," she pulled at his chin, bringing his eyes up to hers. "We're okay, right? You and me...we're fine. Lilli, she's safe and happy and nobody is going to get close to us." She smoothed her hands up over his stubbled face. "Don't get me wrong, I'm...sick. And furious. And whatever it is we end up doing, I want them to just..." She swallowed back her sense of vengeance for just a moment, her hands clenching into fists. "But at the end of the day, they're just pictures. Just pictures." Even though she said the words, even though she meant them, she felt tears rise to her eyes. Softening, Harry's hands lifted to her cheeks, wiping them away.

"I know," he nodded, his voice stuck in his throat.

"And it's not like people don't already assume that I..." She trailed off, unable to follow through with her attempt at some humor.

It pained him, she could see it; in his eyes and the set of his shoulders. This hurt him more than he was letting her see. "You know this is going to be worse for you Maddie."

"I know," she nodded; she did.

"It isn't fair, but that's how it is," his hands moved from her face, down to her shoulders, drawing her into his arms. "It's going to hit you harder than me even though I'm clearly an active participant."
"I know," she nodded, burying her face in his shirt, in the warmth of his embrace. She knew he was right; it was always harder for women than it was for men. If the situation had been reversed, if it had been Harry's head in her lap, it would have landed differently. But it wasn't. It was her head and his lap and she knew what that meant.

"I'm so sor..."

"Shhh..." Maddie's hand reached up, stopping his words before he said them. "If I don't get to be sorry, you don't either." Her eyes peeked up at him. "Got it?"

Unable to speak, he nodded, tightening his hold on her. And there they stood in the hallway just outside Lilli's room. With their daughter asleep inside and teams of people working around them, they held on to each other for just a little bit longer; grounding each other, centering themselves.

"You know..." Maddie was the first to speak, her head lifting up to look at him, her chin resting on his chest. "We're going to have to go downstairs eventually..."

"I know," he sucked in a breath, calmer than he had been only moments before.

"You ready?" She patted his back and stepped away just a little.

"Ready?" He chuckled, his hands smoothing over her arms. "To step into what is surely going to be one of the more mortifying moments of my life?" His eyebrows arched high on his head, his cheeks flushing just thinking about having to look Maddie's mother in the face. "Yeah..." He leaned in to kiss her. "I'm ready."

When they appeared back downstairs, the hustle and bustle had shifted. The protection team had moved off to another room and were decidedly less chaotic and the family had moved into the kitchen; dinner preparations well underway. As the couple stepped back into the midst of them, they drew to a slow stop, eyes shifting up towards them. Most of the faces in the room held sympathy and a bit of relief at finally seeing them emerge from upstairs. But as Maddie looked over at her husband, his face was flushed red but his eyes looked right to Hannah, standing as though he were ready to face whatever she had for him.

In a wonderfully sweet way that Harry would never in his life forget, Hannah wiped her hands off on a dishtowel and moved right over to him. With a warm smile on her lips she placed her hand on his arm and singlehandedly put her support behind him. "Tell me how I can help?"

"Sorry?" His voice cracked, shocked.

"Well..." She thought over her words for a moment. "This is private property and even though my daughter might be, I'm not a member of the royal family. And if somebody came onto my land to...take those pictures then surely there must be some legal action I can take?"

Harry's eyes blinked and for the first time that day, he thought his knees might give out. He swallowed back the urge he had to cry and nodded. "They want to send out some...engineers," he took a deep breath. "To look at the pictures and the land, to judge distance and angles and pixels and...I don't know..." He shook his head, trying for a smile. "They want to figure out from where the photos were taken, to see if they were taken on your property or the neighbors and then...then we can decide how to proceed."

"Okay then," Hannah nodded. "Tell...whomever you need to tell that they can have access to whatever they need." She patted Harry's arm.

"Thank you," Harry smiled at her, the easiest smile he had managed that day. "Hannah, I mean
it...I don't know what to say." He shook his head, reaching to pat her hand. "Thank you."

"Of course," she nodded. "Now. We're getting ready for dinner. You two hungry?" Dismissing the awkwardness, Hannah moved right past them, back to what she was doing.

"No," Maddie shook her head, groaning as she stepped further into the room. "I don't think I could eat a thing."

"How about a drink?" Jenna's voice was sweet as she called out from the bar in the corner of the room, a bottle of wine in her hand. "Think you might be able to drink something?"

"Now we're talking," Maddie smiled to her cousin, her friend, sinking into a chair as the stress began to ease. "I would love some. Thank you."

"No problem," Jenna gave her a quick wink and turned to open the bottle, to pour some glasses.

"So..." Kyle cleared his throat glancing from Harry to Maddie, hoping to break the tension in the room. "Are we eating in here or...out on the deck?" Though he tried to keep a straight face, the corner of his mouth twitched up and even as he felt Harry's glare settle on him, his eyes stayed on Maddie.

With her glass poised halfway to her mouth, Maddie took a deep breath and sat it back down on the table. "I will play somebody a thousand dollars if you could just...give us anything, ANYTHING else to talk about tonight."

"I'm sorry," Kyle softened. "I just thought maybe..."

"It's okay," Maddie shook her head, smiling across the room at him. "I appreciate it I'm just..."

"Not there yet," he nodded, his hands rising in surrender. "I get it. I'm sorry." He turned to Harry, his cheeks warming in a bit of embarrassment. "I apologize..."

"No need," Harry held up his hand. "If she's okay, I'm okay," he nodded his head to Maddie who smiled in reassurance. "Though I have to warn you, tonight's not the night to poke...either of us."

"Got it," Kyle smiled, moving to Maddie, bending to kiss the top of her head. "I love you."

"I love you too," she patted his arm as he moved back to his spot. "Anyone?" She looked around the room again, hope in her eyes.

"Actually..." Amy was the first to speak up; a little timid, strangely shy. "I...I might have something." She looked to Kyle, her smile small and sweet. Maddie looked between the two of them, watching Kyle press his hand to his chest and give her a small nod.

"What's going on?" Jenna spoke up, confusion twisting her smile.

"Well..." Amy looked down at her hands, her cheeks a warm tint of pink, her eyes dancing as she looked back up, looking right at Maddie as she said it. "I'm pregnant. We're...we're going to have a baby."

And the room that had once been quiet and slightly nervous suddenly broke free. Applause rang out, people were shouting and Maddie was on her feet with a wide, easy smile on her face; both her and Harry rushing to congratulate the soon-to-be parents.

"Oh my God! Kyle!" Maddie hugged him tight, kissing his cheek. "I'm so happy for you! Why didn't you SAY anything?"
"Because," he laughed, looking to Amy. "I thought we weren't saying anything."

"I'm sorry," Amy laughed as she hugged Gary and then Jenna and then Harry. "I couldn't let us all just sit around all night worrying."

"Come here," Maddie moved to wrap her arms around her. "Congratulations Amy. You're going to just...be the most amazing mother." Kissing her cheeks, she stepped back, letting Dena move into her place.

With warmth in her heart, Maddie looked up, her eyes catching Harry's over the crazy mass of love and embraces and they smiled; sincere and easy. With his hand pressed to his chest, he mouthed the words 'I love you' and with tears in her eyes she did the same.

By the time they had retired back to their room later that night, Maddie and Harry were exhausted. After Amy and Kyle had dropped their news, the air in the room had lightened considerably. They had managed to eat a little bit, managed to drink a little bit more and both were touched by the support they received, both of them excited at the soon-to-be addition to the family.

They moved around their room quietly, pulling off their clothes from the day, changing into pajamas. As they brushed teeth and washed faces, Harry could tell Maddie's mind was drifting away from the present moment. He could see the thoughtfulness in her eyes, in the wrinkles of her forehead. He stood next to the bed, watching as she slipped into the crisp cool sheets.

"You want to tell me what you're thinking about?" Harry called out to her, pulling his blankets back.

"Mmm..." She smiled up at him, caught in her trance. "I was thinking about my father."

"Oh?" He wasn't expecting that. Climbing in next to her, he settled back in bed, watching as she did the same.

"I was thinking about what he would have thought about tonight..." Her eyes were tired as she rested against her pillow.

"Well, if I had to bet money somewhere, I would guess he would have taken me out back and shot me..."

"Ha!" Maddie laughed, her eyes rolling as she shook her head. "I didn't mean about that. I meant...about the family, about how we're growing. You know...since he's been gone, we have Lilli and now Kyle's going to be a father..." She grew a little misty, a little nostalgic. "He would have loved to watch it happen."

"Ah," Harry nodded, softening. "I'm sure he would have enjoyed being a grandfather."

"He really would have," Maddie agreed, sighing as she sank further into her pillow, her fingers reaching out for Harry's. A moment of peaceful quiet passed between them before Maddie spoke again. "And you're wrong."

"About?" His fingers tangled with hers; stroking and holding.

"He wouldn't have taken you out back and shot you," her lips turned down in a frown.

"No?"
"No," she shook her head, turning onto her side to look at him. "But he absolutely would have joined the 'hunt them down and kick their ass' side of things."

"Yeah," Harry breathed. "I would imagine."

"And...I suppose he might have had a few choice words for you," she teased him lightly, poking his leg with her toe.

"I would think," Harry smiled over at her, happy her humor wasn't completely missing; happy they could still do this. Crawl into bed next to each other and decompress.

"Harry?" Her voice was softer, less sure.

"Hmm?" He tugged her hand closer to him, pulling it onto his chest.

Turning innocent eyes up to him, she asked, "what do I do?"

His head lifted up a bit as he turned to look at her, her question and her voice drawing his concentration. "What do you do?"

"I mean..." She took in a deep shaky breath as tears welled in her eyes. "What do I do?" She was looking to him for guidance. "Tomorrow and the next day and the day after that..."

"Ah," he nodded; understanding. Clearing his throat he thought for a moment. "Well first, you stop reading anything that's written about you. And I mean...anything." His expression was serious as he imparted wisdom born from experience. "Even the good stuff is going to mention this for awhile."

Maddie nodded. "How long?"

"A year?" His mouth turned down in a frown. "Maybe a little longer."

"Okay," Maddie blinked at her tears. "I can do that. I don't read much anyway..." She tried for a laugh but managed a smile.

"You avoid the magazine racks and the entertainment news and basically all of the internet..."

"Sure," she sniffed, unable to keep from imagining the photos that were about to be plastered all over the place.

"You learn how to fake a smile," he offered his best version, his hand lifting to stroke her lips. "And you find a way to tune out the inappropriate questions that might come, to ignore the people who think they can say something to you when we're out to dinner or with our friends."

"Okay," she nodded again.

"You keep your friends close," he took in a breath. "But you don't have to worry about that, they're going to form a circle around you, just like your family has." He nodded his head, knowing it was true; having watched them do it for him. "You don't stop doing what's important," he shook his head. "You don't stop socializing, you don't stop working with your charities. You remember that the people who work for us are working for us...they're taking care of security concerns to keep us safe, they're handling the PR side of the house and...and you just keep being you...you keep being the brilliant doctor you are, my gorgeous, amazing wife..." Her lips turned up slightly. "You keep being the wonderful mother you are to Lilli..."

"You're going to make me cry," she waved her hand at him, wiping at her eyes.
"And..." He snatched her hands back into his, leaning to kiss her as he met her eyes. "Most importantly, you...you don't let it settle too deep."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean...I mean I know that you know that this is just going to...hit. It's going to explode and there are going to be people who are going to say horrible things. There are people who have just been waiting for the opportunity to come after you and Maddie..." His jaw clenched as he shook his head; hating that he could only guess what was about to unfold. "They are going to come after you."

"I know," she whispered. She wasn't naive, she knew."

"Just, when it happens, please don't let it sink too far..." His fingers moved over her chest, resting on her heart. "Keep your sense of humor, keep your spirit...don't let it alter who you are. It would be a great, great shame if you let this change you."

Maddie could only nod to him, letting him know she had heard him, that she understood. Her emotions were tangled in her throat, preventing her from any sort of coherent reply. They had made it through this one day; just this one day. It had already taken a lot from them, it had exhausted them and it had pushed them. But it was still only this one day.

"It..." Maddie's lips curled up, wavering as she spoke. "It could have been somebody else's cock..."

"Excuse me?" Harry's head lifted completely off his pillow as he looked to her incredulously.

"That's one of the ways Kyle said it could have been worse," she explained tearily. "It could have been somebody else's cock." Her lips tugged just a fraction higher. "Or somebody else's mouth."

"Well," Harry swallowed, his eyes wide in stun, his mind searching for the humor she was trying to reign in. "I suppose that would have been worse."

"I suppose," Maddie agreed. Then, tightening her hold on him, she moved closer to his body; to the warmth and steadiness she so desperately needed from him. With a shaky breath, she finally managed to put voice to her thoughts. "This isn't over...is it?"

"No," Harry shook his head, his heart sinking in his chest at the look in her eyes, gulping back the bile that rose in his throat at the thought of it all. "Not even close."
Chapter 176

Going back to London was Maddie's decision. As tempting as it was to stay in the relative safety of her mother's home—and as fine as Harry was with staying indefinitely—Maddie knew that this wouldn't begin to drift away from them until they went home. Until they showed their faces, until the public had their fill of them.

"You're a wise woman love," Harry shook his head at her, softened by her strength. "Wiser than you should have to be right now."

And she was right.

The public, the press, the paparazzi; everyone was waiting to see the two of them again, to catch a glimpse of the couple. It had only been two days since the photos first surfaced and, in those two days, it felt like the pictures had wallpapered the world. They were in newspapers, in magazines, on the internet. The legal team had been working over time, the engineers had been out and big moves were being made to shut it all down. But it was too late; they had been seen by nearly everyone who had the ability to see.

The damage was done and the fallout had begun.

"No," Harry shook his head at her, stern and unmoving as they planned their trip home. "No. We're not going to walk out through the fucking airport."

"Harry..."

"We're flying on a private jet Madeline!" His voice rose without effort. "We're going into the airport in Denver privately and we are leaving Heathrow privately. That's it. That's the end."

Maddie's mouth opened but he rushed ahead. "And I really don't give a fuck what Thomas thinks about this."

Maddie's mouth closed, her lips pressing together as she watched him pace their room, his fingers wreaking havoc on his hair. On his third pass by her, she took a breath and took a chance.

"Harry..." His eyes turned to meet hers. "They are waiting to see us."

"Maddie..."

"They are!" She cut him off, pushing away from the dresser she was leaning against. "They are looking for us. They want to see us...hiding behind sunglasses and...I don't know...embarrassed," she shook her head. "But they want to see us and the longer that we avoid them, the bigger it's going to get. Now we're going back to London and we have..." She laughed, a humorous chuckle. "We have this LIST of events coming up and nobody wants one of those to be the first time they get a shot at us..." She sighed, rubbing the back of her neck. "It would just be easier if we walked out of Heathrow."

"Easier on who?" Harry's voice had quieted, his tone softened. "On Thomas? On the press?"

"On me," she looked up to him under sad eyes, her bottom lip drawing between her teeth as she shook her head and shrugged. "I don't know Harry. It might just be easier on me...to get it over with. Maybe this feeling in my stomach will start to go away..."

And there he was, caught in this tangled web of his anger and her sadness and the right thing to do. Holding her gaze, he tossed it over in his mind, knowing that his favorite option—moving to the tropics and never coming back—wasn't really viable. "Fine..." He breathed, waving his hands
up in surrender. "If you really think it'll be easier...for YOU, then I...I guess I'll do it. But only if it's about you. Not for anyone else."

And that's how the world was handed the next pictures of the Sussex family.

Maddie with sunglasses on and a diaper bag over her shoulder and Harry carrying the baby carrier with Lilli safe and shielded from the cameras, from the crowd. With Maddie's hand tucked tightly in his and their protection detail right along with them, Harry walked the short distance to the already loaded car with his head held high and his shoulders squared.

Pictures were taken.

Video was filmed.

And it felt like everyone, everywhere was calling out to them, hoping for a reaction, hoping for a "better" picture than the others.

As Maddie slipped into the backseat, Harry secured Lilli's seat into the base and climbed in, shutting the door behind him. Already loaded with their bags, their security detail moved into place and they were driving away from Heathrow, on their way home.

Only after they had escaped the view of the cameras, of the crowd, did Maddie let out the breath she was holding. With shaky fingers, she peeled back the blanket covering Lilli's seat and she looked in at her daughter; sleeping peacefully and completely unaware.

"Okay..." She sighed, turning a small, wavering smile to Harry. "Okay."

"Okay," he nodded, reaching for her hand as he took a deep breath of his own.

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Despite his initial protests to stay in Colorado longer, Harry was more than happy to be home. In fact he felt a great amount of relief driving through the gates of Kensington Palace; a peacefulness washing over him when they stepped through the doors of their home. And as Maddie pulled Lilli from her carrier, moving up the stairs to change her and then feed her, Harry stood still in the entryway and watched her as she moved.

And for the first time in awhile, he began to feel in control of things--however fleeting or uncertain that might actually be. They were home on their terms and they were back to the most important business at hand--taking care of Lilli.

He was still there in the entryway when Maddie returned. Sitting on the settee, his eyes turned up to her as she came back down the stairs. She had taken off her shoes and her sweater and had pulled her hair up into a bun and when she rounded down the last stair, she let out a heavy, deep breath and stopped right in front of him.

"Hey," her fingers stretched out to him, scratching along his jaw.

"Hey," he reached out for her, his hands curving around her hip as his mouth turned upward.

"You forgot Lilli..."

With a laugh, Maddie nodded. "She passed out mid-bottle. Apparently she's still sleepy."

"Apparently she has her mother's tolerance for jet lag," he pulled her closer to him as he joked.

"Poor thing," Maddie sighed, her hands moving to cup his face, her eyes holding his for a beat as
they settled back into being home. "That didn't go so bad."

"No," he shook his head slightly as his arms moved around her, his eyes darkening just a bit as he remembered the crowd. "That didn't go so bad."

"No," Maddie shrugged, moving to stand between his legs, thankful for the closeness. "And..." She sighed again. "Not even one person mentioned anything about your wife being a swallower."

She was trying for a joke, trying to ease the tension and the stress but Harry wasn't ready. His body hardened beneath her hands, his jaw tight and his eyes small. "I dare somebody to mention that in my presence." Swallowing back the anger that had risen, his hands smoothed down her back to her hips, making a move to push her away, feeling suddenly anxious and wanting to stand, to move.

"No, no," Maddie shook her head, her hands resting over his as she stood still. "I'm sorry. Hey..." She bent so that she could look into his eyes. "I'm sorry. I thought we might be ready to joke about it and..."

"I'm not ready to joke about it," he shook his head, his fingers tightening their hold on her, wanting to pull her to him, wanting to shield her from all of the shit that was falling around them.

"Okay," Maddie nodded, smiling in an offer of peace. "I won't joke." She took a step closer to him, letting go of his hands so she could run hers over his shoulders, around his neck. "But please don't push me away."

"I wasn't," he shook his head, realizing that maybe he had. "I didn't mean to."

"Do you think..." Maddie's head tipped to the side as she watched him closely. "That you're ever going to let me back in your lap again?" Her eyebrows rose and her smile was easy, but the way she chewed at her lip, there was a bit of nervousness in her chest.

Harry blinked up at her, his mind scurrying over the last few days as he tried to place a time he might not have let her. Finding none, he shook his head, his forehead etched with confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." She sucked in a deep breath and pushed it out. "Since the photos came out, you haven't really...touched me."

"Maddie..."

"And you haven't really let me touch you," she continued on, her fingers running warm over the skin of his neck. "And I'm not sure if it's just because you haven't been in the mood or if you're in shock or...or if this is the new state of us or..."

"Come here," he nodded his head, his hands drawing her right to him. Maddie went, lifting her legs to climb up onto the settee with him, settling right there into his lap. With his hands smoothing down over her legs, tugging her closer, he lifted his lips to hers in a sweet, warm kiss. "Of course that's not the new state of us..." He kissed her again and let out a long breath, his head tipping back against the wall. "I just...I hate that this is out there Maddie. I hate that everyone gets to see you like that and I hate what they're all saying because of it..."

"I know," she nodded, catching the sadness and the sweetness under the anger.

"And I'm...ha." He let out a bark of a laugh. "I'm a bit of a territorial person."

"No," Maddie's eyes narrowed playfully.
"And I'm a little bit stubborn."

"What?" She blinked, her eyes teasingly blank.

"A tad protective."

"You don't say."

"Alright," he pinched her nose, shaking his head at her, unable to help the smile on his face. "This is hard for me. When they come after you, it's hard for me."

"I know it is," she sighed. "And I love you for that. I just..."

The sharp ring of the landline pulled them both from the moment, their heads turning towards the phone that sat on the stand next to them. With a sigh of irritation, Harry stretched to answer the phone.

"Hello?" He pressed it to his ear, his eyes blinking a few times as he listened and then they went wide and flashed right to Maddie. "Yes Sir." He nodded, sitting up straight. "Of course. Yes. Okay. Good-bye."

"What is it?" Maddie asked before he had even returned the phone to its base.

"My father," Harry spoke with a slight groan. "He's coming over."

"What?" Maddie felt a panic wash over her. "When? Now?"

"Yes," Harry nodded. "Now. He's on his way."

"Oh God," she pressed a hand to her stomach, alive and full of butterflies. "Okay. Well...I guess I should get up."

"I guess so," Harry nodded, letting out a small smile as she slipped from his lap.

"What does he...ha." She shook her head as she moved around the entryway. "I know what he wants." Her eyes met his as she spun back around to look at him. "He wants to talk about it, doesn't he?"

"He does," Harry nodded, his hands stuffing into his pockets.

"Oh God," Maddie groaned, her hand sliding up to her forehead as though she were checking her temperature.

"Maddie, you know you don't need to be so nervous."

"Don't I?" Her eyebrows flew up. "Your father is on his way over to talk about these photos of..." She felt her stomach flip, felt her cheeks flush red. And suddenly she found it to be so much easier to deal with the strangers who had seen the pictures than it was to face those who knew her.

"Yes, he is," Harry nodded, watching her closely. "But he's coming to talk about legalities, he's coming to talk about what's being done now to clean it up, what the publicists want us to..."

"We're not in trouble?" She had asked before and he had answered. But as she awaited the imminent arrival of her father-in-law, she needed to hear it again.

"We are not in trouble," Harry shook his head slowly. "At least you're not in trouble."
"Why did you say it that way?" Her brows creased. "Are you in trouble?"

"No," he chuckled at how quickly that had stopped her unravel. "At least I don't think so."

"Then why..."

"Because," he shrugged, a wiry smile pulling at his lips. "I'm almost always in trouble...for almost anything."

"That's not true," Maddie countered.

"Well, not since I met you," he nodded to her.

"Ha...well..." She sighed. "That night...it was my idea..." Her eyes locked with his but at least this time they weren't as scattered. "Maybe I'm not the good influence I once was."

Trying to lighten her mood, trying to ease the panic, Harry shrugged and smirked. "Maybe not. But I think I'll keep you around anyway."

The knock on the door reverberated around them.

Charles was there.

"Well," Maddie took a deep breath, pulling all of her courage up into her core as she stood tall and nodded to the door. "Let's see if the family still agrees with that sentiment."

"Well they haven't kicked me out yet so..." He shrugged again and, feeling considerably lighter in mood than he had earlier, he opened the door to his father.

"Harry," his smile was genuine as he greeted his son. Stepping into the house, he moved to hug his son--holding tighter to his shoulders than he normally did.

"Father," Harry kissed his cheeks, shutting the door behind him as they moved inside.

"Thank you for allowing me to stop by," he released his son and his eyes shifted over to his daughter-in-law who could feel the heat of her embarrassment coloring her cheeks. As nervous as she was, she met his gaze, she stood tall. And she was greeted with an abundance of grace and understanding. "Madeline."

"Charles," she smiled, stepping towards him with a shaky breath. Before she could curtsey, before she could do much of anything, his large, strong hands were on her shoulders, pulling her into a hug.

"My dear," he kissed her cheeks, pulling back so that he could look down at her. "How are you doing?"

Trying to be strong, trying not to dissolve in tears, Maddie swallowed and blinked and took a breath. "Well I suppose I've been better."

"I suppose you have," he nodded, his eyes full of sympathy. He leaned to kiss her forehead and then released his hold on her, allowing her space to breath, to relax. And she did; much more so than she had been before he had stepped in the door. "Tell me, is there anything I can do for you?"

"No," Maddie shook her head, blinking back the tears that welled now out of relief. "You've done it." She sniffed and laughed at herself, doing her best to avoid Harry's eyes. Taking a breath she
kept her focus on her father-in-law. "I just want you to know how truly sorry I am about...all of this."

"Maddie," Harry's voice was heavy with warning.

"No," she shook her head at him without turning away from Charles. "I am. We should have known better, we should have..." She swallowed and stood tall. "It doesn't excuse what they've done, it doesn't make it right. But we should have...and I just thought I should apologize for...all the work it's made for everyone else."

The space among the three of them was quiet for a long moment; peaceful and contemplative as they all thought over Maddie's words, over all that was happening. Maddie with bated breath, Harry with his eyes fixed on her and Charles, with heavy thoughtfulness on his face.

"I'm not entirely sure what to say, my dear," he smiled to Maddie, his hands smoothing down the front of his shirt, stuffing into his pockets in a way she had seen Harry do in the past. "Though I do think it's important to note that nobody, including myself, thinks that any of this is your fault. Yes, sometimes we all make decisions in the heat of the moment that we might not have made with the same kind of retrospect that comes with time--but that's what makes us human. And I wouldn't ask any more of you than that," he cleared his throat and thought for a moment. "And I understand that part of...who we are...comes with varying degrees of a lack of privacy. I suppose some of that can be expected and at times, some of it can be welcomed..." He could almost feel his son rolling his eyes but he stayed focused on his daughter-in-law, his daughter--who needed him more in that moment. "But there are times, and this is one of them, where the violations are so egregious that there aren't really words for them and any actions that might seem worthy are probably illegal."

"Though not entirely out of line," Harry muttered under his breath.

"It's true," Charles nodded to him before turning a sympathetic smile to Maddie. "I'm truly sorry this is happening to you Madeline. And it IS happening TO you. You are not an active participant in this, no matter your actions that night. Nobody should be able to intrude on a private, intimate moment like that. I don't care who is on the other end of the lense."

Biting at her lip, Maddie tried to keep from crying but having him there in all of his stately presence putting his support behind her, relieving her of this burden she had felt since she saw the photos, she couldn't help herself. The tears fell from her eyes, even as she smiled at him. "Thank you," she whispered, wiping at her cheeks with a soft laugh. "It means a lot to hear you say that..."

"I mean it," he put his arm around her shoulder, hugging her to him as he looked over to Harry. "There's a meeting tomorrow at St. James. The attorneys, the engineers that were out to your mother's property. " He squeezed Maddie's shoulder. "They have updates for you and there are some decisions to make."

"Really?" Harry's eyebrows lifted, curious.

"Mmm," Charles nodded. "But Thomas will be contacting you about all of that soon." He dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "And that's not why I stopped by."

"Oh?" Harry was amused by the look in his father's eyes. "And why is it you stopped by?"

"To make sure you were okay," he looked between the two of them, his smile stretching high and wide. "And to see my granddaughter. Of course."
"Of course," Harry laughed, clapping his hands together.

"Is she here?" Charles glanced around, his hands rubbing together as he seemed to look for her.

"No, no," Harry shook his head. "We left her in the states, decided we needed some down time..."

"Very funny," Charles eyes dipped into a glare directed right at his second born.

"She's upstairs," Maddie cut in with a smile that came easier now. "She needed a bit more of a nap but I can take you up to her, I'm sure she would be more than happy to nap cuddled up with her Papa. Would that be alright?"

"That would be more than alright," he nodded, gesturing for Maddie to lead the way up the stairs.

And she did, with a refreshed peace of mind, she moved past Harry, squeezing his hand as she walked by, and she lead Charles up to a sleepy, snuggly Lilli.

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Though Maddie slept peacefully that night in her own bed tucked up next to Harry, the morning brought with it a new wave of nervousness. Just as Charles had said, Thomas had called them the night before, setting up a meeting for that afternoon. As ready as she was to find out what new information they had, as ready as she was to move forward to next steps, her stomach flip flopped knowing she would be soon facing a whole host of people who had seen the photos, who had studied them closely.

It was though she woke that morning with a red flush already at home on her cheeks. And it never dissipated; through her shower and breakfast and dressing for the meeting. She was blushing all the way through the ride to St. James' even with Harry next to her seemingly at ease and ready for business.

What she didn't know was that underneath the suit and the stoic face, was a boiling steam he was desperately trying to tame. Knowing that they were about to sit around a table and dissect this moment between him and Maddie, knowing the words and the phrases that were going to be tossed around, made his skin piping hot. Knowing that Maddie sat next to him a complete bundle of nerves, made his pulse pound. But he had to keep calm and he had to control his temper and he had to be there to support her.

So he was trying to keep it under control.

*Trying.*

But it wouldn't take much to set him off. Thankfully those who surrounded him knew him well and were already expecting him to be hot and rigid. So they did their best to prepare for that. They pulled up to the private entrance at SJP, blocked from view by the public just in case they had been spotted or followed. Much to everyone's relief, nobody knew about the meeting and the press and paps were nowhere to be found.

When Harry stepped out into the crisp morning air, he buttoned his suit coat and rounded the car to Maddie, reaching out to take her hand; holding her close next to him as they entered the building. Ever professionals, the staff rose to their feet with slight nods and bobs as they passed, some even offering steady eye contact and small smiles. Feeling as though she had at least a few supporters in the building, Maddie felt the tension ease from her shoulders just a bit, she felt the nervousness slip away for just a moment.

But then, as they rounded a corner, she looked up to find Thomas walking in their direction. Tall
and reserved and ever professional, he moved with a businesslike determination.

"Good morning Sir," he turned first to Harry, nodding his head in a bow as he extended his hand to shake Harry's.

"Good Morning," Harry's voice softened only a fraction as Thomas turned to Maddie then.

Without a blink of hesitation, Thomas met her gaze and smiled. "Good Morning Ma'am," he bowed his head to her and took a step forward, pressing kisses to both of her cheeks as she sucked in a shaky breath.

"Good Morning Thomas," she sighed, feeling a bit of relief in her shoulders, in the tightness of her lungs. She was thankful for the way Thomas held a place for professionalism and compassion as he escorted the two of them off to the board room.

With his hand on her arm, Harry stopped Maddie just before they stepped inside, moving closer to her, drawing her into as private of a conversation as they could have. Seeing this, Thomas quickly turned his head, diverting his eyes.

"What is it?" Maddie whispered, her eyes turning up to meet his.

"Are you okay?" His hands were warm on her shoulders.

"Of course," she smiled, her hand lifting to pat his. "I'm going to be fine Harry. I'm a big girl."

"In know," he nodded, letting out a breath of frustration at it all. "I'm just...less than thrilled about this."

"I know," she smiled wider, looking off at the group of people that had gathered, knowing there were more just on the other side of that door. "But hopefully they have some good news for us."

"Yeah?" He arched an eyebrow. "What are we considering good news at this point? Massive internet failure?"

"Something like that," she laughed lightly. "Come on Captain. I'm fine. Let's get in there and get this over with."

Nodding his head, Harry's hands smoothed down her arms and let go. Turning to Thomas, his voice came out louder. "We're ready."

"Of course," Thomas stepped back up to them, pulling open the doors and gesturing ahead of himself. "After you."

Maddie, pulling herself together, stood tall, brought a smile to her lips and then, with Harry's hand on her back and all of his strength right behind her, she stepped into the room.

In the end, the team of people gathered around the table did have good news--as good of news as could come their way, short of massive internet failure. Maddie sat at Harry's side, her mind reeling as she processed all they had told her. She looked over the paperwork placed in front of her, she took in what they were saying but it wasn't until she and Harry were alone--until Thomas had cleared the room to give them a minute--that she finally let it settle.

"He..." She swallowed at the dryness in her throat, her head turning slowly to look at Harry who sat still and silent next to her. "He was on my mother's property." Her eyes were wide as they blinked, her head shaking in something of disbelief.
Sitting forward, Harry pushed his chair away from the table, rising to his feet in effort to expend some of the energy it had taken to sit there and hear what they had to say without breaking something. "Of course he was on your mother's property..." His jaw was clenched, his hands balled up into fists. "Did you see how close he got to us?!

"I..." Maddie let out a sarcastic laugh. "I can't believe it...Harry..." She leaned back, watching him walk around the room. "He was breaking the law. He was trespassing..." She took in a breath and looked down at the documents in front of her. "And they can prove it."

As satisfying as it was, as monumental as this evidence could prove to be, the relief and excitement that Maddie felt came with a deep sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Harry?" She looked over to where he stood, hands on his hips as he stared out a large window. "Are you okay?"

"No," his answer was quick, automatic. "Yes," he corrected with a shrug. "I wasn't expecting this," his confession was heavy with emotions that he had been storing for years and years. "Every time they've done something like this, they've been so careful," his hands moved to the small stand that ran underneath the window, his fingers gripping it as he worked it all out. "We could never go after them. We had no recourse and now..." His head dropped, hanging heavy for a long moment.

"Now we can go after them, after him..." Maddie's voice was soft as she called to him, wanting to give him space, wanting to hug him close. "We can come out swinging and...Harry...what do you think we should...do?" She was just as thrown as he was at the options laid out in front of them. "What do you want to do?"

Without turning around, his head shook slowly. "I don't know," he exhaled, one of his hands leaving the stand to rub at the back of his neck. "Fuck, Maddie. I really don't know."

The two brothers sat across from each other in Harry's office. Surrounded in dark brown leather and the heaviness that came with this conversation, with the burden they seemed to never evade. "Well..." Harry sucked in a breath, leaning in to place his glass of scotch on the table between them. "What do you think?" After the meeting, on their way back to Kensington Palace, Maddie had reached over, taken his hand, and suggested they call in reinforcements, guidance. They had called the only two people they knew who had been in a situation close to this, the other two people they trusted implicitly. Once they had arrived, Maddie and Kate had drifted to the kitchen while Will and Harry went off to his office.

Deep in thought, Will rubbed at the back of his neck and sighed. "I don't know, Harry," he shook his head. "Even though I know that it's not, it seems like an easy answer to me; a really easy answer."

Harry nodded; heavy and slow. He knew exactly what Will was thinking. "You would go for it."

"Yes," Will's eyes were dark, his jaw tight. trying to control the way his emotions surged forward. "After all of these years, after everything they've done, you're finally in a place where you can put your foot down and cut them off at the knees..." Will leaned back, shaking his head as he thought of all that had been dropped on them over the years, on those they loved.

"I know," Harry nodded, understanding exactly where his brother was coming from--a large part of him coming from the very same place.

"You can go after them," Will leaned forward, eager. "And you have the law behind you this
"I know," Harry took a deep breath, reaching for his drink and taking a long sip. "I know you're right."

"But?" Will lifted his eyebrows, waiting. "You're hung up on something..."

"Yeah," Harry leaned back against the couch, his fingers rubbing at his temple, at the ache that had been in his head for days. "It's not just me we're talking about."

"But it's Maddie's mother we're talking about." He waved his hand towards the door. "It's not even just Maddie. If it were...then it would be easy." He shook his head. "But it's Maddie's mother we're talking about."

"Because it was her property," Will nodded.

"Yes. And if we go after them, then she plays a big part in that," Harry met his brother's eyes. "So then I'm dragging Maddie's mother into this fucking circus. And you know what would happen then, you know how that would play out..." Harry rubbed his hands up over his face, into his hair and looked to his brother for guidance. "You would do that? Drag the Middletons into this?"

"Tell me, what does she say about it all? Mrs. Forrester?"

"Ha..." Harry laughed. "She's just like Maddie; stubborn and punchy and takes no shit from anyone." He sighed. "She says that she supports whatever decision we make."

"She says?" Will caught the tone of his brother's voice. "You think she doesn't mean it?"

"I think she doesn't know..." Harry's voice dropped low as he shrugged his shoulders. "She supports our decision, whatever it is. And she means it, she really does. She just doesn't know what the fallout looks like. But I do."

"You do."

"And so do you," Harry's eyes shifted back up to meet Will's. "So what do I do Big Brother? Take a stand? March my wife's family into the fire? Or let it go and..." His entire face tightened. "And let them win. Again."

"I don't know," Will shook his head, his eyes wide with sympathy for his brother. "I...Jesus Harry. I don't know. I do want you to know though, you have my support. No matter the direction you go."

"Thank you," Harry smiled. "I appreciate that."

"Tell me," Will tossed back the last of his drink. "What does Maddie want to do?"

Harry smiled as he thought of her, his beautiful, strong wife who had had to weather way too much because of him. "Sometimes she wants to kill him and sometimes she wants to run away to Mustique and never return and sometimes..." Harry took a breath. "Sometimes she wishes she would have married Bishop."

"Yeah?" Will cracked a smile. "She tell you that?"

"Not yet," Harry snickered. "But a few more years of this and..."
"Yeah," Will nodded. "Do you think she's leaning one way or another?"

"No," Harry shook his head, his lips curving down into a frown. "But I will tell you this...we're going to end up doing whatever it is Maddie wants to do."

"What can I do?" Kate's smile was soft and sweet as she looked to Maddie across the table. With a wine glass in her hand and a calm nature about her that made Maddie feel at ease around her.

"I don't know," Maddie shook her head, swallowing a sip from her glass. "Listening helps. Thank you for that by the way. I know I have no room to complain considering what's been done to you..."

"No, no," Kate shook her head. "One violation isn't more or less than another."

"That's true," Maddie whispered, feeling an unexpected rush of tears to her eyes. "That's true..."

"Hey..." Kate's hand stretched across the table to Maddie, her fingers warm as she patted her hand. "I'm sorry Maddie."

"Thanks," Maddie sniffed, wiping at her eyes with one hand as she held onto Kate's with the other. "I just...I don't know what to do next. I've come to terms with the fact that the pictures are out there and that people have seen them and I was prepared to just...let it play its course and then fade but now..." She took in a deep breath and smiled. "Now they have a case, now they can file suits and it just makes it bigger." She laughed then, a sick, twisted laugh that Kate understood all too well. "Who knew it could get bigger than pictures of me giving Harry a blow job."

Kate's lips curled higher, her head shaking as she shared a light laugh with Maddie. "What did the team say about it all?"

"They left it to us," Maddie sighed. "And as thankful as I am for the power to make some sort of decision in the middle of all this...shit..." She rolled her eyes. "There's a part of me that just wishes this was one of those decisions that were made for me." Her head tipped to the side. "Come to think of it...maybe that's how you can help."

"Oh?" Kate's eyebrows lifted, her glass poised at her mouth.

"Maybe you can make the decision for me."

"Oh no," Kate shook her head, taking a drink. "No way."

"You could tell me what you would do," Maddie waved her hand towards her. "What you would have done..."

"Maddie..."

"Honestly though," Maddie's voice dropped lower. "When those pictures of you came out, had that pervert been on private property, had you had the ability to go after him...would you?"

Kate's eyes shifted to the side, her mind drifting in thought to a place in her past, a place much like the one Maddie was sitting in right now. After a long minute, after another sip of her wine, she leaned forward and, meeting Maddie's eyes, she shrugged. "I don't know. And I'm not just saying that to evade the question. I really do not know."

"Exactly..." Maddie sighed.
"On one hand, I was deeply grateful to have the photos and the discussion fade from my present. Letting that drift to my past was something I welcomed with open arms," Kate shook her head as she took another drink from her glass. "On the other hand...it would have been nice to have some sort of vindication, something that made it official...that they were wrong. You know?"

"I do," Maddie whispered, her heart aching for her friend, her sister.

"And they were wrong," Kate insisted. "The man who took the photos of me in France and the man who took the photos of you in Colorado. They were wrong."

"They were," Maddie finished her drink and reached for the bottle. "And now...we've been handed the ability to make them own that. We can make it official..." She reached to top off Kate's glass. "How do we not do that? For all of us?"

"Because..." Kate sighed, slumping back into her chair. "It's not that easy, not that simple. None of this is."

"No," Maddie shook her head. "None of this is."

"What does Harry want to do?"

"What do you think Harry wants to do?" Maddie's eyes met Kate's and they shared a knowing look.

Kate nodded, licking her lips as she twirled the glass around in her fingers. "When you asked...what I would have done..."

"Yeah?"

"I may not have known, I may still not know," she lifted her eyes up to Maddie's. "But Will. He knew. He still knows. In fact, my guess is he's in there telling Harry the exact same thing right now."

"What's that?" Maddie asked, already knowing the answer.

"He'd bring them to their knees," Kate shrugged, taking another sip. "Whatever it took, however long it took. He'd drop them where they stand."

Maddie gulped at the lump in her throat, knowing for sure that both of the brothers they were married to had it in them to go to that place in their minds. Harry had admitted it to her numerous times; he was fiercely protective; loyal and stubborn and when somebody messed with those he loved--he absolutely had it in him to be ruthlessly vindictive. And Maddie knew the same about Will.

She wondered, as she sat in the kitchen sipping wine with Kate, which way they would end up going, which way Harry would lead them. And she knew, looking over at the woman she considered much more than a confidante, much more than a sister, that this situation was bigger than just them. It was bigger than this particular set of pictures, than this particular photographer. And she wondered--if the time had come for somebody to step up and bare the wrath--and the responsibility--of a collective of great many injustices.

Clearing her throat, Maddie took a deep breath and made an attempt to shift the mood. "My cousin says that it could have been worse."

"Oh?" Kate's eyebrows lifted along with the tension in the room. "How's that?"
Smirking into her glass, Maddie repeated Kyle's words. "It could have been somebody else's cock...or somebody else's mouth..."

Nearly snorting wine up her nose, Kate sat down her glass, waving her hand in front of her face as she laughed. "Jesus..." She wiped at her face with her napkin. "Yes. Well. That would have absolutely been worse."

"Yes..." Maddie sighed, laughing along with her. "But at least I'd know what we would be doing next."

"Cut him off at the knees?" Kate smirked.

"Somewhere a little higher," Maddie winked.

"Well..." Maddie watched her husband from across the kitchen as she sat dishes in the sink, as he came down from all of the drinks he had shared with his brother that night. "What did Will say? What would he do?"

Harry looked over to her, his eyes catching hers as he shrugged, a small smile pulling at his lips. "It doesn't really matter what Will would do..."

"What?" Maddie laughed. "Of course it does. What did he say?"

"Maddie..." It was late and he was tired and drunk.

"Murder and mayhem?" She supplied with a sarcastic tone, placing the last of the glasses in the sink before turning to him. "Everyone wants to kill this guy, don't they?"

"Everyone?" Harry lifted his eyebrows, rubbing his hand over his sleepy face.

"Everyone that matters," Maddie folded her arms over her chest, leaning back against the counter. "Will...you..."

"I never said I wanted to kill him," he shook his head. "Yes you did," she laughed as he moved next to her, facing her as his hands held onto the counter next to her. "The very first day, that's the first thing you said."

"I did," Harry nodded, sighing as he shrugged. "Maybe I've calmed down?"

"Have you?" Her lips twitched as she smiled, catching the question in his voice.

"I don't know," he exhaled deeply. "Maybe I'm trying."

"Hey..." Maddie reached out to him then, her hand rubbing up his arm; warm and comforting. "You don't have to calm down. Not for me." Her fingers rounded over the swell of his bicep, giving him a squeeze. "I want to know how you really feel, what you really think..."

"How I really feel?" The corner of his mouth quirked up, his eyes flashing as he looked to her. "I feel like letting them loose."

"Them?"

"The teams of people who would go after him," Harry's eyes lifted up to look out into nothing, his mind working. "I feel like this man messed with my family and I feel like he should be...punished..."
"for that," his grip on the counter tightened. "And...if they won't let me take a swing at him then I suppose this would be good enough..."

"Yeah..." Maddie's hand moved around to his back, soothing and sweet, knowing he was shouldering quite a burden with this.

"But." He bit off the word. "But I think that doing so would only draw this out, would only widen its impact on my family..."

"How do you mean?" Maddie's eyes narrowed in confusion.

"Your mother," he nodded to her. "This pulls her into the deep end."

"Ah..." Maddie got it.

"Ah," he repeated, turning to stand next to her, leaning back against the counter and shrugging his shoulders.

"You know she's on board with whatever..."

"I know," Harry nodded. "And you know that you don't really understand how overwhelming 'whatever' can be until you're in it..."

"True."

"You want to pull your mother into this?"

"I don't know what I want," she answered simply, honestly. "I've thought it over and over and over and I still...I have no idea what I want."

"Yeah..." Harry smiled down at her, thankful for her in so many different ways.

"And you?" She nudged him with her shoulder. "Are you leaning one way or another?"

"Mmm," he nodded, leaning to kiss her cheek. "I'm leaning towards passing out...in my bed...with my wife..." He pushed away from the counter, pulling her hand into his and tugging her with him. "And sleeping off the Scotch I drank with my brother tonight...before I have to do it all again tomorrow night with Bishop."

Maddie snickered at him, letting him pull her from the kitchen, letting him pull her from that conversation for the night. "I don't know, Captain. Maybe you're getting too old for this. Maybe you can't pull off tomorrow night with Bishop..."

"Shush," he stopped, dipping to press his lips to hers. "We haven't seen the Bishops in months..."

"Months?" She rolled her eyes, knowing he was completely off.

"I miss them. I need a night with them," he sighed. "I think we both do. Laid back, easygoing....laughter..."

"You don't think they're going to mention the pictures?" She followed him up the stairs.

"Oh I'm sure they're going to mention the pictures," Harry groaned, already gearing up for at least one off-handed comment. "But at least when I throw something at Bishop's head, it won't make the papers..."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tossed back in laughter. Even though he was joking, the image alone was
enough to make her snort. "You're right. We do need some time with them."

"Yes," he chuckled along with her. "Yes we do."
Maddie hadn't planned on drinking so much that night with the Bishops, she really hadn't. But it was the first time the four of them had been together without the children. With both little ones off at their respective grandparents, Maddie should have known that they would all cut a little loose. She should have guessed that the alcohol would pour freely.

But for some reason she was still surprised to find herself giggling on the couch next to Ella, sipping on her fourth glass of champagne feeling, for the first time in a while, completely relaxed. It was that freedom she felt, that slight edge from the liquor, that gave her the push she needed to open up the great big box of obvious that had sat in the room with them. The one neither of their friends had mentioned, out of a great love they all shared.

But there on the couch with a fresh glass of champagne in her fingers, Maddie decided it was time to just open it up and get it out in the open.

"So..." She sighed, settling back into the cushions tucking her feet up underneath her as she turned to Ella with a grin. "Are we really not going to talk about it?"

"It?" Ella's smile was wide, her own level of intoxication just enough that she didn't see it coming.

"The pictures," Maddie waved her hand, looking over at Harry and Bishop who sat in chairs across from them, nearly as deep into Scotch as they were into their champagne.

"Ahhh..." Ella nodded, her eyes glancing over to her husband as her cheeks flushed. "The pictures."

"You've seen them?" Maddie lifted her eyebrows, looking at Ella over her glass as she drank.

"Yeah," Ella nodded, having the wherewithal to look slightly embarrassed. "I saw the first two that popped up with the article but I didn't look at the rest."

Maddie nodded, swallowing more champagne. "And?"

"And?" Ella laughed lightly.

"What did you think?"

"Ha..." Ella met Maddie's eyes, holding her gaze as she tried to read her, as she tried to judge which way this was going to go. "Well..." She took a deep breath and went with her gut instinct. "I thought your hair looked nice."

"Jesus," Harry groaned as Maddie pulled her glass away from her mouth, laughter pushing from her lips as she swallowed what was in her mouth.

"My hair looked nice?" Maddie sighed, shaking her head as she giggled. "That's what you're going to say to me right now?"

"What did you want me to say to you right now?" Ella grinned as she shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know," Maddie laughed, shaking her head at her best friend. "But there are pictures all over the world of me with Harry's cock in my mouth and..."

"Whoa, whoa," Bishop held up his hand, nearly choking on his own drink.
"And all you really have to say is...nice hair?" Maddie sighed. "Come on Ella. Be real with me. We've been through way too much for you to tiptoe around this and..."

"And what?" Ella countered her. "So you occasionally blow your husband..."

"For fuck's sake," Harry wiped at the Scotch that tumbled from his glass, shocked at the words that were flying around them.

"Good for you," Ella raised her glass. "Good for him," she snickered, nodding in Harry's direction. "It's really fucking unfair that people follow you around and make money off of showcasing your private life but...I don't know Maddie. People are making a really huge deal out of something that's really fucking small."

"Well," Harry mumbled into his glass. "It's not that small."

"Harry!" Maddie turned wide eyes to her husband, shocked and pleased to finally get a bit of humor out of him.

"Well you really couldn't tell," Ella shifted her gaze right over to him, not even blinking as she jumped into the banter with him. "Maddie's big ol' head was in the way and the pictures really weren't that good."

Bishop and Maddie were both looking at Harry, waiting and wondering which way this was going to go. When he sat back in his chair and shrugged, they both relaxed. "That's a fair point," he conceded to Ella, lifting his glass; first to her and then to his lips—which were smiling wide for the first time in a long time.

"But," Ella took another drink and went for it. "If you wanted to ease our curiosity..."

"Hey!" Bishop's eyes shot right to her. "Easy!"

"Knock it off!" Maddie laughed, tossing a pillow in Ella's direction as laughter took over the four of them.

Winking, Harry nodded to Ella, "maybe after a little more Scotch?"

"Maybe," she tossed a wink back before she sighed and turned back to Maddie, stretching to pat her arm. "I am sorry they're out there darling. And I'm really sorry that people are saying what they're saying."

"Oh well," Maddie shrugged. "What can you do? I mean...I know what we can do about the photographer but...what can you do about all of the commenters?"

"Nothing really," Ella shook her head, wishing that weren't true. "But that doesn't mean it isn't fucking ridiculous."

"Right?!" Maddie laughed. "Damn hypocrites!" She took another sip from her glass. "Droning on and on as if they wouldn't suck Harry's dick in heartbeat if given the chance." With Harry choking on a mouthful of whiskey and Bishop's eyes growing exponentially wider, Maddie laughed along with Ella and continued her own little frustrated rant. "I mean...they think I don't know about the list of people who want in my husband's pants?!" She waved her hand towards Harry. "These people who scour the internet for shots of him in tight pants, hoping to get a glance at his bulge? They would jump at the chance. But when I jump at the chance, with my HUSBAND mind you, I'm the one with the loose morals?! I'm the slut? Okay. Sure." She rolled her eyes. "They just wish they could be the slut with Prince Harry's cock
in their mouth.” With Ella next to her in a fit of laughter, Maddie went for another sip, finding her glass empty.

"Here," Bishop cleared his throat, amazed at how things were unraveling there in front of him. "Allow me." Rising to his feet, he topped off her glass and sat the bottle on the table.

"Thank you Bishop," she nodded a smile up to him before glancing to his wife. "You know I'm right."

"I know," Ella tried to catch her breath. "But hearing you say it...

Maddie took a sip from her fresh glass, looking over to the two men who, well laughing along with them, had remained relatively silent. "What about you?" She focused her gaze on Bishop.

"Me?" He pressed his hand to his chest. "I can honestly say I've never been on the long list of people who want in your husband's pants."

"Aw come on," Harry flashed a sarcastic smile in his direction.

"Well maybe just the once..." Bishop gave way, playing along with Harry who simply shook his head, sipping his own drink.

"Funny," Maddie's eyes were alive with amusement. "You've been awfully quiet about all of this Bishop."

"Have I?" He sat back in his chair, finding this whole exchange humorous, assuming correctly that it was cathartic for her.

"Mmm," she nodded. "And that's not really your thing...what gives?"

"Nothing," he shrugged. "I have no problem with your exhibitionist lifestyle."

"Exhibitionist?" Maddie's eyes shot wide.

"It means that you like to..."

"I know what it means," she cut him off, trying her best to glare at him.

"Of course you do," he offered a smirk of his own, a teasing wink.

"I should slap you for that tone," she countered.

"You probably should," he agreed, happy that she was laughing along with him.

"But..." She sighed. "The pictures...you haven't said one thing about the pictures."

"Yeah I know," he let out a breath. "I haven't seen them."

"What?" Maddie blinked, the smile drifting from her face, glancing back and forth between him and Ella. "What do you mean you haven't seen them?"

"I mean that...I haven't seen them." He shrugged his shoulders, not wanting to make a bigger deal out of it than necessary.

"You haven't?" Even Harry was surprised.

"But..." Maddie shook her head, thrown. "Why not?"
With a deep breath, he sat forward, allowing them all to slip serious for just a moment. "Because. There are just...there a few things in life that a man simply shouldn't see. And his best friend's wife on her knees...that's one of them."

Maddie felt tears welling in her eyes. "But..." She swallowed at the lump rising in her throat. "But I wasn't on my knees."

"Yeah?" Bishop held her eyes, smiling in that sweet, wonderful way he had. "Well I would have no way of knowing that."

As tears slipped onto her cheeks, Maddie was up from her spot on the couch. Setting her glass on the table, she moved right over to Bishop and, surprising them all, she sat down in his lap and hugged him tight. "Thank you," she whispered as she kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

"You okay?" He hugged her back, smiling up at her as she nodded and stood.

"Yes," she wiped at her eyes, taking a deep breath, clearing her thoughts. "I hadn't realized how much I needed for somebody to have not seen them." She sank back into her chair. "Thank you for that Bishop."

"You're welcome."

"Okay," she sighed, turning her smile to Harry. "Okay."

"Yeah?" Harry's heart had been aching for her for a long time, it was good to see her find some solace in his best friend.

"Yeah," she nodded, smiling as Ella took her hand.

"Come here," Ella nodded her over and Maddie went, snuggling close to her best friend. "How can we help? What can we do?"

"I don't know," Maddie sighed, her eyes lifting to meet Harry's. "We just have to wait out the excitement about it all..." She played with Ella's fingers and shrugged. "And we need to decide what we're going to do about the photographer."

As Ella nodded along, Bishop shifted in his chair, a rough, cough of a sound rumbling in the back of his throat that indicated disgust and irritation. Harry shook his head, sharing a look with Bishop that Maddie couldn't quite read.

"What?" She blinked, looking between the two of them. "What was that?"

"Nothing," Harry shook his head.

"It was something," Maddie's lips turned up in a smile, her eyes shifting to Bishop. "You want to weigh in on this?"

"Me?" He pressed his hand to his chest. "No, no." He shook his head, looking down into his drink. "This isn't my place at all."

"Sure it is," Maddie turned to him, interested in what he might have to say about all of this. "I value your opinion and I know Harry does. Come on Bishop..."

His eyes were fixed on Harry for a minute before he turned to look at Maddie. With a smile and a quick shake of his head, he avoided the question. "It doesn't matter what I would do."
"What?" Maddie laughed, glancing between the two men. "Of course it matters. I'm looking for input from everyone, most of all our closest friends..." She looked to Ella who shrugged and back to Bishop, sighing as she leaned back in her chair. "You would let it go, wouldn't you?"

"Why do you say that?" He nodded towards her.

"Because...there was this time when Harry and I were just dating..." Maddie's smile tugged higher as her mind drifted into their past. "When some magazine printed old pictures of him and some blonde at the park and made it play like it was recent...do you remember?" She looked to Harry.

"I remember," he nodded, his lips curling up into a bemused grin.

"Anyway..." Maddie looked to Bishop. "You came and found me while I was walking and processing and you told me that this was what it was like to be in Harry's life. I was either in or I was out."

"You told her what?" Harry turned to his best friend.

"Not quite like that," Bishop held up his hand.

"Exactly like that," Maddie snickered, her eyes watching Bishop. "Your message was that I had no control over stuff like this and fighting it was futile. I just...I had to find a way to let it go and love him in the middle of all of it."

"Aw," Ella's head tipped to the side, her smile sweet on her husband.

"I did say that," Bishop winked to his wife before he looked back to Maddie. "But that was different."

"How?"

"How?!" Bishop's eyes flashed wide. "Come on. That was innocent and he was in public and they were old pictures and what I was telling you was that people were always going to twist things to try to cause a stir, to try to bring drama, to try to increase sales..."

"And that's not what this is?"

"Not even close," Bishop's voice grew sharp, dark in a way Maddie wasn't sure she had ever heard from him. "This is some guy sneaking the fuck around on private property, evading protective detail and stalking somebody." He sat his glass down on the table with an audible clink. "Some sick fuck taking pictures of something nobody should be a part of unless they're invited to be." Bishop's eyebrows lifted and his eyes held onto Maddie's. "What would I do? If somebody had done this to my wife?" He shrugged. "I would fucking kill him."

"Bishop..." Ella's reflex was to reach out to him, having very rarely seen him like this.

"And I don't just mean killing him," he clarified. "First I'd send all of the resources at my disposal after him; lawyers, accountants, headhunters. I'd unleash hell on his head, take everything from him that meant...anything." He took in a breath. "And once that was over, once he wished he was dead...I'd kill him. With my bare hands."

Maddie sat stunned and completely fixated on Bishop, on the look in his eyes. Swallowing, she tried to pull her gaze from him. But when she finally did, she looked to Harry who was looking right back at her. With a tight jaw and a red face and eyes as dark as Bishop's, Harry was watching her and she got it.
Harry felt the exact same way as Bishop.

"But," Bishop cut into the tension that had filled the room. "Obviously you can't do that..."

"What?" Harry's head snapped over to him. "Why?"

"Because," Bishop smiled at him, understanding him better than anyone. "You're the Duke of Sussex my friend and your hands are, in this instance, tied."

"Fuck," Harry breathed.

"But, if you want me to..." Though Bishop's lips were smiling, everything else about him was serious. "I can go get him."

"Go get him?" Maddie looked between the two of them, glancing to Ella for help. "You're really going to go kill some man in Nebraska?"

Bishop didn't answer. Instead he turned his eyes to Harry and as well as Maddie thought she knew the two of them, she honestly didn't know how seriously to take this wordless conversation that was happening between the two of them.

Finally Harry looked to her, his smile the first to crack as he shook his head. "No. Of course he's not going to go kill some man in Nebraska."

Though the four of them laughed, though the room relaxed, every single person in that room knew one thing was certain--if Harry had agreed to it, Bishop would have done it.

And Maddie wasn't quite sure how she felt about that.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ It was late that night when Maddie and Harry finally walked through their front door--or early the next morning. They had been at the Bishops' all night; eating, drink, laughing and having just the kind of night they had needed since the photos had dropped. With Lilli at Charles and Camilla's and enough champagne still in them to be tipsy, Harry dropped his keys on the table next to the door, shutting it loudly behind him. Giggling, Maddie flipped on the lights, both of them stepping into their home, both of them breathing a little easier.

"That..." Maddie turned around, walking back towards the stairs as she smiled to him. "Was a fantastic idea Wales."

"Getting drunk with the Bishops?" He lifted his eyebrows, laughing at the wide way she smiled, the soft sway of her hips. He had known her long enough, knew her well enough to know--she was tipsy. She was feeling warm and wonderful and all in all--he was thrilled about that.

"Yes," she bit her lower lip, stopping at the bottom of the stairs to pull off her shoes. "I didn't realize...at the beginning of you and me..." She waved her hand to him.

"Didn't realize what?" He chuckled, shedding his own shoes, his jacket.

"How important it would be," she sighed, pushing her hair back from her face. "To have people like them in our lives."

"People like them..." He knew what it meant to him, but he wanted to know what it meant to her. Harry followed behind as Maddie lead the way up the stairs, pausing as she reached the second floor, turning to answer.
"People who don't dodge the truth. People who will be real with you. People who aren't afraid to tell you that maybe, just maybe..." She stood tall as he approached her, her hands resting on his chest as he listened. "You shouldn't be giving your husband head on the deck...right there in the great wide open."

Harry huffed out a laugh, his hands moving to her hips, bringing her to him. "Now, now. Don't be hasty," his eyes were heavy as he smiled down at her, walking them both back towards their room. "I didn't hear one person say anything even close to that..."

"Oh you didn't?" Maddie laughed, her hands sliding higher, up around his neck.

"I didn't," he shook his head, dipping to kiss her. "And even if they did..." He kissed her again. "I really, really don't want you to stop."

"No?" Though everything about this conversation was heavy with impure thoughts, Maddie's eyes showed nothing but innocence.

"No," he shook his head again, his mouth trailing kisses down from hers as they reached their room.

"So you're fine then..." She breathed, her hands moving into his hair, holding his mouth to her neck as she reminded herself to stand. "With me being on the list..." She sucked in a breath as his hands lifted to her chest; hot and rough. "...of people wanting in your pants..."

"Mmm..." He grinned against the soft skin of her collarbone, his tongue tipping down to the roundness of her chest. "As long as you're the only one on the list."

"Ha!" Maddie's head tipped back in laughter, the sound bouncing around their room. "That will never be the case Captain..."

"Maddie," he groaned, everything inside of him wanting to sidestep the banter for just tonight. His face pulled away from her skin, his eyes lifting to hers. "You know that I don't care about...all of this...right?"

"What?" She was confused, her eyes searching his for answers.

"This...this...craziness," he rolled his eyes, his hands running over her curves, holding her close; tight. "I don't care that the entire world knows that we have an active sex life...I don't care that they know that I have no problem jumping in with you outside, right in the open..."

"Harry..."

"And God, baby, I don't care that they know what my face looks like when..." He sucked in a breath, his fingers tracing over her lips as he gently moved her back against the wall, right next to the doors that opened to their balcony. "I love this mouth Maddie." He leaned in to kiss her; slow and sexy. "I don't care that they know that."

"Can I tell you a secret?" She kissed him back, her head tipping back against the wall as he moved in closer. "I don't really care that they know how much I like having you...in my mouth."

The groan that pulled from Harry was deep and low and reverberated in Maddie's chest. "Madeline..."

"I love you," she cut him off, wanting to be clear. "And they can call me whatever the fuck they want to...I'm not going to stop wanting to drive you absolutely mad."
There was a brief pause in Harry's mission, a moment when the cloud of lust and want lifted and in his clear mind, all he could think about was just how much he loved her. Right then. Smiling up at him with that tipsy grin of hers, telling him very clearly that even after this massive violation, she still loved him. Still wanted him.

Swallowing back the emotion in his throat, he shook off the momentary lapse into heaviness and breathed in the haze of sexiness that had been with them all night.

With one finger dragging hotly from her lips, to her jaw and down the side of her neck, his other hand skimmed up her side, slipping underneath the hem of her shirt. When his fingers found her hot skin, Maddie giggled. Her hips pressed out towards him and with her hands wrapped around his biceps, she pulled him to her.

Harry knew he had been more careful with her since the photos had hit, he knew he had been reserved. It hadn't been entirely unintentional. But it wasn't because he hadn't wanted her, it wasn't because he was afraid to touch her and it sure as hell wasn't because he wasn't THERE any longer.

He simply hadn't know how she would feel after the entire world had stepped in on such a private, intimate moment between them. If he was honest...he was afraid that she wouldn't want to touch him for a while, that she wouldn't want to let go like they had on that deck at her mother's.

But it was becoming abundantly clear, through her words and her actions, just how wrong he had been to worry.

And now, there was nothing reserved about the way he was kissing her, nothing tentative about the way he was handling her, his hands rough and hot on her skin, his hips rocking slowly against hers as he tugged at her clothes, as the heat between them boiled.

"You know..." Harry tossed aside her shirt, his fingers returning to her chest, cupping up under her bra, roughing over her chest. "There really is only one thing I would change about all of it..."

"What?" Maddie's eyes lifted from where they were focused on the muscles in his arm, the way they stretched and strained as his hands worked her over. "I don't..." She shook her head, distracted from her thoughts when he slipped off her bra, when he leaned in to take her nipple into his mouth. "Ohhhh..." She breathed, her head tipping back against the wall again.

Grinning against her chest, Harry's tongue ran wet around her nipple before he pulled back and looked up at her. In his eyes, in his smile was that raucous twinkle, that look that made Maddie suck in her breath in preparation, that made her stomach flip flop, that made heat and want shoot straight to that spot just lower than her stomach.

Kissing his way up her chest, Harry spoke in heavy, lust-filled breaths. "I would...much rather...it be me..." He stood up tall, his hands on her hips skimming over her stomach as they slid to her center.

"You?" She gasped as his fingers slipped into the top of her pants.

"Mmm," he nodded, biting his lip as his fingers moved lower. "I would much rather it be me...on my knees."

As quickly as his words registered in her foggy brain, Harry was moving, his eyes locked hotly with hers as he dropped to his knees right there in front of her. Before her brain had a chance to catch up with her pounding heart, Harry had her pants at her ankles, lifting her feet to tug them off of her, taking her panties with them.
When his mouth returned to her, when his fingers wrapped around her thighs and his nose nudged into that warm, wet place that only he knew, Maddie was quite suddenly, and infinitely thankful for a great many things.

For the wall behind her that held her up.

For the wild red hair where her fingers were buried.

She was thankful their daughter was with her grandparents.

Thankful she could moan and groan and call out to God without any inhibitions.

As if she had any chance of keeping quiet, as if she had choice.

All of the time Harry had been restraining himself with her had built up and was flowing out of him as he moved in on her, as his mouth ravished her, as his lips and his tongue and those long, glorious fingers of his gave and gave and never once relented.

Until she was close, until the cries that pushed from her lungs were deep and primal and heavy with the breathiness that drove Harry absolutely fucking mad.

"Oh God Harry..." Her hips pushed out, grinding against his face, wanting more of him. "I'm so close...I..."

"Hold on..." Harry pulled back, bringing a groan of protest from his wife. With a wide, wicked grin, he kissed her swollen center and moved, rising to his feet.

"Harry...." She shook her head at him, catching herself against the wall, catching her breath. "What are you..." Her eyes narrowed as he went to the doors to their balcony, turning the locks, the knobs, pushing them open. With an amused chuckle, she shook her head. "Surely you aren't suggesting that we go out there and..."

"No," he breathed, returning to standing in front of her. His hands gathered her face, tipping her lips up to him as he kissed her; deep and long. "It will be some time before I take you outside like that again..."

"Some?" Maddie's eyebrow lifted, her lips curling up in a smug smile. Shaking his head at her, he kissed her again and then moved back, already lowering back to his knees. "Then why the doors..." Her train of thought was distracted by his lips returning to their work.

"Because," he breathed hotly against her thighs. "Just because I'm not going to let them get pictures of you doesn't mean I don't want them to know..."

"Know what..." She gasped as his tongue slipped into her, as his fingers stroked against her.

"That as much as you...," he ran his hands up and down her thighs. "Want in my pants..." His tongue tipped out, running a long, slow lap up the center of her, making her knees give, making her groan. "I want in yours so much more....God Maddie." He stroked against her. "As much as you like having me in your mouth..."

"Ohhhhh..." Maddie moaned at the memory, at the thought.

"I love tasting you."

"Harry..."
"I want them to know that," he leaned into her. "I want them hear that...." The fingers that weren't currently stroking inside of her reached up to her chest, hot and insistent and rough against her.

"Harry..."

"I want to hear it," His voice grew heavier, deeper, his focus shifting right back to this room. To her. "Come on Maddie," he encouraged. "Let me hear it baby..."

And it was mere moments before he got his wish, before his efforts were rewarded with the cries he had elicited from his wife.

Happy and full of his own hot desires, Harry held onto her as she came apart at his mouth. And then, heavy with lust, he rose to his feet and wasted no time shedding what remained of his clothes. In a matter of seconds he was pushing her back against the wall. He was holding her tight as he pressed into her, as he moved inside of her, as he kissed her lips and nipped at her skin.

And it wasn't long before her cries came again, drowned out only by his own.

And neither of them cared who heard it; neither of them cared who knew.

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It was very early in the morning when Harry woke with the beginnings of a headache and a full bladder. Slipping from underneath the blankets, he stepped from bed, the room was cold from the rain that had rolled in overnight. They had fallen asleep with the doors still open and the smell of rain had drifted inside, the drops playing a soft drumming patter that made him smile.

When he returned from their bathroom, he went over to the doors and pulled them mostly shut, keeping them open just enough to not shut out the sounds and smells completely. Staring out the rain streaked glass, he stood still for a moment, his arms stretching up over his head, bending his neck from side to side, hoping the pills he took, the water he had gulped would hold off the headache he knew he deserved.

Hoping to manage a few more hours of sleep, Harry turned back towards the bed, his eyes drifting to the wall he had taken Maddie against. His cheeks flushed pink as he grinned and looked over to her. Surprised to find her looking right back at him, his hand pressed to his chest, his eyes flashing wide. "You're awake."

"Mmmmm..." She nodded, a smile on her face as she snuggled into her pillow.

"Did I wake you?"

"No," she shook her head. "I was just...thinking."

"About?"

"What we're going to do," she blinked, keeping her eyes on his.

"Today?" the side of Harry's mouth lifted in half a smile. "Well I was hoping for a few more hours of sleep, maybe some greasy breakfast and tea..." He shrugged.

"That's not what I meant," Maddie smiled.

"I know," he nodded, taking a deep breath before he moved back to the bed, before he was crawling in next to her. He sighed into his pillow, turning on his side to face her and though he had every urge to pull her to him, he kept his hands to himself, wanting to give her space for this
Neither of them spoke for some time. They laid there next to each other, their sleepy eyes watching each other, their minds working it all over again, certainly not for the first time.

"I..." Maddie was the first to speak, breaking the peaceful silence with her soft voice. "I think I know what I want to do."

"Oh?" His eyebrows lifted, moving on his pillow, inching closer to her.

"Mmm," she nodded. "But...it means the conversation wouldn't fade. It means this won't just...drift into the past. At least not for some time."

Harry caught her meaning, the realization hitting him in the gut; nerves and anxiety creeping in. She wanted to go after the guy. And his reflexive, natural reaction was mixed. Nodding, his eyes shifted from hers, looking off somewhere in the distance, his mind drifting even further.

"Harry..."

"I can't stop thinking about your mother," he cut her off, the sincerity catching in his voice. "I know she said she's okay with all of this and I know you think she's strong enough to stand up to what they might throw and you know what...you're probably right," he shook his head, a bitter chuckle pushing from his lips. "If this were just my fight, I would have jumped in already. If it were just you and me..." He laid back flat on his pillow, his eyes reaching up to the ceiling. "But I can't stop thinking about your mother."

Maddie felt tears in her eyes, emotion in her throat and a deep, heavy love in her chest. She nodded her head as she tried to keep it together, as she tried not to cry. "It's funny that you say that," she whispered. "Because I can't stop thinking about yours."

"What?" His eyes snapped over to her, his voice fading into the air around them.

Nodding, she felt tears spring to her eyes. "I can't," she shrugged her shoulders, watching her husband's face transform as long ago memories began to creep forward. She could see it all washing over him and as much as she didn't want to cause him any hurt, as much as she didn't want to dredge it up--she had too. This was unavoidable. "I know that this particular guy was not responsible for your mother's death..." Harry's eyes grew a little darker, his jaw a little tighter. "But his tactics were."

"Maddie," Harry started, wanting to say something but having no idea what it was. Sitting up in bed, his knees drew up, his arms resting on them as he looked away from her, as he shook his head.

"I'm sorry," she sat up and reached out to him, her hand warm as it ran up his back to his shoulder, down his arm. "I don't want to make you upset Harry..."

"You aren't," he tried to reassure her, but she could feel the strain in the muscles under her hand. 

Nodding though she didn't really believe him, she continued. "This just feels so much bigger than us," she squeezed his arm. "It's not only about these photos of you and I on the deck...it's not only about this guy in Nebraska." She gulped back the tears in her throat. "It's about the guy who stood on a public road and took pictures of Kate topless. It's about those girls who sold pictures of you in Vegas. It's about...God Harry, it's about the horrible, fucking people who followed your mother, who stalked her, who were so relentless in their quest to..." She shook her head, wiping at the tears on her cheeks. "It's about the ones who wait in parked cars to jump out and take pictures of Arthur and the...ones who are going to chase down Lilli..."
At the mention of his daughter, Harry's eyes turned towards her, taking in the look on her face, the emotions that had taken over. Relaxing just a little, his hand reached up to where her fingers rested on his arm, patting them as he took in a few breaths, as he calmed. "It's not your responsibility to take a stand against all of those people, Maddie."

"It's not?" She inhaled, her eyebrows lifting. "Then who's is it?" She shook her head. "So far they've all been able to get away with it; they were standing twelve inches on the side that was in their favor. So far your family, my family has had to just fucking take it! While Kate is victimized, while Arthur is scared, while you and Will have to grow up without your mother..." When Harry moved away from her, when he slipped back out of bed and began to pace, she let him go; knowing he needed to move in order to take it all in. "But this guy. He was standing twelve inches on the wrong side. Finally. We have a case! A great one! And these teams of people who are assembled to protect us are telling us to go for it. And God Harry....I know you're afraid for my mother and I love you so much for that but....if we don't go for it...if we don't..." She blinked at the tears in her eyes. "Then what does that say? To the men who are going to come after our children?" He spun around to face her, stress and tension pulling at him. "That it's okay? That we're not going to fight back even when we can?" She held his dark gaze and she shook his head. "I've never been the girl to sit on the sidelines and watch it happen Wales. Never. I've always jumped right into it...it's why you love me." She paused, relieved to see him smile. Sucking in a breath she let it out slowly. "I don't know baby...I just think we have to."

"For my mother?" She could barely hear his voice, but she understood.

"Yes," Maddie nodded. "For your mother. And Kate. And Arthur and Lilli...and for us. I think that we have to do it. And...I think that my mother would be terribly disappointed if we didn't."

Standing still in the middle of their room, Harry's mouth dropped open as though he were going to say something. His hand ran up the back of his neck, pushing at the tension there and his mouth closed. Looking down at his feet, at the floor, his mind was running it all over and over and over. Pressing his eyes shut, he took a deep breath and tried to think.

It was simple, at some level it was very simple. Did he want to press charges or not?

Yes. The answer thudded loudly in his brain; a quick, easy reply. His reflex was, and always had been, to strike out when he was attacked.

And this was as much of an attack as any before it had been.

He took another deep breath and nodded his head. Was Hannah the only thing that had been holding him back? Was it really about her? Was there anything else? Any other part of him that was afraid, that wasn't ready for all of it? Any other piece of the puzzle that he simply wasn't looking at?

His voice was low, barely a soft murmur as he began to work it out out loud. "They'll file first thing Monday morning...the press will have it by the afternoon. They'll issue a statement..." He sucked in a breath, his head lifting, his eyes reaching for hers. "Then the conversation starts all over; our rights versus our responsibilities. It won't fade away but it will change..." He wasn't really talking to her so much as he was...testifying. "Somebody will step up on his side, some fucking piece of trash that calls itself news, some rag that doesn't want to lose the ability to print our private lives. It won't just be him; they'll load him up with attorneys and..." He took a breath and turned away from her, walking a slow pace over to the windows; sorting it all out. "It'll drag out in court; it won't be quick. We...God I wonder...will we have to testify? Will your mother?" He shook his head, not really looking for her to answer. "Maybe...maybe..." He stopped in front of the windows, his fingers rising to tap on the glass as he looked out at the day beginning to dawn. It was a few minutes before he drifted back to the room, before he turned around and
looked to her. "At some point you might have to talk, under oath, about what happened on the
deck that night."

Without batting an eyelash, Maddie nodded. "Okay."

"And your mother..." He moved towards her then, standing at the foot of the bed. "At some point
they might want her to come out, she might have to take the stand and..."

"Okay," Maddie nodded again.

Nodding along with her, Harry's arms crossed over his chest, his features softening as his mind
thought over all of the instances of invasion Maddie had mentioned, and even more that she
hadn't. "You're right," though quiet, his voice was full of emotion. "We can't let them think it's
okay..." He shook his head. "It's not okay and God, when I think about Lilli..." He blew a
calming breath from his lips and cleared his throat, his shoulders squaring as he stood tall. "I want
to talk to your mother one more time, make sure she knows all of the ways this might play out,
extactly what it might take, what they might say..."

"Okay," Maddie nodded, feeling her emotions building in her chest. "And then?"

"And then..." His head tipped to the side, regarding her with such love and gratitude. "And then
we go get him."

Maddie nearly cried even as her lips curled into a wide smile. "And then we go get him."
Once the decision was made to go after the photographer, once Harry called Thomas and gave him the green light, the plan of attack began flying into motion. As promised, Harry had called and spoke to Hannah. And then he had sent attorneys to Colorado to talk to Hannah, wanting to be sure she understood exactly what moves they were going to make, exactly how they were going to proceed.

He would never forget the phone call he got late one evening, hours after the attorneys had arrived at Hannah's home.

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Sorry?!" Harry had flinched at her words, stopping on his way up the stairs, causing Maddie to nearly run into the back of him.

"Did you think I didn't understand the conversation we had yesterday?" Hannah rephrased the question. "We spent two hours on the phone Henry."

"I..." He stammered with wide eyes, looking to Maddie for help. "I remember."

"And I thought we had reached an agreement.

"We did. I just..."

"Just thought you would send a team of lawyers to explain it to me again?"

"There are only four of them. That hardly qualifies as a team..."

"How many players are on the field per team in a polo match?" Hannah was quick, her words were sharp even though he swore he heard a hint of laughter.

Swallowing back his pride, he sighed. "Four."

"That's right." Hannah laughed. "You sent a Polo Team to..."

"Yes. Yes, okay. I did," he cut her off. "Listen Hannah..."

"Ooohhh..." Maddie chuckled, shaking her head at him.

"Henry Charles..." She started, her voice lowering. But Harry wasn't going to back down, not on this.

"Mrs. Forrester," he cut in once more, ignoring the way Maddie snickered next to him. "I did not send the team to Colorado to insult your intelligence or to imply in any way that you didn't understand what we've spoken about."

"Did you just call me..."

"But I think we can all agree that out of the three of us," he glared at Maddie who wouldn't stop laughing. "I have the most experience in what we're about to jump into. And..." He reached out to pinch his wife's arm lightly. "And I love all of you way too much to have you come on board without having a third party explain it all to you without my...biases."
"Aww..." Maddie's head tipped to the side, her eyes dancing as she smiled up at him.

"Now," he took a breath. "I apologize if it upset you. That certainly wasn't my intent. I just, I wouldn't be able to live with myself if you agreed to all of this simply because I talked you into it."

The line went silent for a moment and Harry held his breath, his eyebrows raised as he waited for Hannah to respond. "Fine," she sighed and he exhaled. "Fine."

Fine," he smiled.

"At any rate, I'm glad you sent them."

"You are?" He chuckled, continuing up the stairs as he relaxed.

"Mmm," she was smiling, he could tell. "They gave me a few things to think about..."

"Oh?" Harry followed Maddie into their room.

"Yes. In fact, I've made a few decisions."

"Decisions?" Harry stopped in the middle of his room. "Decisions about what?"

"About this lawsuit," Hannah explained.

"And..." Harry waited, beyond curious about what was going to come next from his mother-in-law.

"And I would suggest you two get your guest bedroom ready."

Harry blinked. "Our guest bedroom?"

Maddie's eyes flew up to his as Hannah continued. "Mmm Hmm. Your guest bedroom. I'm coming out there."

"You're coming here?" He pointed to the ground, his eyes widening at his wife who was looking at him for answers.

"That's right," Hannah laughed. "If we're going to do this, and we are going to do this, then I want to be there when the papers are filed, at least the ones being filed on my behalf. You two can do what you want with your part of the suit."

"But..."

"I think it's important that when people find out about this, when this story begins, that they know that I was there, that it was important enough to me that I came out and filed myself. Not this team of attorneys employed by the Royal Family."

"You want to file yourself?" Harry could hardly believe what he was hearing, shocked at what she was proposing.

"Yes," she answered simply. "And don't worry. I already ran it by the legal polo team and they thought it was a fantastic idea."

"Of course they did," Harry groaned. "You do know that I wanted to keep you as far out of this as possible."

"And you do know that it's not within my character to stay as far out of this as possible," she
countered.

Looking right at Maddie, Harry sighed and smiled. "Yes. I suppose I should know that by now."

"I suppose so," Hannah agreed, her stance and her tone softening just a bit. "I know this is going to unfold in any one of a great many number of ways...I just thought...I don't know. It might help if I were there."

"Hannah..."

"Harry..." She countered his concession with one of her own. "The attorneys said it was okay if I did it this way. Why don't you just...let me do it this way."

Harry took a minute, his eyes fixed on his wife as his mind focused on his mother-in-law. And finally, seeing the smile on Maddie's face, hearing the hope in Hannah's voice, he gave in; a heavy nod weighted down by the knowledge of what was to come. "Fine."

"Fine?" There was hope and uplift in her voice.

"Fine," he sighed. "I'll make up the guest bedroom. Come on out."

And she did. Hannah was on the next flight to London, ready to stand up and jump in head first. Though Maddie had agreed with Harry, initially hoping to keep her mother as protected as she could, she was thrilled to be seeing her again. The day before the papers were going to be filed, they all sat together around Harry's office and went over the strategy again; wanting everyone to be on the same page.

As the attorneys finished with the legalities, the PR team stepped forward with the spin.

And Harry, clearing his throat and leaning forward, spoke up.

"I'm not completely thrilled about Mrs. Forrester going in alone." All eyes swung to look at him.

"She won't be alone," one of the attorneys offered. "We'll all be there with her."

"Mmm," Harry nodded. "That's not exactly what I meant." He looked over to Thomas. "I thought maybe I'd go with her."

The reaction to that suggestion was like a nervous tremor around the room. Unable to help herself, Maddie chuckled into her hand. Harry turned curious eyes to her.

"Sorry," she smiled, waving her hand around the room. "I'm not sure they like that idea."

"What's wrong with that idea?" Harry looked to Thomas who stepped forward, ready with his answer.

"It'll look like..."

"I don't care how it looks," Harry cut in.

"Sir," Thomas's lips curled into a tight smile. "It will look like..."

"I said I don't care how it looks," Harry's voice hardened. "I don't want her to walk in without some support."

"Yes Sir," Thomas nodded. "And then you asked what was wrong with that idea and..."
"You don't like how it looks," Harry finished with a roll of his eyes, a huff of his breath.

"I don't," Thomas didn't flinch away from him, having grown accustomed to much bigger tantrums than this particular disagreement.

"How does it look?" Maddie looked right at Thomas, her curiosity getting the best of her.

"Like your mother is the puppet and Harry's pulling the strings," Thomas was blunt and to the point.

"Ah," Maddie nodded, her eyes shifting to her husband who met her gaze, eyebrows raised.

"Clearly they don't know your mother very well."

"Clearly," Maddie agreed with a grin. Taking a breath she turned her focus back to Thomas. "So I suppose it's not any better if I go?"

"No Ma'am," Thomas shook his head. "Not as bad, but not ideal."

"Well then somebody give me something," Harry ran his hand back through his hair. "Because I'm not in favor of her going in with...you know, just the polo team," he waved his hand at the attorneys who looked confused at his reference.

Thomas looked around the room at the sea of faces pinching up in thought, running through names of possibilities. "Okay," he turned a small smile to the couple. "Perhaps we take a ten minute break and let our minds work it over?"

"Fine," Harry sighed, pushing his notebook away from him on the table and rising to his feet. "Let's take fifteen. I need some air."

"Back in fifteen," Thomas told the group who were rising to their feet and shuffling around. Some of them left the room, some of them moved off to the corners to talk. Thomas looked from Maddie to Harry and back again. Sensing the mood, he nodded softly to Maddie and took his leave.

"Some air?" Maddie sat forward, reaching up to take his hand.

"Care for a walk?" He asked without looking down at her, his fingers curling around hers.

"Sure," she rose to her feet and followed as he lead her from the room.

The second they stepped out into the courtyard, their hands separated and his stuffed into his pockets. "You think I'm being ridiculous?"

"No," she shook her head quickly, her arms crossing over her chest. "I think you're looking out for my mother..."

"Think that's going to piss her off?" He shot a glance over to her, one eyebrow raised and a corner of his mouth twisting up.

"No," Maddie chuckled and then shrugged. "Maybe a little but she'll be alright."

"Yeah," he sighed, turning his gaze out around him.

"You know it is just a walk into the courthouse. It's not a huge deal. She'll be fine going alone..."

"I know," he nodded. "But they're going to leak the announcement before she goes. There will most likely be photos and...I don't know. Maybe it's symbolic, maybe I'm overreacting. I just want
somebody with her.

"Okay..." Maddie agreed, seeing he was set on this. "Well then...who?"

"Who what?" The voice that came from behind them startled them both. Though when they spun to find her wide comforting smile and big hazel eyes, they both relaxed.

"Kate," Maddie was happy to see her, feeling a little bit surrounded by testosterone lately. Leaning to kiss her cheeks and hug her close, she grinned. "It's good to see you. I didn't know you were going to be here today."

"I wasn't," Kate shook her head, leaning to greet Harry with a kiss and a hug. "Will and Arthur are taking a little father/son time so I thought I would get ahead on something..." She pulled back and looked at the two of them. "You guys looked very deep in thought. Everything alright?"

"Mmm," Maddie nodded, her voice lowering. "We're in the War Room planning how tomorrow's going to go..."

"Ah," Kate nodded, having been brought up to speed on what was happening. "What's the debate?"

"My mother is going in with the attorneys tomorrow to file and Harry..." She pointed to him.

"I want somebody to go with her," he shrugged, the three of them moving in closer together, into their own strategy session.

"And we're trying to decide who..." Maddie explained. "And we're struggling."

"I see," Kate nodded again, her own mind drifting a bit. "And I suppose they don't want it to be anyone in the family."

"No," Harry shook his head, his hand pulling from his pocket to rub at the back of his neck. "Hey...what about Bishop?" He looked to Maddie. "He doesn't look like he's pulling strings and he'd be happy to go..."

"Bishop who hits on my mother every time he sees her?" Maddie snickered and Kate chuckled. "I suppose he's an option."

With a smile, Harry nodded. "Or maybe Collins? He'd do it if we asked..." Harry waved his hand. "And he doesn't hit on your mother."

"That's true," Maddie nodded, her bottom lip pulling in between her teeth. "We could always ask Ella..."

"We could..." Harry nodded.

"Or..." Kate's voice was low and thoughtful as she spoke up. Both of them turned to look at her. "I'm sorry. This isn't my place at all..."

"No, no," Harry shook his head. "Go on."

Kate nodded and smiled. "What about my mother?" Maddie blinked, her eyes turning up to Harry's as Kate continued. "She knows what's going on. She's talked to your mother..." She looked to Maddie. "She told Hannah and Will and I that if there was anything she could do..." She shrugged. "She would be happy to walk in with her, more than happy I'm guessing. She's close the family but not The Family..."
"It's true..." Maddie nodded, her mind working it over as she watched Harry's face as he did the same. "What do you think?"

With his head nodding slowly, his lips turned up. "I think I like it. I think it would...I think it would work. I could take it to Thomas when we get back in..." He turned his gaze to Kate. "Do you really think she'd do it? She'll be tied to this mess and they'll most likely write all kinds of bullshit about her..."

"They already do that," Kate shrugged, a wry smile twisting at her lips. "But I think she'd do it. I think she'd be happy to do it. I think she might find some little sort of satisfaction that somebody gets to stick it to them, you know?"

"Yeah," Harry sighed, knowing just how much these women they loved had to stomach just to be with them. "I know." Taking a breath and trying to shake it off, he reached out to Kate, his hands warm on her arms. "Will you ask her? We're heading back in and I'll bring it up to Thomas but...you'll check with your mother? Give her the lay of it all, make sure she...knows?"

"Of course," Kate nodded, patting his hand. "I'll go up and call her now."

"Thank you," he leaned in to kiss her cheek.

"Thank you," Maddie did the same, holding onto her just a bit longer than normal before she kissed her and stepped away. "Maybe tomorrow night you and I can open a bottle of champagne?"

"Absolutely," Kate grinned and spun on her heels. "I'll let you know as soon as I talk to her." With a small wave and a bright smile, Kate was on her way back inside, leaving Harry and Maddie facing each other, both a little lighter than they were moments ago.

"You're okay with this option?" Maddie's fingers reached for his, tangling around them.

"Short of me walking her in myself?" He sighed. "It's my favorite so far. Come on love," he pulled her hand up to his lips for a quick kiss. "Let's go see how Thomas and the Polo Team feel about it."

With a giggle, Maddie followed along with her husband, holding tight to his arm the entire way up.

In the end it was Carole who walked with Hannah. Thomas had cleared it with Will and Kate's people and easily agreed and Kate had been right, Carole was more than happy to step up next to Hannah. So she did. The two mothers walked side by side in front of the legal polo team. With their heads held high, they passed by the handful of photographers who had been given notice of the moment and they walked inside. The papers were filed, the story was printed and the can of worms was effectively opened. Even more so later that day when a suit was filed on behalf of the Duke and Duchess suing for breach of privacy.

Though Maddie was nervous for nearly the entire morning, though Harry had bitten off what was left of his fingernails, in the end--it went as well as could be expected. The public was shocked at the news, but was mostly supportive. As Hannah and Carole walked back out together, both women were proud; of their daughters, of their sons-in-law and of themselves. And that night, as the rest of the world gained knowledge of what was to come, as Maddie and Harry were receiving notes and phone calls of support from foreign royals, Hannah and Carole were sitting down to a warm, wonderful meal at Clarence House hosted by Camilla; mothers, all around.
Chapter 179

Maddie had no idea what time it was nor how long she had been laying there, awake and staring up at the ceiling of their room at Sandringham. It was a deep dark in their room and she couldn't hear anyone moving around in the stillness of the house. All she could hear was the steady tick of a clock across the room and the soft, slow breathing of the man next to her.

It had been a little over a week since they had marched forward and put their collective foot down. The press had gone slightly amiss as debates arose all around them; public figure versus expectations of privacy, The Royal Family versus the Paparazzi, Maddie and Harry versus some sad, lonely wanker in Nebraska named Ernie.

Maddie sneered as she thought of him, a strangled sound gurgling in the back of her throat. She wasn't sure she had ever felt such blind hatred for anyone really--much less some man she didn't know. But there it was, heavy and dark and keeping her awake on a night when she should absolutely be sleeping.

The next day was a big day; they were Christening Lilli at St. Mary Magdalene's on the grounds of Sandringham. Everything was set. The Christening gown Arthur had worn was cleaned and steamed and hanging in the closet next to Maddie's ensemble and Harry's suit.

The pram was clean and waiting...somewhere. Maddie's mind halted for a moment, wondering over exactly where it was being stored. Next to the gilded carriages? In the garage? In one of the many empty rooms?

She didn't know.

Sighing, she turned on her side, choosing to look at Harry instead of the bedside table. Her knees pulled up, tucking into her stomach as her eyes ran over his sleeping self. His chest was bare, exposed, and rising and falling with the waves of his breathing. His hair was a mess, tufts sticking every which way. His arms were raised above his head, as though they had been tossed carelessly back. Maddie's smile warmed her face. She had seen Lilli sleep exactly like that on numerous occasions and she loved how much alike the two of them looked in moments like this.

'Alright Sussex,' the voice in her head took on a commanding tone. 'You have to be up early and you really shouldn't give Tara more issues to work with...' She sighed heavily. 'Go to sleep, Maddie. Go. To. Sleep.'

Sucking in her breath, she turned back onto her back, stretching out her legs, tucking the blankets up around her chest and, settling back into her pillow, she closed her eyes and she willed herself to sleep.

But nothing came. Nothing but the tick of the clock in the distance and the sound of Harry sleeping next to her. Groaning, she kicked her heel softly into the bed; frustrated with herself, with her predicament. In all her life, she had very rarely had issue falling asleep and she hated that it was coming now.

But the cognitive part of her brain understood it. Tomorrow was the first time she would be facing the public since the lawsuits had dropped. In all fairness this was the first time she would be facing the public since the pictures had ran--save only the quick walk out of the airport. Though she couldn't imagine anyone having the audacity to show up early the next morning to wait for hours along the walk they would be taking to and from the church just to protest or mock. But she was
still nervous. It was still a big moment. And she still wasn't able to fall asleep.

"Fuck..." Maddie exhaled quietly, finally to the point of irritation where she was considering just getting out of bed.

And then, coming from the warm, sleeping body next to her, she heard her husband chuckle.

Her head whipped to the side, her eyes opening wide. "Harry?"

"Expecting someone else?" He snickered, turning on his side to look at her, amusement lighting up his eyes, turning up his smile.

"I..." She sighed, turning to face him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't," he shook his head, a small yawn pushing from his lips.

"But you were sleeping so soundly," she nudged him with her foot under the covers. "And now you're awake..."

"How long have you been awake?" He reached out for her, his fingers warm as they drew up and down her arm.

"I don't know," she shook her head. "I've been afraid to look."

"Wanna tell me what's running through your mind?" His fingers slid down to hers.

"Ugh..." She groaned, holding onto his hand as she rolled to her back, looking up at the ceiling frustrated with herself, with her current state of awake. "I can't stop thinking."

"About?"

"About tomorrow..." She rubbed at her eyes with her free hand. "Or today."

"The Christening?" His forehead drew together in a pinch. "But that's easy. We just...stand and walk and do what we're told. Everyone's arrived so we don't have to worry about that and..."

"I'm not worried about the Christening," she sighed. "Not really."

"Then what are you worried about?" He pulled her hand closer into his.

"I...I don't know. I'm not really...worried."

"Maddie..." He prodded, trying to sidestep her brush off.

"Ernie," she groaned. "I'm thinking about Ernie."

"Who the fuck is Ernie?" Harry looked to her, confusion in his eyes for a split second before it dawned on him. "You're kidding me. Maddie, you're letting fucking Ernie keep you up right now?"

"I'm not letting," she countered. "It just...IS. I can't help it. Tomorrow we're walking out in front of everyone...in front of all of these people who have seen the photos, who have seen me..." She sighed. "All of these people who have been reading the papers and watching the news and are just watching and waiting to see how we're going to react, how we're going to look..."

"Exhausted I would imagine," Harry muttered, taking a breath as he adjusted next to her.
"You do know we've done literally everything we can do about that situation."

"Yes."

"We've done everything we could possibly do about...Ernie." His face twisted up as he said his name.

"Yes, Harry I know. I just..." She sucked in a breath. "I don't know Harry...maybe we should have let Bishop kill him."

Harry's laughter rang out loud into the room, the rumble from his chest shaking the bed as Maddie's laugh joined his.

"Maybe..." Harry sighed, pulling her hand to his lips for a kiss. "Maybe we should have. But it's too late for that. It would be too suspicious."

"True," Maddie's giggle faded, her fingers working up into his hair.

"Tell me, what can we do? To help you get some sleep?"

"I don't know," she inched a little closer to him. "I could just get up for a while, do some reading..." She thought it over for a minute. "Or maybe we could go for a run?"

"Okay," Harry laughed, leaning up on his elbows, looking down at her with mock concern etched on his face. "Now I'm worried about you. Did you just say you want to go for a run?"

"I did," Maddie grinned, blinking her wide, innocent eyes up at him. "And what of it Captain? I run."

"Sure," he bent to kiss her, his lips soft and warm against hers. "You run."

"I do!" Her hand smacked at his shoulder. "You know I do! The whole time I was training for the walk, I..."

"I know you did," he countered, his hands moving to the mattress on either side of her, trapping her in as he leaned down to kiss her. "But I haven't seen you put on a pair of running shoes in quite some time..." His smile held something more of a tease than it had before, his lips taking more time to run over hers than they had before.

"Mmmm..." Maddie smiled against his mouth, her body arching out a bit--wanting to be closer to his. "Maybe you just haven't been paying attention..."

"To you?" His head tipped to the side, his eyes narrowing in on her, his nose nudging hers as he kissed her again. "Not true Madeline..." He kissed her again. "I'm almost always watching you..."

Feeling the flush in her cheeks, feeling the heat traveling through her body, she had no choice but to give in to it, to let her desire for Harry replace everything else that had been going on in her mind. As her fingers moved up his arms to his shoulders, she smiled up at him through half lowered lashes. "So...no run?"

"No," Harry shook his head, his lips brushing against hers as he moved over her. "But maybe...maybe we could find another way to tire you out? Something that's proven effective in the past?"

"Ohhhh..." She chuckled as he moved between her legs, as his body settled warm and ready against hers. "Like what exactly?" Her legs moved to wrap around him, drawing him closer,
making him groan as he kissed her again.

"I don't know," he moved against her. "But we're very smart people...we'll think of something..."

With a breath and a long, slow kiss, Maddie let go of the thoughts that had been occupying her mind and she let her husband and that amazing mouth of his pull her right into something so much more fulfilling, so much more worth her time.

When Harry rounded the corner on his way back up to their room, he could already hear the low, deep beat of the music she was playing. Dressed in his suit, he was coming to get his wife for their walk to the church. She had dressed Lilli and sent her downstairs in Harry's arms. After safely delivering her to the handful of grandmothers in the room, he was now going to fetch back the other woman in his life. On his way up, he passed Tara who smiled and nodded, having finished up with Maddie's hair and makeup. The music grew louder and louder and when he finally stepped into their room, he was chuckling.

"What on Earth are you listening to?" His feet stopped moving as he caught sight of her; soft and elegant and beautiful in lavender.

"A little hardcore rap music," Maddie answered, touching up her lip gloss in the mirror.

"Hardcore rap music." Harry repeated with a laugh, coming to a stop behind her. "Seems the perfect sort of playlist for the morning of our daughter's Christening." His hands fell softly on her hips, not wanting to wrinkle her or mess her up.

With a laugh, Maddie shrugged. "Nobody else can hear it and...I'm trying to pump myself up."

"Ah yes," Harry nodded, understanding in an instant. "For the walk."

Maddie pulled in a long, slow, deep breath. "For the walk."

Meeting her eyes in the mirror, he nodded and then dipped his lips into her neck to kiss her there. "I thought maybe we had chased those thoughts from your mind."

"We did," Maddie smiled, reaching up to rub her fingers over his cheek, turning in his arms to face him. "But we're about to go out there and...maybe they're back just a little bit. I just needed a little extra push..."

"Okay. Seems fair," he smiled, leaning in to press a soft, chaste kiss to her cheek. "It's going to be okay. The walk, the day. It's going to be fine. I promise."

"You promise?" She lifted her eyebrows, wishing she could forget all of the work Tara had just done to her hair and face, wishing she could drag him off to bed, wishing he could kiss her; wishing they could have one more round at chasing out the crazy thoughts consuming her mind.

"I swear," he nodded, his hands warming on her hips, the memory of the night before bringing a flush to both of their faces.

Sucking in a breath, Maddie tried to calm herself. "You came to fetch me?"

"I did," he exhaled with a nod. "It's time to go."

"Okay..." She swallowed, letting her hands fall away from him as she stood tall.
"Maddie..."

"It's okay," she assured him, spinning to look in the mirror one more time, checking the soft floral fascinator pinned into her hair. "It's not like there will be protestors with signs..." Harry snickered behind her and she shot a glance over her shoulder. "Right?"

"Right!" He was quick to nod. "Right, right. No protestors."

"And everyone will be there with us..."

"Absolutely," Harry nodded, watching as she turned to face him, as she stood tall and smoothed her hands down over her ensemble.

"Okay..." She took a breath and smiled. "I'm ready."

"Okay," he nodded again, allowing her a few steps before he called out to her. "Maddie?"

"Hmmm?" She turned lifted eyebrows to him, stopping in the doorway.

"There's just...one thing missing..." His head tipped to the side, his smile smug as he looked her over.

"What?" She glanced down instantly, taking inventory of her outfit, taking stock of her appearance.

"I don't know..." His finger tapped his chin as he moved closer to her. "Maybe....maybe what's missing is in here..." His hand patted his pocket.

"Nice," Maddie's tone flattened, her eyes narrowing. "If you think we have time for something naughty, you're sadly mistaken."

"Ha!" He shook his head, his fingers slipping into his pocket. "No my darling. Nothing naughty. In fact..." When he pulled his hand from his pocket, his fingers were closed over his palm. With a twinkle in his eye, he held it out to her. "I think it's something rather...nice."

"You got me a present," Maddie was beaming, her feet bouncing slightly in excitement.

"I did," he nodded and then, standing tall, he opened up his fingers and lifted his hand closer to her. There in his palm was a beautiful platinum bracelet with diamonds and amethysts and an abundance of sparkle.

"Harry..." Maddie breathed, the fingers of one hand pressing to her lips as the other stretched out to the jewelry in his hand. "It's...stunning."

With a smile, he picked it up into his fingers, nodding towards her wrist which she gladly lifted to him. "It's Lilli's birthstone..."

"So it is," she watched his eyes, his smile, his sweet face as he placed the bracelet around her wrist, securing the latch before he looked up to her.

"I love you Maddie," he drew her wrist to his lips, kissing over her pulse before he turned her hand over and kissed the back of her hand.

"I love you too Captain."

"And..." He tugged at her arm, pulling her to him. "I'm so...fucking proud of you." His hands circled her waist and his lips dipped to meet hers. "Today...all of the days you've been with me..."
"Harry..." She sighed into him, not caring one bit about her makeup or her hair or her clothes. She let him kiss her, she let him hug her tight and then, resolutely, she let him take a step back. She pressed her hand to her heart. "Thank you for...for all of the days...." She looked down at the bracelet. "And for this. It's...beautiful."

"You're welcome," he leaned to kiss her once more. "Come on love...they're waiting for us."

Taking his offered arm, Maddie fell into step with him; through the hallway, down the stairs, towards their family and friends already gathered and ready to go. And for as nervous as she had been for the last twenty four hours, she felt the oddest sense of peace.

With her husband right at her side.

This wasn't the first time Maddie had stood at those gates, ready for the walk to the Church. And it most certainly wouldn't be the last but, at least at this moment, it was the most anxiety provoking. With Lilli situated happily in the pram and Harry just to her right, Maddie was essentially ready to go.

But the ball of nerves in her stomach laid claim to a different story.

"Pull it together Forrester." Her voice was barely audible, spoken through tightly clenched teeth and a well practiced smile.

But Harry, standing next to her, had heard it. Though it drew him closer, his hand resting comfortably on her back, it also drew him to laughter.

"I can always tell when you're taking the piss out of yourself," he spoke softly into her ear as they began moving forward.

"Oh?" She lifted an eyebrow, her features softening as she took a deep breath and stood tall.

"You bring out your maiden name," he ran his hand up and down her back, turning his smile and a quick wink to her. "You never seem to cuss the Sussex part of you."

"Oh I do," she shook her head, a light laughter lifting from her lips. "Trust me, Captain. I do."

"I'll take your word for it," he nodded, smiling down at his daughter as they rounded the corner. Just before they stepped into view of the crowd, just before they stepped into the awaiting lense of the cameras, of the public, Harry let his eyes close for a split second, sending up a quick prayer that this walk, that these witnesses were in fact as easy as he had promised they would be.

And it was. And they were.

The second they stepped out through the gates, nodding to the guards who stood by, a rush of excitement ran through the crowd. There was laughter, a few gasps and even a smattering of light applause and all of it served to bring a smile to Maddie's lips. All of it made Harry breathe a little easier.

He quickly surveyed the lay of it all, looking out at the mass of people for any hint of impropriety and, finding none, he allowed a bit of relief to seep in. Seeing Maddie doing the same, sensing the peace of mind that had come to her, he could finally breathe a little easier.
So they smiled and they walked and they offered waves and nods as they passed by. Taking turns checking in on Lilli, they walked together through the crowd.

Every single person they passed by met their eyes. Every single one of them smiled. And when Maddie heard a group of women huddled together call out, "Princess Maddie!" She couldn't help but glance over to them.

And when they called out, "We love you! We have your back!" Harry felt his wife's back straighten under his hand, felt her walk taller and he couldn't help but toss them that brilliant smile of his.

This walk had turned out much, much better than he had promised.

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Maddie had always thought that it was the music that did her in, the rhythm and melodies that drew her quick to emotion. But on this day, standing at the altar while Kate cradled Lilli and Bishop swore an oath, she wondered if maybe it was the Church that had such an impact on her feelings, if it were the sanctity of it all that overwhelmed her.

She wasn't quite sure anymore. But as she stood tall next to Harry, she was fighting back tears, she was struggling with the sentimentality of it all. Their precious baby girl was surrounded by these men and women pledging to be there for her; to protect her, to guide her. All of them; Kyle, Peter, Kate, Bishop, Ella, and Collins; all of them took their turn speaking the words. All of them promising to look out for their daughter as if she were their own, all of them smiling down at her as though they loved her.

And they did.

And it made Maddie's heart swell so big, she had to press her hand to her chest to keep it from exploding. There had been so much going on around them, so much happening to them. She had felt like she and Harry were wading into this battle and a big part of the reason why was this desire to set a precedent, to lay what they considered the groundwork for protecting Lilli and her future as much as they possibly could.

Watching the faces of their friends and their family, of their loved ones, she knew that each one of them would do the same. As would those sitting in the pews behind them; her mother, Harry's parents. All of them.

Blinking at the tears in her eyes, she held onto Harry's hand and she smiled at her daughter, wiggling in Kate's arms, cooing up at the Archbishop, bringing warmth and laughter and sweetness to this beautiful church that seemed to always tug at Maddie's emotions.

Maybe it wasn't the music. Maybe it was her; her and these people she loved.

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"Well Sussex...we did it." Harry's smile was wide, his eyes dancing as he leaned down to the chair Maddie sat in and kissed her.

The formalities of the day had long since passed; the photos had been taken, the tea had been had and the Senior Royals had retired for the evening. With Lilli passed out in her bassinet and Arthur running wild with his Papa before he inevitably passed out, the rest of the party had settled in the drawing room; drinks and appetizers passing around.

"It?" Maddie smiled up at him, her fingers stroking at his cheek, lingering even as he pulled away
from her.

"We walked from here to the church without incident," he winked down at her as laughter rumbled around them.

"And all the way back again," Bishop offered with a smirk.

"It's true," Harry nodded, moving to sit on the arm of Maddie's chair.

"You should be so proud of yourselves," William spoke up over the rim of his glass.

"We are," Maddie nodded, smiling at her brother-in-law, her breath coming up so much easier now that it was all over.

"So I hope that it's okay that I ask," Kate leaned forward, looking over to Amy who had gained quite the noticeable bump since Maddie had last seen her. "Maddie told us you were expecting."

"I am," Amy nodded, her cheeks flushing just a tiny bit.

"Can I ask how far along you are?" Kate's smile was warm.

"Of course," Amy returned the smile. "Just over four months," her hand ran over her belly.

"Do you know what you're having yet?" Collins asked, watching as Isaiah drove his toy cars the length of the immaculate room.

"No," Amy shook her head. "We can find out in a few weeks."

"Are you going to?" Harry asked, taking a sip of his drink.

"Mmm," Kyle nodded. "I don't know that I'm the most patient person in the world..."

"Noooooowww..." Maddie snickered, meeting her cousin's eyes as laughter moved through the group.

"We're going to find out," Amy nodded to Harry.

"Do you know?" He leaned forward, curious. "Mother's intuition and all?"

"Maybe," Amy shrugged. "I have a feeling that it's a girl but...Kyle's certain it's a boy. How about you," she looked to Maddie. "Did you know?"

"No," Maddie shook her head. "I mean, I thought I did. I thought it was a boy for sure but Harry...he knew it was a girl."

"I did," Harry beamed as his mind drifted back to those glorious days when Maddie was pregnant, when they were learning all of these new wonderful things about their baby, when they were preparing to expand their family. And, as he looked down at his wife, as the conversation continued on to preparing for Kyle and Amy's baby, as it moved on to the natural tales of babyhood that came at moments like these, he was suddenly quite overwashed with emotion.

And he wanted another.

He wanted to get Maddie pregnant. He wanted to watch her grow and soften and change. He wanted to give Lilli a brother or a sister—or twelve. He wanted to cuddle up in their great big bed with Lilli and several others just like her.
He wanted it all over again; desperately.

Remembering where he was, remembering the company he kept, he cleared his throat and pulled himself together; taking all of his willpower to get back to normal.

But for the rest of the night, he couldn't shake the feeling. And he couldn't keep his hands off of his wife.

"You WHAT?!!" Maddie's voice rose with laughter. It was much later that night and those of their family and friends who were leaving, had set out towards home while those that were staying had retired to their rooms and it was just Maddie and Harry in their room with Lilli sleeping just next door.

"You heard me," his eyes and his grin were set on her from the other side of the bed where he stood tall as she dressed for bed.

"I did!" With a giggle, she tossed her shirt at him. "And you're out of your mind!"

"I'm not!" He caught her shirt and let it fall to the floor. "Don't you?"

"Don't I what?" She pulled on her soft pajama shirt. "Want another baby?"

"Yes!"

"Yes!" She laughed at him, stepping into her pajama pants and crawling onto the bed. "Yes..." Her voice softened as she moved over to his side on her knees. "Of course I want another..." She shrugged and blushed. "I would love to give Lilli a brother...or a sister...or seven."

"Ha!" Harry's smile was ridiculously wide and did nothing to quell Maddie's urge to laugh. "Now you're just toying with me." He pointed a finger at her, warning in his tone, in his eyes.

"I'm not,' she pinched his finger. "I mean it. I want that too..."

"Then why are you laughing at me?" His voice dropped low as he moved in closer.

"Because," she sighed, her hands rising and landing on his chest. "Because we have to wait a little bit longer Captain. I just had a baby. My body needs time to recover before it can start creating another one of your children..."

Harry's eyes lit up at the thought. "How much time?"

"Well..." Maddie sucked in a breath, thinking it over. "The doctor says you should wait a year before getting pregnant again..." She shrugged. "So when Lilli turns one, we can talk..."

"Oh I don't think there will be much talking," Harry shook his head, his hands running over her body, his eyes locking with hers.

Snickering, Maddie swatted at him. "You're insatiable. Can't you be happy with the one we have now?"

"I am," his eyes darkened as he took a step back, her words hitting him harder than she intended. "I am gloriously happy with the one we have now..."

"I'm sorry," Maddie reached for his hand. "I know you are. I didn't meant to imply that..."
"I adore Lilli, Madeline," he pressed her fingers over his heart. "And if she were the only one we ever had, I would be...blessed..."

"Harry," Maddie's fingers bunched at his shirt, wishing she could rephrase.

"I just...I love her so much, she's made my life so much better," he took a breath and shrugged his shoulders. "Imagine what it might be like to have seven more just like her."

"Hmmm..." Maddie's smile pulled at her cheeks. "Imagine what it might be like to try to make seven more just like her." With her hand on his hip, she pulled him closer to the bed, closer to her.

"See," he tapped the end of her nose with his finger, his smirk pulling smug as he bent to kiss her. "NOW you're talking..."

"Maybe..." Maddie kissed him back, holding him to her for more. "Maybe a little less with the talking..."

"Mmm..." He moaned against her lips, moving onto his knees on the bed with her, his hands already searching for her. "What are we trying to drive out of your mind tonight?"

"Nothing," she breathed, her head tipping back as his mouth moved to her neck. "There's nothing in my mind tonight....except for you."

And, as they tumbled back onto the bed together, nothing but laughter and warmth and happiness followed behind them.
"You know..." Maddie smiled at him across the front seat of the car. "I'm not sure we could get any cheesier than this."

"Cheesier?" He lifted his eyebrows, keeping his eyes on the road.

"Fluffy," she offered with a shrug. "Romantic. Silly..."

"I catch the meaning," his hand landed softly on her knee, his thumb stroking over her skin. "But I'm not sure why you think it's silly."

"We're closing on Foxgrove today," Maddie inched a little closer to him, loving the feel of his skin on hers. "Signing the final papers, taking ownership, collecting keys..."

With a big laugh, Harry nodded. "I'm well aware of that. I made the appointment remember?"

"I do," she wrapped her fingers around his, leaning to place a kiss on his shoulder. "And you made the appointment for our anniversary..."

"Ah," he grinned.

"And you asked that the final signing be done on the property..." She glanced out the windows at the countryside.

"It's true," he shrugged, completely unashamed. "It seems you caught on to my little plan?"

"Lilli's with Greta and you packed a picnic basket?" She lifted her eyebrows, nodding towards the back seat. "The contents of which I'm still not sure of..." Leaning back, she stretched her hand out towards the basket, only to have him tug at her fingers, pulling her away.

"Now, now," he shook his head at her, gathering her hand into his and holding it tight. "I told you to stay out of there."

"Yes and we all know how well I listen to what I'm told."

"Come on my darling, can't a man woo his wife on their anniversary without getting into trouble for it?"

"You're not in trouble," Maddie shook her head, tucking her hand further into his. "I was just commenting on how..."

"Cheesy?" Harry chuckled, turning the car through the gated entrance and up the long drive.

"Romantic," Maddie eased up, her excitement at their upcoming acquisition getting the best of her. "It's very romantic Harry, to celebrate our anniversary this way; out here at this home where I hope we're going to spend years and years..."

"And years," Harry cut in with a grin and a kiss to her fingers.

"And years," Maddie finished with a nod. Biting her bottom lip, she turned her eyes towards the end of the road, towards the big house in the opening. And she felt the warmth and ease of home begin to settle in. Dropping his hand, she leaned forward in the car, her hands bracing on the dashboard in front of her. "Wow...would you look at it?" She glanced over at him. "It's
so...beautiful in the way it sits there. Tall and...majestic almost."

"It's gorgeous," Harry agreed, driving them right up in front of the house before he put the car in park and turned off the ignition. "And so are you."

"Mmm..." Maddie smiled, blinking flirtatiously at him as she leaned to kiss him. "Come on Captain," she tugged lightly at his soft sweater. "Let's go buy ourselves a country home."

With a quick nod and one last kiss, they were pulling apart and stepping out of the car. Harry waited for her to round the car, taking her hand in his before they started up the walk to the house. They were greeted on the front step by their Real Estate agent, the tall smiling woman who had been handling this purchase for them.

"Good Morning Your Royal Highnesses," she dipped into a quick curtsy before stepping forward to kiss their cheeks.

"Good Morning Ms. Stern," Maddie smiled, taking a deep breath as Harry did the same.

"I suppose I should welcome the two of you home," Ms. Stern smiled, gesturing to the grand house that stood behind her.

"I suppose you should," Harry was beaming, happy to finally be closing the deal. Though most of the other important people involved in the purchase had signed what they needed to sign, this was the last step. "Is everything in order?"

"It is," she nodded, turning her grin to him. "Everything you asked for."

"Thank you," he smoothed his hand down the front of his sweater before he reached for his wife. "You ready?"

"I think so," she nodded excitedly, taking a step forward before he moved in front of her.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," he laughed, shaking his head at her. "What are you doing?"

Halting in her path, she eyed him cautiously. "What are you doing?"

"Oh you know..." He shrugged, moving in on her, pecking a quick kiss to her cheek before he bent down. "Bringing some old world tradition to our lives." With a snicker, he lifted her up into his arms.

"Oh for the love of...Harry!" She swatted at him as he adjusted her close to him, laughing as he ducked her swing. "Is this really necessary?"

"Oh absolutely," his grin stretched even higher.

"But we haven't even signed the papers," her voice dropped low. "It's not even our threshold that you're intent on carrying me over."

"Only a matter of technicalities," he winked at her. "Right Ms. Stern?"

"Yes Sir," she nodded, averting her eyes away from the couple, stepping aside.

"See," he leaned to kiss Maddie. "Maybe you let me do my thing."

"Fine..." She sighed, wrapping her arms around his neck and making a dramatic smile of it all. "By all means Captain...do your thing."
And he did. With his hands holding her tightly to him, he nodded to Ms. Stern and stepped right into the beautiful home that was about to be theirs. Taking a moment to meet Maddie’s gaze, to share a look with his wife, he kissed her once more and sat her on her feet.

"Okay," he clapped his hands together, turning to Ms. Stern who had shut the door behind him. "Where's the paperwork?"

"Right this way," she gestured into the den, unable to stop smiling at the two of them. Hand in hand, Maddie and Harry stepped into the next room where a table was set up with all of the necessary documents, pens and a bottle of champagne on ice.

"Big day," Maddie nodded to Harry as she sat down in the chair he had pulled out for her.

"Big day," he agreed, sitting down next to her as they both focused on the papers in front of them, on the big step they were taking that day.

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In the end, purchasing Foxgrove was simple; easy. They signed the handful of documents Ms. Stern placed in front of them and they handed over a Cashier's check for the largest sum of money Maddie had ever signed over. With a pop of a cork and a toast to their new home, they were finished.

Foxgrove was theirs.

Ms. Stern was quick to leave them, wanting to give them time and space to take in their new home. With a hug to Maddie and a knowing look to Harry, she packed up her items, made her excuses, and she left them alone.

Harry shut the door behind her and turned to look at Maddie. Standing in the middle of the entryway, her eyes were looking up at the high ceiling, at the staircase that lead to the second story, her mind already drifting to what she was going to do with the place, to the notes she had for their designer. With his arms crossed over his chest, he watched her, in love with the way she looked when she was like this; happy and in thought.

She spun around a few times, sighing as she let this newness settle over her. And then she stopped, catching him out of the corner of her eye as he watched her. Clearing her throat, she turned to face him. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"I think there might be," he nodded, the corner of his mouth twisting up higher.

"Henry Charles," her eyes narrowed, her cheeks flushing.

"No, no," he shook his head, pointing his finger at her, moving in closer. "Your mind went there love. Not mine. I was talking about something completely different..."

"Which is?" Her smile softened, her fingers wrapping around his, pulling his hand into hers, suddenly feeling much more romantic than she had expected to feel standing there in this new home of theirs.

"Well..." His arms moved around her, wrapping her up and drawing her in. "It IS our anniversary."

"It is." She nodded, her grin deepening. "Two years."

"How did we ever make it?" He joked, leaning in to kiss her neck.
"I don't know," she laughed, shaking her head as he kissed down her throat. Her hands holding tight to his shoulders to keep from falling back. "Luck I guess."

"Luck," he nodded, nipping at her earlobe before pulling back. "I was wondering if you might come with me to the family room at the back of the house."

She knew instantly that something was up, she didn't even need to see the glimmer in his eyes. "To the family room at the back of the house?" Her lips pursed together. "I don't know Henry..."

"It'll be good, I promise." He wagged his eyebrows, lifting her hand into his as he took a step backwards, pulling her with him in the direction of the family room.

So she followed. How could she help herself with that tall, swagger of a man smiling at her like that--she'd follow him anywhere. He held onto her hands as he walked backwards, pulling her through the hallway and into the large, open room where she could already imagine a Christmas tree, where she could already envision Lilli playing. He stopped when they were standing in the middle of the room, his hands moving to her shoulders as he stepped closer, as he held her still.

And she waited, with a wide smile and her eyes soft on him, she waited.

"Did you know..." His voice was low and warm, his smile smug. "That the second anniversary gift is Cotton?"

"Look at you," she nodded, a soft chuckle in her throat. "Ever the traditionalist..." She reached out, her fingers tugging lightly on his sweater, craving closeness.

"Mmm," he nodded, swallowing back the emotion that seemed to be gathering in his throat. "I wanted to get you something to mark this anniversary, to mark what we're doing today..."

"Oh?" She lifted her eyebrows, her body shifting closer to his. "You mean other than this home in the country?"

"Yes," his hands ran up and down her arms. "This last year has been..." He trailed off, shaking his head as he thought it over; the highs and lows, the sweet and the sad. Clearing his throat, he pulled his mind back to present. "But finding an appropriate gift in cotton proved more difficult than I might have hoped."

"Are you trying to tell me you bought me some naughty little outfit to wear around the house? Cause I'm not entirely opposed..." She winked up at him.

"No," he laughed. "Though I absolutely will if you would prefer..."

"Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you going to give it to me?"

"I am," he nodded, hugging her closer as he bent his lips to hers; soft and gentle. And then, with a deep breath, he stepped back; his hands on her shoulders turning her around so she faced away from him.

Maddie blinked, confused for only a second and then she saw it.

And her breath sucked into her lungs.
"Harry..." She exhaled his name, her hand pressing to her chest over her rapidly thumping heart, her eyes scanning over the painting that hung over the fireplace. "It's..." She could barely believe it, taking slow steps towards it, she took in the details, the strokes and turns of the brush that had painted it.

"It's on cotton canvas," he offered, his voice soft and slightly shy as he watched her react to it. "So it counts."

"It's...it's my parent's house..." She stood right below it then, her eyes wide as she looked it over. "Your first house in the country..." He added, moving up behind her.

Her eyes welled up as she took it in. "But who..." Her eyes flickered to the corner, searching for the signature of the artist, wondering who in the world had gone to her mother's house and rendered such an amazing piece of art.

When she found the name scrawled out in that unmistakable penmanship, the lump in her throat rose and the tears in her eyes fell and she spun around to face him. "You..." Her voice cracked and her heart swelled. "Harry...you did this?"

His head nodded; humble and shy and fragile as he smiled. "I tried to anyway..."

Before the self-deprecating laugh could puff from his lips, Maddie was in his arms, her own flung around his neck as she held him tight and close; as warm tears slipped from her eyes.

"I love it," she whispered into his neck. "I love it so much. I love YOU so much...I..." She pulled back, her hands on either side of his face as she kissed him. "I don't even know what to say to you, you just...." She kissed him again. "You continue to blow me out of the water with...Harry..." She sighed, turning to look at it, holding onto his hand. "This is...beautiful."

"Well," he let out a breath he had been holding. "I'm so happy you like it."

"Oh I do," she nodded, her eyes still turned up in awe as she looked it over. "It's just...amazing. It's amazing. And I'm so happy it's here..."

"In your new house in the country," he offered, his eyes shining brightly as he watched her.

She took another minute, struggling to pull her eyes away from it. But when she did, she smiled up at him, her bottom lip pulled between her teeth. "Do you think...do you think you could wait here for a moment?"

"What?" He laughed. "Where are you going?"

"To the car," she nodded her head towards the front of the house.

"You're leaving me?" He joked. "But we just bought this house and..."

"Your gift," she cut him off with a shake of her head. "Your gift is in the car and while it's not nearly as remarkable as this..." She shrugged. "I still want to give it to you."

"Yes," he smiled, bending to kiss her hand. "I will wait here."

"Thank you," she sighed, tipping up on her toes to kiss him before she stepped away, leaving him standing tall and proud and happy in their family room.

She was back in no time, stepping quickly into the room, slowing as she approached him. She
looked sweet and slightly coy and she had one of his suit coats hugged to her chest in her arms.

"Are you cold?" He eyed the coat suspiciously.

"No," she shook her head, sighing as she stopped in front of him. "I too struggled with the cotton aspect of this anniversary..."

"Ever the traditionalist?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Something like that," she smirked.

"Did you...did you buy me a new coat?" He tapped the fabric in her arms.

"No," she smiled, looking down at it. "But I altered it just a little."

"You what?" He laughed, curious.

"I did," she nodded, lifting her eyes to him as she pulled the coat into her hands and held it out to him tentatively. "Take a look. Just inside the front left side...over your heart."

Taking the coat from her, his forehead creased and he looked inside. When he found it, small and delicate, his eyes shot back up to her. He knew exactly what it was but he wasn't sure how...

"I took the fingerprints they made of Lilli from the day she was born..." Maddie moved in closer, taking the coat back from him as she explained. "I had a silkscreen created and had them printed on..."

"Cotton..." He finished her thought, his eyes shining as it began to make sense. Maddie smiled wider, her head nodding.

"I printed up a ton of them and then I had your tailor sew them into all of your coats," she smiled as she ran her finger over the small oval shape sewn into the lining just over his heart. "All of your jackets, all of your..."

Her words were silenced by the soft urgency of his lips. With his hands in her hair, he tilted her mouth up to his and he kissed her; warm and slow and deep. When he pulled back, Maddie's cheeks were pink and her lips were rosy and her eyes were full of so much love for him.

"You...you'll have a little bit of Lilli with you wherever you are and..."

And he kissed her again--because he had to. Because he couldn't help himself.

For most of his waking life, Harry knew he walked with an air of confidence, with a smirk and a wink and that damn cheeky grin that everyone seemed to be drawn to. For most of the time he was tall and strong and wasn't afraid to take on the world, was happy to shoulder whatever was tossed his way.

But in his heart of hearts, in those deep, soft secret places, he was nothing but fluffy. Nothing but sentimental. And if anyone, or anything, could bring it out in him, it was his wife--who he absolutely adored.

He knew enough to know that he could most likely have his pick of a variety of women waiting in vain for his marriage to falter. He knew enough to know that there were those out there who didn't even need for his marriage to falter, who would be ready and willing in a moment, without question. And there was probably a time in his life when that would have made him smile, when that would have puffed up his feathers and strengthened his strut.
But that time had passed, long before Maddie had become his wife, long before she had agreed to his proposal. And now, nothing could bring him to the highest of highs quite like the bossy blonde in his arms kissing him back like she needed him half as much as he needed her.

And he needed her; so much. With his fingers tightening in her hair, with his tongue teasing into her mouth, he took a step forward, causing her to take a step back. Moving his hand from her hair, his arm wrapped around her waist, holding her tight to him as he walked her back another step. And then another. When her back met the wall, she whimpered against his lips and opened her mouth to him.

She knew enough to know when her husband wanted her, knew enough to know exactly what it meant—the way his hands were running over her body, the way his lips were moving against hers—the way he was holding her to him.

And she knew that this heat that was rising between them, the way the sweetness was melting into this heavy desire, she knew exactly what was about to happen right there in the family room at Foxgrove. The home they had only owned for a matter of minutes.

She was right, blissfully so. Harry stood tall and commanding over her, pressing her into the wall behind her, stepping into her space. Her fingers were greedy as they pushed up under that soft sweater he was wearing. His mouth was hot and hungry as he kissed down the column of her exposed neck, as he gathered her chest in the rough palms of his hands as his tongue dipped down to tease her.

"Harry..." She moaned; a breathy sound tipped in desperation, a sound that drove him mad. "Please..."

"Fuck..." He groaned, his hands sliding down around her ass, squeezing as he pulled her to him. His eyes were dark as he smiled down at her. "You have any idea how much I want you right now?"

"I think I do," she bit her bottom lip, arching her hips out to meet his, feeling him hard and ready for her.

"We are miles from a bed," he shook his head even as his hands moved up under her skirt, as his fingers teased against her hot skin.

"Since when do you need a bed...Captain?" Her eyes were wide and as innocent as she could possibly make them with the way his hands were moving against her.

"Ooohhh..." He chuckled, pushing in closer, bringing this amazing pressure to every single part of her body he was touching. "Do I sense a challenge?"

"You do," she nodded, lifting her leg to wrap around his hip, pulling him into her. "What do you say Henry...are we rising to the challenge this afternoon or..."

In an answer, his mouth was on hers.

He was going to rise to the challenge—as he always did.

In a heated frenzy, Maddie's hands were on him, pulling up his sweater, fumbling with his belt, his zipper. His breath was hot in her ear as his mouth moved across her jaw, down her neck. Before she could wrap her fingers around him, he was moving away from her, dropping down to pull her panties out from under her skirt, tugging them off her legs and letting them fall to the floor next to him.
His eyes flashed up to hers, holding her gaze as he stood; so intense and so heavy that Maddie held her breath; anticipation scorching through her.

And then he moved in. Normally when he took her like this, with her back pressed against the nearest vertical surface, it was fast and rough. But this time was different. This time when his hands slid up over her, they were soft and reverent. This time when he hitched her leg up around his hip, when he pressed into her--he was slow and purposeful and intense.

A soft cry fell from her lips as his hips rocked into her, burying himself deeper and deeper still and when he was just as deep as he could possibly be, he lifted his mouth from hers and, looking down into her hazy, lust filled eyes, he smiled.

His fingers traced lightly over her cheek, down her jaw, her chin. They stroked over her lips before he bent down to kiss her again; soft and slow.

Every single move he made was slow, every single move was intense. He wanted to make love to her, even if it was urgent, even it if was pressed up against this wall in their new home. And the way those two desires met up inside of him, the way they were moving between them, drew a new sort of heat to the moment.

And despite the slowness of his movements, despite the lightness of his touch, it sent Maddie soaring over the edge. But even as she arched out against him, even as she tried to will him to move faster, he stayed steady.

Slow and steady and achingly deep.

And sooner rather than later Maddie was scratching her fingers into the soft sweater he still wore and she was panting his name and she was coming completely undone in Harry's arms. But he held her up, he held her steady, even as he pressed his own face into her neck and lost himself inside of her. Slumped together in a heated mass of heavy breath and satisfied sighs, Maddie opened her eyes and found his instantly. The smile that greeted her made her already rapid heart swell.

"Happy Anniversary?" She laughed lightly, her fingers massaging into his hair.

"Welcome home?" He chuckled along with her, his hand moving up to her face, stroking lovingly over her face, his thumb rubbing along her well-kissed lips. "Come on love...let's get you dressed and go..."

"Go?" She breathed, her leg falling from around his hip, standing steady on the ground. "Go where?"

"Home..." He sighed, not wanting to step away from her yet. "We're going back to the city..." He kissed her lips, his fingers trailing down her neck.

"But...the picnic basket and..."

"I don't care," he shook his head, moving his warm, solid body against hers, craving the contact. "I need to get you to a bed Maddie..."

"A bed?" She breathed, her eyes flashing wide as he bent to kiss her.

"Mmm..." He moaned against her lips, his hands smoothing softly over her. "A bed. Come with me?"

Her body, nearly puddy from what he had already done to her, reacted to his words, to their
implications and she nodded. Yes. She would go with him.

"Here..." He took half a step back, holding onto her hand as he bent to pick up her panties and offer them to her.

And she took them. But, keeping her eyes locked with his, she didn't put them on. Instead, she sucked in a long, slow breath and she stuffed them into the pocket of her rumpled skirt. Turning on her heel, she started towards the door.

"Captain?"

Harry blinked, cleared his throat and shook his head. "Yes?"

"We're an hour from home..." She called out to him. "And the bed doesn't get any closer if you just stand there."

Snapping out of his daze, he clapped his hands together and hurried after her.
The nude pictures of Maddie dropped over night. There was no warning, no heads up, no calls for comment. They just appeared and were instantly everywhere. It didn't matter that they were fake and it didn't matter that there was a long ago issued injunction barring their use. This was war and whoever it was who was saddling up next to Ernie in Nebraska was hitting back against the Sussexs, back against the Royal Family.

And they weren't pulling any punches.

The loud ring of the landline shattered out into their room, waking them both from deep, heavy sleep. Maddie sat straight up in bed, a panic already washing over her as Harry reached for the phone, knocking over several items on his nightstand as he did.

"Yes?" He answered, his voice rough with sleep. Watching him closely, she began to mentally prepare herself for something big; a death, an accident. Maybe a war. She didn't know for sure what was going on, but she did know that that phone hadn't rang once in the entire time she'd been sleeping next to Harry.

She watched and listened and she jumped when she heard his voice turn sharp and angry.

"What the fuck are you talking about?!" His eyes whipped around to look at her, his hands pushing the blankets from his legs, rising to his feet unable to contain the energy that was piping through his veins.

Maddie couldn't move, couldn't find her voice to ask him what was happening so she sat there and she watched Harry's face drain of color. "What do you mean they're..." He reached for his cellphone, tugging it up, listening to the other person on the other end of the phone as he slid his fingers over the screen. "Oh my God..." He whispered, his eyes staring down at the screen, the image glaring and bright as he nodded his head.

"What..." She managed a whisper, seeing the tension on his face illuminated by the light from his phone.

"Jesus Christ. I thought we took care of this?! But then how in the hell...Well what do you want me to...Fine. Yes. We'll get dressed right now. See you soon."

With a storm of anxiety brewing in her stomach, Maddie watched as Harry placed the phone back on its base, the slow, quiet way he moved only making her more nervous.

"Harry?" Her voice cracked, her mind scattered as she tried to figure out what in the hell could be going on that made him so angry, that required them to get out of bed and get dressed at four in the morning on the day of Trooping The Colour.

His fingers stayed wrapped around the phone as he took a breath, as he tried to calm himself. His knuckles were white and his face was red and were it not for the sleeping baby down the hall, he would have ripped the phone out of the wall and thrown it through a window.

Maddie gulped at the dryness in her throat. "Harry what is it? Is everyone okay or..."

His head nodded slowly as he had to consciously tell his hand to let go of the phone. Turning to face her, he caught the look on her face; the panic and the fear and God how he wanted to scoop her up and take her away from all of this. "Everyone is...ha...everyone is fine."
"Then who is coming over here at four in the morning?"

"Thomas," Harry answered, his tone cold and businesslike, desperately trying to keep his anger in check as he looked down at his phone, sliding his fingers over the screen. "You should get out of bed and get dressed and..."

"You still haven't told me what..." Without word, he handed his phone over to her, nodding down to the screen illuminating their dark room. When she looked down, when she saw those photos that she thought were buried deep in her past, the gasp that pushed from her mouth was painful to the both of them. "But..." She stammered, shaking her head as she began to scroll through them. It was like deja vu, the first time she saw them clear and vivid in her mind. She had been Harry's girlfriend then, a private citizen. Somebody had threatened to print them but she was able to shut it down, she was able to call them off.

But there they were.

Everywhere.

"What do we..." Her eyes were blinking at the shaky tears that began to build. "What do we do?"

"I don't know," Harry shook his head, pulling a t-shirt over his head and reaching for a pair of jeans; wide awake and barely keeping his calm.

"Who...who did this? Who has these? I thought we handled this years ago?" She was having such a hard time registering it as real, as something that was happening outside of a horrible dream.

"We did," Harry's voice was tight and clipped. "Thomas is on his way and I'm sure the...the fucking polo team has been called." He pulled on a pair of jeans and ran his hands up over his face. "But the answer is I don't know. I don't know who the fuck has them, I don't know who the fuck printed them first, and I don't know WHO THE FUCK..." He stopped, his fists clenched at his sides as he tried to calm. He could see that she needed answers, that she needed something to snap her out of the spiral that was clearly holding onto her mind. And he really fucking hated that he didn't have anything to offer. "I'm sorry. I..." His heart cracked then, his emotions rushing to the surface. Pulling it together, he held his hand out to her. "You should get out of bed Maddie and put on some clothes. Thomas is on his way and we're meeting in my office in fifteen minutes."

"But..." Maddie shook her head. "They couldn't use them before."

"I know."

"And they're...Fuck, Harry, they're fake. They're not me. They're..."

"I know," Harry nodded, watching as she looked around the room. "It's different now."

"How?!" Her eyes were wide and upset and he could see that she honestly didn't know.

And it broke his heart to tell her. "You're married to me." He had to look away, his shoulders tense, his neck tight. "That's how it's different Maddie. You're a Duchess now...fucking public property." His voice was low and full of so much guilt it almost made the room heavier.

"Harry..." Maddie's eyes were welling up, her throat was closing in and despite her concentrated efforts, she felt like she was losing it.

"Maddie..." He looked down at the floor, sucking in his breath so he could look at her.
"But...Trooping the Colour is today..."

"I know."

"We have to be dressed and ready in a matter of hours. We...have to be in a parade...in a fucking carriage...Harry! We have to stand next to the QUEEN on the balcony!"

"I know!" His voice echoed in the room and before he could apologize, Maddie threw his phone down on the bed next to her.

"And my naked ass is all over the place!"

"It's not your naked ass..." He shook his head, his conviction barely there.

"It doesn't fucking matter..." She whispered, her head nodding in defeat as a few wayward tears ran down her face. "Okay..." She sniffed, her hands smudging at the tears on her cheeks. "I'll get out of bed. I'll...get dressed." She pushed back the blankets and stood. "I just need a minute."

Brushing past him, she went straight into their bathroom and shut the door behind her.

When Maddie came back out of the bathroom, she was as pulled together as she could possibly hope to be. Harry was gone, she assumed already down in his office. Taking a deep breath, she tugged on a pair of jeans and reached for a soft flannel shirt. Pulling her hair up and back out of her face, she was careful to avoid her own eyes in the mirror--knowing that it just might send her back into the dark hole she was trying to avoid.

She was trying; to hold it together, to be strong. She was trying to do what she had promised herself she would do throughout the course of this crazy lawsuit. But it was getting harder; infinitely harder. She made her way over to her nightstand, reaching on reflex for her cellphone but thought better of it. Who knew who had seen these? Who knew what kind of phone calls or texts were waiting with questions for her she wasn't even close to answering.

Leaving her phone and what was left of her humility, she stepped out of the safety of their bedroom.

When she passed by Lilli's room, she was instantly drawn in; her soul seeking the peace that came with their sweet, slumbering daughter. Stepping inside, she was careful and quiet as she watched her. That wild tuft of bright red hair, the way her hands were tossed carelessly over her head. She looked so much like her father.

The thought of Harry brought wave upon wave of emotion crashing into her, weakening her knees and twisting up her throat. The look on his face, the tension in his shoulders. It all made her want to cry.

And run very very far away.

Smoothing her hand over Lilli's hair, she bent to kiss her chubby little cheeks and then, with great regret, she stepped from her room and continued on.

She could hear the voices in Harry's office as she made her way through the house. Thomas was there and from the sound of things, he hadn't come alone. The door was nearly closed and she knew they were waiting for her but everything inside of her wanted to crawl back in bed, pull the covers up over her head and avoid the entire rest of the day. But that wasn't even close to an option.
So she took a deep breath and she stepped into the room.

The conversation drew to a halt and all sets of eyes turned to look right at her. Thomas was there with two of the attorneys sitting around the table on the far end of the room with her husband who already looked finished with the conversation. Harry let out a breath of relief when he saw her and rose to his feet, the others following nearly instantaneously.

"Hey..." He made a move to go to her, to take her hand or her arm, to walk with her into the room. But she gave a quick shake of her head to stop him, certain that any softness from him would take down what was left of the steel wall she had been trying to put forward.

Looking to the other three men in the room, she swallowed her pride and tried for a smile. "Gentlemen," she nodded her hello.

"Ma'am," Thomas was the first to step forward, the first to meet her eyes. Trying to make this moment as easy as possible, he gestured towards the table, towards an empty spot for her. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"No," she shook her head, moving over to the chair next to Harry's. "Thank you." With a sigh, she sat down. "Though I suppose I should be asking you all that..."

"No Ma'am," Thomas offered a small smile. "It's unfortunate that we have to impose upon you at this hour."

"Unfortunate?" Maddie puffed out a bitter, breath of a laugh and sat back in her chair.

"I'm sorry Ma'am," Thomas held her eyes as he took his seat, the other men following his lead. And Maddie could see it in his gaze; he was sorry for so much more than just the hour of day.

Pressing her lips together to keep from crying, she nodded her head. "Why don't you all continue..." She waved her hand. "I'll catch up."

Thomas nodded to the two attorneys seated on the opposite side of the table. Clearing their throats, they sat forward, looking from Harry to Maddie and back again. "You were asking about the previous cease and desist order," the older of the two spoke up.

"Yes," Harry nodded, wanting to reach out to Maddie, to connect with her, but seeing that she didn't want that—couldn't handle that. "When these photos first surfaced, they were deemed as edited and altered images. It was determined that they weren't her. And order was issued and they were barred from being published."

"Yes sir," the older attorney opened a folder and pulled out a document. "I have that right here."

"And?" Harry lifted his eyebrows. "They decided to just suddenly ignore the order and distribute them anyway."

"No sir," the man shook his head. "We contacted the representing attorneys on our way over here and they've confirmed that this wasn't their client."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Their client is no longer in possession of the photos."

"Then who is?" Maddie leaned forward, her eyes narrowed.

"Our team is in the process of figuring that out."
Maddie sat back. "Do you think it's him? Do you think it's Ernie?" She nearly choked on his name. "Is this his way of lashing out?"

"Maybe," Thomas nodded. "We don't know that it's Ernie. But we do think it's somebody who has decided to take up his side of this argument."

"Can they..." Maddie sucked in a deep breath, looking down at her hands. "Can they really just publish these like this? Can they really just...put them up and..."

"They already have," Thomas' voice was gentle but resigned. "The team is checking into the legalities of it all, the wording they've used...and as soon as we have an answer, you'll have it. And as soon as we can do something, we'll do it. But in the meantime..."

"They're already out there." Maddie finished for him, unable to look up at any of them. For the first time since all of this began, she was acutely aware that she was the only woman in a room full of men.

The tears she had been fighting rose to her eyes and this time she didn't even bother trying to hide them, trying to push them away. She just let them fall as she nodded. "Madeline..." Harry reached for her then, his hand taking hold of hers.

"What do we do?" She whispered. "I just..." She puffed out a breath and looked up to him. "Fine. Whatever. The pictures are out there. The world thinks they've seen me naked and..." She shook her head at the absurdity of it all. "Fine but..."

"Not fine," Harry shook his head, his voice hard.

"But what do we do?" Her eyes met his full of questions he wasn't sure he could answer. "Do we go to the event today? Do we pull out? Do we issue a statement? Do we...Fuck." Her fingers swiped at her cheeks. "Do we send Bishop to Nebraska?"

Though Harry chuckled at that, he lifted his eyes up to Thomas, holding onto her hand as he waited for answers himself.

"Tell me what you want to do," Thomas looked to Maddie, hating to see her like this, wishing there was more he could do.

"I don't know," Maddie shook her head, her voice drifting off. "I don't know." Squeezing Harry's hand, Maddie rose from her chair and moved away from the table.

Harry cleared his throat and spoke up. "Maybe you can call the Queen's office and see if they have a preference..."

"Of course," Thomas answered quickly, pulling his phone from his pocket, knowing somebody was up there as well.

Turning back to look at them, Maddie asked. "We're in a waiting pattern right now?"

"Yes Ma'am," Thomas nodded, his fingers swiping over the screen as he dialed.

"I'm just going to wait..." She pointed to the doors that joined Harry's office. Before either of them could respond, Maddie was stepping out of Harry's office where phone calls were being placed, where legalities were being debated, and she moved into her own office.

It was peaceful and quiet and serene and she could almost convince herself that what was
happening around her wasn't really happening.

Almost.

Stepping further into the room, she was drawn to the window seat. She had seen pictures of Diana there and she couldn't help but drift to the place where she allowed her mind to wander.

What would her mother-in-law have to say about all of this? What would her advice have been? How would she direct them?

"Maddie..." Harry's voice was soft and quit. He didn't want to disturb her but he simply couldn't just leave her alone.

"Hmm?" She lifted her eyebrows though her eyes stayed focused on the window.

"Are you okay?" He knew how absurd the question sounded but he had to ask it.

And she had to be honest when she answered. "I don't know," she shook her head. "I...God, Harry, I'm trying to be." Turning around to look at him, her arms crossed over her chest and she leaned back against the wall. "I just keep trying to figure out...why..." Nodding, Harry stepped further into the room. "I mean, why is this happening? Why is somebody even doing this? How does a person even get to this spot? Where they create these...pictures. Where they lie about them being me...I mean...why would somebody DO that?" She swallowed and looked around her office. "What have I ever done to anyone to make them..."

"Nothing," Harry cut her off. "You've done nothing. This isn't about you, it's..."

"Oh come on," Maddie laughed bitterly. "This isn't about me?" Her eyebrows shot up, her eyes intent on him. "Did you SEE the photos? Have you read the articles? Let's be honest. It's at least a little about me, don't you think?"

He had to look away because he had nothing for her; no arguments, no rationale. "I'm sorry. I..."

"Don't be," she shook her head, hating just as much the way this hit her husband. "I just...I've been thinking about what it was I could have possibly done to these people. What did I do to make them think it's justified to treat another person this way..."

"You did nothing," Harry insisted but she didn't hear him.

"Is it really just because I married you? Because I happen to fall in love with a Prince?" Her eyes squeezed tight, nearly closed as she thought about it all. "Because I was an American who fell in love with a Prince? It just..." She shook her head, a light laugh pushing through her lips. "Is it because I've given up my job? Because I've taken on certain charities? Because I don't have enough? Because..."

"Stop," Harry called out to her. "Please just...stop. You know it's none of those things on their own. You know that this has to be more complex than that, bigger than that."

"Has to?"

"Yes," he nodded. "It has to. Because them coming after you..." His voice was strained, every muscle in his body tense. "Jesus Maddie...do you have any idea how much I just want to get you away from all of this?"

"Yeah?" She offered half a smile. "And how exactly are you planning on doing that?"
"I don't know," he shook his head with a huff of a laugh. "We're going to Bendal this summer. Maybe you stay there? Off, out in the middle of nowhere..."

"Ha!" Maddie's laugh rang out, amused by the idea. "As tempting as that might be..."

"It's pretty tempting, isn't it?" Though he was smiling, his heart ached.

"I'd rather be here with you, if it's all the same..."

"Yeah," Harry's head hung down, heavy with the emotions her words drew up. When his eyes lifted to hers, they were dark and sad and when he spoke her name, his voice cracked. "Maddie..."

"Excuse me," Thomas's voice called out as he stepped into the room, his cellphone in hand. "I'm sorry to interrupt."

"Come in," Harry spoke up, his eyes trained on Maddie who turned away, looking back to the windows.

"Ma'am," Thomas moved towards Maddie. "I have the Queen on the phone for you and..."

"What?" Harry's forehead drew in. "You can't talk to the Queen's office?"

"No Sir," Thomas shook his head. "It's not her office. It's The Queen." Maddie's eyes snapped over to him. "She would like to speak to you."

"Me?" Maddie whispered, her eyes the size of saucers.

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded, holding the phone out to her.

"You...you didn't call her did you?" Maddie looked nervously at the phone.

"No Ma'am," he shook his head. "She called herself. She would like to speak to you..."

Snapping out of her daze enough to know she should take the phone, Maddie reached for it, took a deep breath and pressed it to her ear. "Your Majesty."

Standing tall in the middle of the room, Harry watched as his wife's face washed over with emotion, watched as her eyes welled up with tears and watched as she turned away from the both of them. "Yes Ma'am," she whispered against the tears in her throat. "Thank you. Thank you very much. I appreciate that." Her head was nodding as she listened. Harry didn't know what his grandmother was saying to her, but he was thankful she was saying it. "Yes Ma'am. Yes. Yes of course," Maddie's back straightened, her shoulders squared. "Yes. Yes Ma'am. Okay. We'll see you soon. Good-bye."

Maddie stood still for a moment after the phone call ended, collecting herself; pulling it together. When she turned around a little of the color had returned to her face and, even though she had been crying, there was much more of a smile present than there had been. She looked to Thomas first, stepping forward to hand back his phone. "Thank you," she nodded to him and turned to Harry. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she met his eyes. "We're going today. The Queen...Gran...she's expecting us." Clearing her throat, she wiped at her eyes and tried for a smile. "I'm going to go get in the shower. Tara will be here soon and...I'm an absolute mess."

"Maddie..." Harry reached for her hand as she moved past him towards the door.

"It's okay," she squeezed his fingers. "Thomas will let us know when they know something but in the meantime...we have to look more presentable than this." Meeting his eyes, she gave him a nod.
and without another word, she slipped from the room; leaving the two men in a heavy silence.

It took a few hours. A few hours, a piping hot shower, some snuggles with Lilli and a bit of attention and pampering from Tara. But when Maddie finally stepped out of the room, dressed and ready for the cars waiting to take them to Buckingham Palace, she felt...better. Nothing had really been resolved yet. The photos were under new ownership and the new owner did not seem to care about any legal or ethical violations they were making by distributing the photos to the world. So there they were. The PR group was in full spin mode and the lawyers were working over time, filing suits and hitting back.

And that was all they really could do.

Well, that and crawl under the blankets for a few weeks while it all blew over. But that wasn't an option and The Queen had called Maddie to duty. So she had done her level best to push it all aside and do what was being asked of her.

With her hair pulled back and her hat pinned into place, Maddie stepped into her shoes, smoothed down the front of her dress and for the second time that morning, left her room and headed down the stairs back into the heat of it all. Greta had already come for Lilli and the car that was waiting for her and Harry was outside and ready to go.

As Maddie reached the bottom of the stairs, the house was relatively quiet; unusually calm for all of the excitement they had had that morning, for the event that was getting ready to roll out. Standing still in the entryway, she looked around and listened for signs of life, signs of activity. Hearing the low murmur of conversation coming from Harry's office, she set off in that direction. Despite all of the craziness, she couldn't help but smile at the thought of him in his uniform.

"Such a sucker Sussex," she mumbled to herself, shaking her head with a bit of a smirk. Stepping up to the door to his office, the voices became clearer and in that unmistakable quiet urgency that seemed to come with the Royal staff, she heard Thomas ask Harry, "When do you want me to tell her? Now or after the balcony appearance?"

With a sick stomach, Maddie stood still and quiet and could almost hear the debate happening in Harry's mind. Saving him the decision, she stepped right into the room. "Tell her what?" Her voice cut into the tension and both men turned to face her, Harry standing tall as she moved inside. "When should you tell her what?"

"Ma'am," Thomas nodded to her, the nervousness on his face doing nothing to ease the tension on Maddie's.

"Harry?" Maddie looked right at him. "Is something going on? Do we know more about the pictures or..."

"It's not the pictures," Harry shook his head, moving around her to shut the door to his office.

"Not the pictures?" Maddie blinked, looking to Thomas. "Not...either set of pictures?" She groaned at how absurd it was that there was more than one set they were worried about.

"No Ma'am," Thomas shook his head. "It's something new."

"Something new?" Her voice rose and her eyes widened and something deep in the pit of her
stomach told her--this was about to get worse.

Thomas looked to Harry who took a long deep breath and sighed it out. "I think you should go ahead and tell her."

"Yes," Maddie whispered, her voice distinctively more certain than her gut. "You should go ahead and tell her."

Nodding, Thomas turned to face her, his hands folding together in front of her. "My office received a heads up and call for comment about an interview that's been given, that's going to air this evening."

"An interview?" Maddie's face screwed up; confused. "With who? Ernie? The guy with these photos?"

"No Ma'am," he shook his head, taking a breath and keeping his gaze with hers. "With a Travis Meeks."

Maddie took a step back, completely caught off guard by that. She felt the air slip from her lungs, felt the heat rise to her cheeks and she reached out to hold onto something, to steady herself.

"But..." She swallowed, trying to relieve the dryness in her throat. "But...how? And why? I mean..." She trailed off not completely sure what she wanted to ask.

"We don't know," Thomas shook his head. "However, it does appear that whomever is putting out this interview is connected to whomever put out these photos..."

"But Travis?!" She nearly laughed. "What in the hell could he possibly have to say that..." Her voice stopped and the color drained completely from her cheeks. "This is about me," she nodded her head, her thoughts drifting. "This...the photos this morning and now this. They're coming after me."

"It would appear so, yes."

"It would APPEAR so?" Maddie laughed; dark and bitter. "Jesus Christ. Did he go to them or did they go find him or...you know what. No." She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. It...FUCK. Why is he giving an interview? Why would they WANT him to do an interview? He's a drunk and he's bitter and..."

"And who better to give one?" Thomas spoke up. "If their goal is to hit you, then who better to put up? A high school boyfriend with a chip on his shoulder."

"Can we...can we stop him?" Maddie asked, a tiny bit of hope hanging in her voice. "My mother knows his parents. My cousins could take him out..."

"No," Thomas shook his head. "It's already done, the interview is already edited and locked."

Maddie stood still and quiet, her eyes blinking as she desperately tried to reconcile her emotions with her logic. "I just don't understand," she shook her head. "The pictures were one thing. I mean...they draw viewers, they can bring in money and people are...fuck. People are interested in scandal but Travis? I mean who could possibly care what the hell HE has to say?!"

The two men stood in front of her, Harry's mind at work trying to find an answer, Thomas's eyes heavy and resolved because he already had one.

"Well," he cleared his throat. "I suppose that depends on what he has to say."
"How do you mean?" Harry spoke up, his eyebrows lifting in question.

"I mean..." Thomas stopped for a minute, struggling to be tactful and respectful in a situation where he had to ask questions he knew he had no business knowing. "I'm sorry Ma'am." his hand pressed to his chest and his eyes grew sympathetic and for a moment Maddie felt more sorry for him than she did for herself and Harry. "So far all of the hits they've taken have been...sexual in nature."

"Hold on," Harry held up his hand, knowing instantly where this was going.

"The photos of the two of you in Colorado," Thomas ignored Harry as he listed them out. "The edited photos of you that landed this morning..."

"Thomas. I swear to God if you're about to ask my wife..."

"I can't help but wonder, Ma'am," he stayed on course, his eyes fixed on her. "Is there anything that maybe we should know? Anything that he might...share, about you, from your history with him that might..."

"Alright, enough." Harry stepped forward, his hand pressing to Thomas's shoulder, backing him up as he stepped between them.

But Maddie was already laughing. "Is there anything you should know?! Is there...ha! Like what Thomas? What would you like to know? That he was my first?"

"Maddie," Harry turned to her, wishing he could start this entire fucking day over.

"Or is that not enough?" Maddie's anger shifted to Thomas, as unfair as she knew that was. "You want to know what our favorite position was? If we took pictures? Or videos or what?! What is it you think he's going to say?! That we were into threesomes?! That we swapped with other couples?!"

"I'm sorry," Thomas held up his hands and he was; sincerely and greatly sorry about all of this. "I didn't meant to upset you and I swear to you, I don't actually want to know any of this. I don't want or need to know anything at all about your private life..." As he spoke, Maddie's anger faded and was quickly replaced with a frenzied sort of upset. "All I want to do is protect you from things we can see coming. And if we don't know what's coming...then so be it. I'll do whatever I can on the other side of this. I just thought that if there was something we knew ahead of time..."

"No," Maddie shook her head, tears filling her eyes as she struggled for breath. "I can't...I can't think of anything. We were just...normal teenagers. We...were virgins when we got together and we...experimented but only with each other and there wasn't anything...crazy or..."

"Can we be done?" Harry had had enough; way more than enough. "The cars are outside waiting and my wife is..." He swallowed. He didn't really know what was happening inside his wife's beautiful brain but he would do anything in the world to make it stop. "Can we just...be done? Whatever he says in the interview, whatever he implies...this has to stop."

"Yes," Thomas nodded, stepping back. "Of course. Of course. Ma'am..."

"Why?" Maddie looked up to the two of them. "Why are they doing all of this? Why are they coming at us from every angle with...all of it? Why now?"

"Because," Thomas's voice was small. "Because they know we're winning; in the courtroom and in public opinion. They know and they're afraid, so they're dumping it all now while they still
Maddie nodded, biting at her lip as she turned away from the two of them. "Well..." She sniffed, took a deep breath and wiped careful at her teary eyes. "Good for them then."

"Madeline," Harry's voice was soft, his hands reaching out to her even as she walked away. "Thomas, could you excuse us for a minute?"

"Of course," he nodded, ready to take leave.

"No," Maddie shook her head, her eyes shooting to the two of them. Holding up her hand to Thomas, she looked right at Harry. "I can't...I can't do this right now. We have a car waiting and the Queen and..." She gulped and took a breath and struggled. "We don't have time for this Harry. We don't have time to talk about it, we don't have time to strategize and we sure as hell don't have time for me to break down." She sucked in another shaky breath and pulled her shoulders back, her head high. "I have to check my makeup and then I'll meet you in the car." Before either of them could say anything else, she spun on her heels and headed towards the door. "Thomas?" She stopped for merely a beat.

"Ma'am?"

"What time does it air?"

"An hour after the event is over this afternoon."

Nodding her head, she swallowed back the tears and put one foot in front of the other. It was time to go; no matter the sickness in her stomach, no matter the dam full of tears behind her eyes, no matter the scattered mind she couldn't seem to calm down. No matter the spiral.

It was time to stand tall, to be calm and step up for the duty she was being called to. This was her life; the Duchess of Sussex.

Harry was waiting for Maddie at the front door. When she came down the hallway towards him, her eyes purposefully avoided his as she walked right past him through the open door. He tried not to take it personally that she seemed to be needing anything that had nothing to do with him. He tried to remember that what she needed now was to shut off the emotion and that meant shutting off her connection to him.

He understood; it was a survival tactic. But it still stung and it still made his blood boil mad.

The rush of fresh air, the flash of the bright sun was enough to allow Maddie a moment of reprieve as she made her way down the walk. She was able to take a breath, able to clear her mind just enough. Refusing to stand anything but tall, refusing to look anywhere but right into the faces of all the men she passed, she nodded her hello to Arthur and Jim who stood at attention next to the car.

Both of them looked mad as hell. And that, for some reason, made Maddie feel better.

"Are we ready?" Maddie managed a smile to the driver who held the door open for her.

"Yes Ma'am."

"Thank you," she slid into her seat with Harry right behind her. The doors were barely closed before they were in motion, the driver making up for any lag in time as they flew through the
streets of London.

"Maddie..." Harry's voice was low and soft. He didn't want to crack into the tough exterior she had going on, he didn't want to shake her. She had been very clear at the house about what she needed. But he hated being disconnected from her like this, especially with what was happening around them.

"Harry," she whispered, looking down at her hands and then out the window. "The only way I make it through the next few hours is if you just...if you let me pretend that this isn't happening. If you let me pretend that everything is okay. Can you just...I can only focus on one thing right now and that has to be making it through Trooping the Colour or I'm just going to..." Her breath sucked in and she shook her head, her hands balling up into fists. "Fold."

"Okay," Harry agreed, pulling his hands into his lap, struggling with his innate need to comfort her, desperately wanting to pull her from this cold, distant place she was going in her mind; the only place she could be and make it through that day.

He understood; as much as he hated it, as much as he was furious about it, he got it. Smile, wave, laugh, stand tall, be good. This was going to be the biggest challenge she had faced since marrying him and fuck how he hoped it was the biggest she would ever face.

Stand tall. Smile. Wave.

Fuck. His jaw clenched as he looked out the window. He had managed to keep it from seeping in, his mind so far had been so completely focused on her that he hadn't had a minute to be as thoroughly pissed off as he was.

But there would be time for that. For right now, for the next few hours, it was all about getting Maddie through it all.


The cars pulled to a stop and the doors opened and there they were; front and center and called to duty. Stepping out of the car, Harry adjusted his hat on his head, tugging at his gloves. He looked across the top of the vehicle, watching as Maddie stepped out, as she moved around the car, her smile already in place. Though he could tell there was something off, something amiss, he knew that nobody else would be able to.

She was just that good at shutting this off--and he wasn't sure if that made him happy and relieved or incredibly sad.

The family was assembled, already lined up and stepping into carriages and there was barely time for anyone to notice they were there much less greet them. They were quickly ushered to the carriage already loaded with Camilla and Kate, both of whom turned wide, concerned eyes to the two of them.

Maddie stepped in first, taking the hand of the footman, finding her spot on the bench seat as Harry followed behind her.

"Oh my God," Kate's voice was low as she looked at the two of them. "I didn't know if you were going to be here." She looked from Maddie to Harry and back again. "God, Maddie. Are you okay? Are you..."

"No," Maddie's eyes lifted up to Kate's, her smile shaky as the carriage jarred into motion, moving forward. "But we're..." She sucked in a breath as they neared the awaiting public, as the wind whipped around them.
"We're pretending it is," Harry finished her sentence, his entire posture tense and rigid, his stomach sick at the fake smile on Maddie's face. "For the next couple of hours."

His eyes met Kate's, pleading with her to be on the same page. Understanding so much more than Harry wished she did, she nodded, swallowing back her memories, her heartbreak for her friend, she pulled her smile to her face and sat tall.

And she waved.

Next to her Camilla did the same.

And next to Harry...so did Maddie.

It felt insane there in that carriage; wildly inauthentic but it was the only way they were going to make it through the morning without cracking. Harry and these women; all three of them forced towards the edge of insanity because of the men they loved. All three of them dragged out for public ridicule and mocking, all three of them offered up at the altar of entertainment.

They were so much stronger than he was, stronger than he could ever be.

For the better part of the parade, Maddie was able to live in a world of pretend. She was able to sit and smile easily. She was able to wave at the crowd as they passed, she was able to let all that was going on around her pause for just enough time to do this; to be the Duchess. Of course it helped that everyone in the carriage was on board with her world of make-believe. It helped that Harry, thankfully, hadn't made one attempt to touch her. It helped that the crowd that lined the streets was supportive, that there wasn't really an opportunity for anyone to ask her questions or to say much of anything.

And by the time they rounded the corner, by the time they neared the gates, she had almost forgotten about the chaos that existed in the real world.

Almost.

But then, just as they were passing through the gates, just as they were all ready to breathe a collective sigh of relief, just as Harry was about to relax the tension in his shoulders, there was a call from the crowd that brought them all crashing back to it.

A man's voice, from somewhere just to the side of Maddie called out above the crowd, above the clatter of the horse hooves, above the cheering. His voice was deep and lewd and his words were a slap to her face.

"That's a great set of tits Duchess!"

And in an instant, the wall she had put up to protect herself came crashing down. Her throat began to close, her palms began to sweat and next to her, her husband was moving. He was halfway out of his seat when Camilla reached out, her hand gentle but firm on his knee, her eyes commanding him back to his spot.

Before a photo could be snapped, before Maddie could lose the smile she had so carefully crafted, before Harry could climb out of the carriage and kick somebody's ass, they disappeared through the gates and behind the walls of the palace.

When the carriage pulled to a stop, Harry was the first one out; red faced and furious. He could barely look at anyone, barely think clearly as he walked away. Camilla glanced at the two girls and went towards him, not sure how she could help but hoping she might.
And Maddie sat, absolutely still in her seat, her cracked smile frozen on her face. When Kate leaned forward and reached for her hands, Maddie's eyes blinked and filled with tears, desperate as she looked to her sister-in-law.

"You know," Kate's voice held only the slightest bit of shake to it. "He could have just as easily been talking to me."

The sound that pushed through Maddie's lips was the most horrible mixture of laughter and bitterness and appalling disgust. "What kind of world do we live in where we both..." Maddie was shaking, her breath coming up short, her eyes growing wider and wider as she shook her head. "Kate...Oh my God...Kate..." She was whispering, pressing her shaking hand to her stomach in a desperate attempt to keep from throwing up, to keep from breaking down.

Kate caught it all and thankfully snapped into motion. Putting a smile to her face, she moved in. "Pull it together," her voice was soft and sweet but undeniably firm.

"I..."

"No." Kate shook her head, the slightest of moves. "Look at me....look at me." She was taking charge, she was in control and Maddie had no other option but to do what she was told. Entrusting this woman with everything in that moment, Maddie looked up to her and she found safety.

And understanding.

"Take a deep breath," Kate muttered through her smile, her eyes darting around the growing crowd, the other carriages that were rolling into place. "In and out." Maddie did as instructed and Kate nodded. "One more time. Okay. Okay..." She swallowed back her own nervousness. "Now...smile."

"I can't."

"You can." Kate's fingers wrapped tightly around Maddie's hands, her lips pulling higher as though she were showing her how to do it. "You can. And you will." She nodded her head. "Smile."

And then for no other reason than the fact that Maddie's panicked state of mind wasn't sure she could disobey a future Queen, she smiled.

And Kate let out her tightly held breath. "There you go. There you go. You're fine."

"I'm not fine," Maddie shook her head, holding her smile in place.

"I know," Kate wavered for only a moment, her heart breaking. "But you can't do this here. You just...you CAN'T."

"I know."

"You want to be the only thing anyone talks about after today?"

"No..."

"You want to let these bastards win against you today?"

"No."

"You want Harry to go over the edge worrying about you?"
"What?" Maddie snapped out of her trance, her eyes darting over to where he stood. "No. No. I..."

"Then smile. Smile and breathe and get out of the carriage. This will be over in a few hours and I swear to you I will go with you wherever you want to go and I will buy you whatever you want to drink and I will drink it with you for however long you want. But right now, we're going to do this." Kate held Maddie's gaze, willing her strength over to her.

Thankfully, Maddie blinked and nodded. "Okay."

"Okay," Kate let out a breath she was holding. With Maddie's fingers tucked up in hers, she rose to her feet.

And Maddie followed behind, both of them stepping from the carriage and moving straight for the door.

The beautiful thing about moments such as these was that often times there was very little room for personal crisis, very little room for small talk or conversation until it was all over. As the family was ushered inside and up the stairs for the balcony appearance, it was clear that people wanted to speak to Maddie--Charles who had just arrived had an enormous amount of sympathy in his smile. But they were all moving so fast to where they needed to be that nobody really had time to catch up with her. And Kate, holding tightly to her arm, was marching her up the stairs, moving her forward.

As they all assembled in the balcony room, Maddie's eyes scanned the group for her husband, momentarily distracted from her own upset by overwhelming concern for his. Just before the doors open, she saw him. He was standing next to Will who was holding a squirrely Arthur in his arms. His fingers were smoothing over his hair, his jaw tight as he focused his eyes forward.

"Thank you," Maddie whispered to Kate as the doors were pulled open and the family began to file out. "Honestly..." She dared to look up to the stunning brunette, her smile genuine for the first time that day. "I don't know what I would have..." She shook her head. "I'd probably still be in the carriage..."

They both let out a small laugh at the idea of that.

"It's okay," Kate shook her head, taking a step forward. "If it weren't for you, I'd still be in that bathroom...consider us even?"

Swallowing back the lump in her throat, Maddie nodded. And then, with a great big breath and Kate at her side for strength, Maddie stepped outside onto the balcony.

Her smile pulled high and her lungs filled with air and she could almost feel the support she had surrounding her there on that balcony.

The Queen who had called her up personally to invite her to stand with them, who encouraged her to stand tall and ignore the things being thrown at her. Charles who was smiling at her. Kate who was looking out for her and Will who was doing the same for Harry.

And Harry.

Her eyes blinked back tears as she thought of him. Since that morning he had done nothing but exactly what she had asked of him; he had left her alone, he had let her be. And now, despite the anger she knew he must be feeling, he was standing tall and giving her space.
And quite suddenly, the last thing she wanted from him was space.

With a smile to Kate, she moved over to his side. Her demeanor stayed tall and strong as she took her place next to him. She watched him swallow deep, watched his jaw tense and she caught him looking at her through the corner of his eyes; checking to make sure she was really there, that she was really smiling.

With a smile up to him and eyes full of emotion, Maddie reached out and placed her hand on his back; strong and firm and supporting. And she felt his reaction to her under her fingers. The stress eased up and he breathed a little easier.

With her eyes trained out at the crowd, she whispered, "I'm sorry."

"No," he was shaking his head before she even finished. "You're...perfect." Daring to turn to her, a smile passed between them; warm and caring and bringing tears to both of their eyes. So he turned away, not wanting to bring them both down out there on the balcony.

So they stood tall; they smiled and they waved.

And right next to them, with a squeal that drew attention from everyone around them, was Arthur, clapping his chubby little hands and holding his arms up to Maddie. "Maaaa...Eeeee."

"Would you look at that," Harry chuckled. "The kid wouldn't even look at me but you..."

"Well, I'm not as scary looking as you are Captain," Maddie smiled up at him before looking to Will and Arthur. "How is my favorite little man?"

"I'm doing okay," Will shrugged. "Though I'm not sure how much I like you calling me little..." They all three snickered at that. "Would you like to hold him?"

"Can I?" Maddie's eyes perked up, wishing her own little girl could be there with them.

"I think he's insisting," Will laughed as Arthur wormed his way closer to his aunt, struggling to be free from his father's arms even as his mother joined them.

"Well then," Maddie held her hands out and scooped a triumphant Arthur into her arms. As he settled in next to her, his eyes turned up towards the sky and he clapped wildly as the planes soared overhead.

And Maddie was finally breathing normally again.

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Stepping through the doors of their home, Maddie finally felt like she could let her guard down. As Harry closed the door behind them, she felt her shoulders sink and her smile fade and she knew a breakdown was imminent. She needed to cry. She needed to scream. And she was finally going to be able to.

Pulling the fascinator from her hair and stepping out of her shoes, she glanced at the clock, mentally calculating the minutes she had until Travis appeared on the screen and said whatever it was he was going to say.

Her stomach twisted up as she thought of it all; she hated not knowing what was coming. Hated it more than knowing all that had already been tossed out there. Looking back at Harry, she offered him a small smile. "I'm sorry you didn't get to punch that man..."
"Ha." He laughed, bitter and dark. "I really wanted to..." He sighed. "And I'm not sure that feeling is going to go away after we watch this."

"I know," she nodded, her head heavy. "Lilli's on her way back with Greta. I think I'd like to feed her and do a little cuddling before we sit down and deal with anything else. Would that be alright?"

"Of course," Harry nodded. "I'm going to take off the uniform and..."

"Excuse me," Thomas's voice called out to them, forcing them both to look up. "I'm sorry..."

"Oh God," Harry groaned, his hand rubbing up over his face. "What now?"

"Ma'am..." Thomas turned his attention to Maddie who honestly looked like she might not be able to take anything else.

"No," Harry shook his head. "Thomas, if there's any way this can just...wait..."

"I'm sorry but there isn't." He held the phone in his hand out towards Maddie. "You should take this."

Her eyes looked down at it with caution, as though it might burn her if she touched it. "Who is it?"

"Your mother Ma'am."

"My..." Maddie blinked, her forehead pinching in confusion. Snatching it up from his hand, she pressed it to her ear. "Mom?"

"Maddie..." Her voice was soft and sad and Maddie was instantly on alert.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Oh honey. It's Kyle."

"Kyle?" Maddie felt her throat start to close.

"Something happened to Amy...she started to bleed and he took her to the hospital and..." Hannah paused, taking a shaky breath. "They lost the baby Maddie. They lost the baby and Amy's in the hospital and Kyle is just...a mess. And..."

The last bit of Maddie's control slipped away and her heart broke in her chest and she began to cry. "Okay. I'm...I'm on my way." Her voice croaked as she wiped at her cheeks. "I'll be there...just as soon as I can."
Chapter 182

By the time Maddie stepped foot in the hospital in Colorado, she was more than a little disoriented. With the hours it took to get there, the change in time as she had travelled, it felt surreal to be walking the halls of the hospital with Arthur close at her side. Still wearing her dress and heels from Trooping the Color, she had only taken the time to unpin the fascinator from her hair and pack a bag before jumping in the car and heading to the airport.

It had all happened so fast. One minute they were dealing with the fallout of the upcoming interview—the interview she had missed in her travels—and the very next minute they were learning of this tragedy that had struck their family. Harry had insisted she leave right away. He had assured her that Lilli would be fine staying behind with him. He had known there was a place she needed to be that wasn’t at their side—and they would be okay without her for a little bit. So she had agreed. She had waited until Greta had returned with Lilli, until she had snuggled her daughter close and showered her with love and then she said good-bye.

But before she walked out the door, before Harry had let her go, he had pulled her into his arms, he had tucked her as close and as tight to him as he could possibly get her and he had kissed her. Long and slow and deep, wanting to solidify the connection between them, wanting to keep her warmth with him even when she left. Wanting her to know in her bones that no matter what happened, no matter the interview, no matter what came next—he was right there waiting for her.

She carried that kiss with her on the flight; the taste of him, the heat of his hands, the look in his eyes. Things were so heavy between them at the moment, weighted with the way they seemed to be standing shoulder to shoulder against these hits that seemed to keep coming. She missed him next to her like she missed a part of her soul, a part of her body.

Despite the heat of the summer, Maddie felt chilled as she moved through the halls. Wrapping her arms around herself, her hands rubbed warmth to her skin as she read the signs that would lead her to her family. There were a few second looks, a few confused glances from people who thought they might recognize her though nearly all of them shook it off and Maddie was thankful for that. She didn't care so much if people knew her, didn't care if they wanted to snap quick photos as she hurried past, didn't even care if they gaped. She only hoped that by the time she reached her cousin, by the time she reached her family, they would leave them alone—that they would respect that privacy.

Her stomach churned as she thought of all the ways their privacy had been violated and for a split second she paused, for a brief, fleeting moment, she second guessed her decision to be there. Maybe her presence would only bring more chaos, maybe it would only make things worse.

"Ma'am?" Arthur's voice was whisper soft and when she turned to look at him, his smile was small and sympathetic. "Are you okay?"
Gulping at the emotions in her throat, Maddie nodded. "Yes." And then, as the tears won out, she shook her head. She wasn't okay. She hadn't even seen Kyle yet and already the grief was taking over.

Wiping at her eyes, she willed her feet to move and she closed the space between herself and her family. Jenna was the first to look up, the click of Maddie's heels cutting into the murkiness of her thoughts.

For a split second she smiled. As the smile faded away, her eyes glanced towards the room that must have been Amy's and she rose to her feet. Her attentions drew the eyes of the others to Maddie and before Maddie could think of anything else, she was standing among family, hugs and kisses and love being passed around through the tears and the sadness.

"I can't believe you're here," Patrick shook his head, his large, worn hands framing her face. "There's so much happening for you right now..." His eyes hardened as he thought of what his niece was dealing with.

"It's nothing," Maddie whispered, patting his hand with her own. "Nothing like this..." She swallowed and looked around the room. "Amy?"

"She's recovering from a second surgery," Jenna spoke softly. "They were able to stop the bleeding and they're pretty certain she'll be able to conceive and carry again...if they want to..." Jenna's eyes filled with tears.

"Good," Maddie nodded, thankful for the small things. "And Kyle?" As she said his name, she saw them all flinch, caught the wave of hurt that passed over them.

"At the end of the hallway," Gary spoke up, nodding his head back down the hallway she had just come from. "There's a balcony. It's small and was probably meant for smokers but...he's decided he's staying there until Amy wakes up..."

"Alone?" Maddie asked, her eyes already looking off in the distance, already searching for him.

"He wanted to be alone," Patrick squeezed her hand in his.

"Of course," she nodded. "Do you think I should leave him be or..."

"You should go," Gary answered her before she could finish her question. "Truly. You should go. You're the only one who's ever been able to boss him around..."

Maddie let out a soft laugh as she nodded. Squeezing hands and kissing cheeks, she promised she'd see them again and then without much more thought than that, she was on her way back down the hallway, back towards Kyle.

And there he was, right where they said he would be. Alone on the balcony, he sat as close to the edge as he could get. His eyes were trained out at the view of the mountains, his shoulders slumped and defeated and long before she stepped outside with him, she could feel the tension coming off of him.

It was colder than she had expected out there, the sun was setting and the breeze was chilled and it rushed into her face as the door closed behind her. She took a few steps in his direction and wondered if he knew it was her; if he had been expecting her.

She wondered if he had even heard her come out there.

She moved slowly as she approached him, sinking into the chair next to him quietly and carefully-
-as though any sudden movements might break him.

It was silly, she knew. Kyle was already broken. She could see it in his face, in his eyes when she had looked down at him. Careful not to touch him, she turned her eyes out in the direction of his, she pulled her hands into her lap and then, with a scratch in her voice, and tears in her eyes, she reached out to him.

"I'm so sorry Kyle. I..." She shook her head, wishing she felt stronger, wishing she had it more together than this. "I'm so sorry."

And then, without so much as a response, without so much as an acknowledgment that he knew she was there, he turned in his seat and he crumbled.

Burying his face in her lap, his body seemed to give out right along with any control he had been holding onto.

And this man who had never really lost at anything, surrendered to all of it. He sobbed; loud, shoulder racking sobs that broke Maddie's heart. With tears in her eyes, tipping down over her cheeks, she leaned forward, she wrapped her arms around her cousin and she held onto him while they both cried.

She held onto him while he fell apart; she held onto him as tight as she could; hoping to keep him anchored to the earth.

Kyle had tried to fight the tears for too long. He had been too busy to cry, too busy to fall apart. With the chaos of the last twenty-four hours, he had barely had time to register how he was feeling. From the worry that had come when Amy had started bleeding, to the panic when the waves of pain began, to the hurried, panicked way he had rushed around, calling the ambulance, going to the hospital.

He had held his breath through the operation, his stomach had twisted into knots as he waited for word on his wife, on his baby. But even then he had known. Deep in the pit of his stomach, he had known. There was too much blood, too much pain. He had known that by the end of the day he wasn't going to be a father any longer.

He had tried to stand tall and be strong; relaying the news to his family, to her family. Amy had been told just before they had taken her into surgery to save her--they had lost the baby. He hated the way it felt, to go from expecting so much to just...emptiness.

He wanted to be with her, wanted to be there when she woke up but being around their family only made him want to fall apart; so he had taken up residence on that balcony. He had taken a chilly refuge to wait out the time it took for Amy to wake up, to wait out the time before he could be with her and begin to grieve, begin to mourn.

He had been shocked when Maddie walked out onto the balcony and at the very same time, he had always known she would show up. Just as he had dropped his life to be at her side when Harry had been shot out of the sky, she would be there for him. And for some reason, having her there cracked the last layer of defense.

The sobbing began with little hope or expectation that it would end.

But eventually it waned, eventually it calmed and eventually he lifted his tired, spent eyes from Maddie's lap and he sat up and looked into the sympathetic loving eyes of his cousin.
Wiping at her own eyes, she gave him as much of a smile as she had and she held onto his hand even as he turned away from her, looking out at the mountains in the distance. "I'm so sorry Kyle..." Her voice was hoarse, cracking with emotion.

"I know," he nodded, keeping hold of her fingers. "I am too."

"I know," she whispered.

"Who called you?"

"My mother," Maddie watched as he nodded his head, as he looked down at their hands joined together.

"I'm sorry it wasn't me..." He shook his head, patting her hand in his. "I just didn't think I could say the words to you and..."

"It's okay Kyle," she tugged at his hand, pulling his gaze to hers. "It's okay."

Biting at his lip in a way that he had seen Maddie do, he nodded his head and took a deep breath, looking her over for the first time since she had joined him.

And then he blinked. "What...what exactly are you wearing? Your hair...you look like you just came from a parade..."

"I did," she wiped at her eyes again, her lips curling up just a bit. "I just came from a parade."

"What?" He let out a puff of a laugh.

"I...we...we were just coming home from Trooping the Colour when my mother called..."

"The thing where you go on the balcony for the flyover?" He lifted his eyebrows.

"Yes," she laughed. "Among other things but yes."

"I see," he nodded, his mind drifting for just a moment. "Is Harry here?" He glanced back to the building, his eyes darkening as he did. "Did you bring Lilli?"

"No," Maddie shook her head, her emotions tugging just a bit at the mention of her little family. "They stayed behind. I thought it would be better if I could just..."

"Yeah," he nodded, understanding and sadness returning to his face. "Yeah. The silence seemed to settle heavy around them, the gravity of the day creeping back into their bones. "I don't know what to do...about the room."

"The room?" Maddie leaned forward, confused.

"The nursery," his voice cracked, the tears coming back. "Do I leave the stuff there? Should I take it down? Which will be worse for her..." He turned to look at Maddie, his eyes wide and desperate. "To go home and see it or...not?" He shook his head. "What do I do Maddie?"

Swallowing at her own tears, she patted his hand and cleared her throat. "You ask her. You wait till she wakes up and you cry with her and then you ask her what she wants you to do..." She sniffed and tried for a smile. "And if she wants it packed up...I'll drive you there and we'll do it together."

"Okay," he whispered, strain and struggle in his voice. "Thank you. For coming and for..." His voice trailed off, emotion stuck in his throat.
"Kyle!" It was Gary who burst through the door, his eyes frantic as they looked for his older brother. Both of them snapped to attention, spinning to look at him. "Amy's awake."

In the blink of an eye he was out of the chair and through the door, leaving Maddie behind, pushing past his brother. Even though Maddie had been told Amy would be fine, she was breathing easier at knowing she was awake. And it appeared Gary was too. Stepping out onto the balcony, he allowed a bit of a smile as he watched Maddie rise slowly from her chair, smoothing down her skirt and wiping at her eyes as she made her way towards him, towards the door.

Without words, they moved together; his arm stretching around her shoulders, hers wrapping around his waist; both of them hugging close.

"It was good of you to come," he kissed the top of her head.

"Aw come on," she shook her head. "You boys have saved my ass so many times...."

"Hmm," he chuckled, his mind finally drifting out beyond the immediacy of what was happening. "Speaking of your ass..."

Hearing the smirk in his voice, she groaned. "Oh God Gary, do we have to?"

"Nah," he shook his head, opening the door for her to walk through. "We don't have to."

"Thank you," she kept her arm around his waist as they moved back to the waiting room where everyone was a tad less grim than they had been when she had arrived. As they all moved to tell her hello, to hug her close, to bring the family together, Derek's face was focused on the tv in the corner of the room; his expression oozing confusion.

"Maddie?" He called to her without taking his eyes from the tv.

"Hmmm?" Still hugging Jenna, she looked to Derek's face and then up at the tv where his gaze was fixed.

"Is that..." Derek shook his head, as though he were trying to settle the confusion. His finger pointed up at the screen. "Is that Travis?"

Maddie felt her stomach sink, felt her cheeks flush red with the return of the anger that had slipped away when her mother called. "Yes." She gulped back her rage, her eyes hardening as she looked at the tv. The sound was muted and she couldn't make out what he was saying, but she could see his face, could see that smug fucking grin. And it made her want to throw something at the screen. "Yes. That's Travis."

"But what the hell is he doing on tv..." Derek looked to for answers but the truth was--she had none.

Before anyone could ask any more questions, before anyone could decide to turn up the volume so they could hear or to turn it off so they didn't have to see it, the Doctor stepped out of Amy's room with news for them.

And all of their attentions were diverted to something so much more important.

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Maddie was just headed back up to the waiting room from the cafeteria when Harry called. Just seeing his name on the screen made the tension that had gathered in her neck dissipate.
"Captain..." She sighed into the phone.

"Hey," he sounded tired and far away and she missed him instantly. "How's Kyle? Amy?"

"Well..." Maddie sighed, sinking into a chair and closing her eyes. "Amy woke up from the second operation not too long ago. We're still in the hospital but I just went down for some coffee. Kyle's in there with her and the doctors. She's...she's recovering."

"Yeah," Harry swallowed, his heart hurting for their family. "And how's Kyle?"

"He's..." Maddie shook her head. "I mean, he is how he is Harry...he's torn up and sick to his stomach and he's managing..." She trailed off and took a breath. "I miss you. I...I miss you and Lilli and..."

"We miss you too," he smiled then, thinking of their daughter, of his wife. With a deep breath, he dove in. "Did you see it?"

"You mean the interview? Or is there something else?" Maddie asked with a bitter-toned laugh.

"This is getting ridiculous, isn't it?" Harry groaned.

"I missed it," she leaned back in the chair. "I caught some of the footage on the tv in the waiting room not too long ago, but I didn't hear any of it...was it bad?"

"Nah," Harry shook his head, the corners of his mouth turning up. "Unless you count wild, raucous sex on a ride at Disneyland as bad..."

"What?!" Maddie sat straight up, her eyes flying wide open. "That NEVER happened! He didn't say that!!!"

"No," Harry laughed mildly. "He didn't. But you really should have heard your voice right now."

"You..." She blinked and then breathed and then sat back. "Asshole."

"You love me."

"Mostly," she groaned. "Jesus...as if any of the sex I ever had with him was wild and raucous..."

"I appreciate you saying that, even if it's just for my benefit."

"It wasn't for your benefit," Maddie sighed. "It's true."

"I'll take it."

"Okay but really. How did it go? How did it play out?"

"It went fine," he shrugged his shoulders. "He mostly alluded to your wild and crazy ways, to an active sex life...you know the sort of thing a jealous ex boyfriend would do..."

"Yeah," she rolled her eyes. "Sure. You've been an ex boyfriend. You'd never do this."

"No I wouldn't," he shook his head. "But I've never really been...jealous."

"Sure."

"Thomas doesn't think it'll be a big deal. It's playing mostly like that over here...jealous ex-boyfriend, out to trash your name while he has the chance."
"Fucker."

"Thomas or..."

"Travis!" Maddie couldn't help but laugh. "What is with you tonight?"

"I had a drink after Lilli went to sleep," he smiled as he said her name. "We had a big day at the park. What's the rest of the night look like for you?"

"I don't know," Maddie sighed, her eyes looked down the hall, thinking of her family. "I'm going to go check on the family, on Kyle. Maybe they know more now about recovery time and such."

"Sure, sure." Harry's voice softened. "Give them my love? My sympathies?"

"Of course," Maddie smiled, letting them sit in a peaceful quiet for a moment before she took a breath. "I love you Harry."

"Oh I love you too," he replied; low and easy. "Let me know if there's anything you need from me?"

"Hmmm..." She smiled to herself, thinking of all the things she'd love from him at the moment. "I'll talk to you tomorrow Captain."

"Good night love."

And with that, the call ended. Maddie sat still for only a moment before rising to her feet, stuffing her phone into the pocket of her skirt and continuing back to her family.

Amy would be in the hospital for three more days; three more days of bed rest and recovery before she could go home and let the grieving and healing begin. When Maddie was allowed into the room to see her, her heart broke at the sight of Amy tucked into the hospital bed; tubes and monitors every which way. With a mourning Kyle at her side, she tried a small smile for Maddie but ultimately gave way to the tears that took over the room.

It was late in the night before Maddie left the hospital, even later still before she checked into the hotel room that would be hers for the next few nights. With her security team across the hall, Maddie managed only to brush her teeth and slip into pajamas before she was out cold in her bed. Her hair was still pinned up as her head hit the pillow.

When she woke the next morning, she was rested and refreshed and ready to dress and head back to the hospital. She ordered up breakfast; coffee with a fruit and a pastry and she climbed into the shower. Warm in her fluffy robe, her hair twisted up in a towel, she sank down onto the couch, reached for her phone. She looked down at the missed call from Harry and flipped on the television, hoping for meaningless and mindless entertainment before the emotion filled day ahead of her. Lifting her coffee to her lips, she swiped at the screen of her phone and dialed, the anchor on the tv shifting to the Entertainment News for the day.

Harry answered on the second ring. "Hey."

"Hey?" She recognized the tone in his voice, her body already tensing in anticipation. "What's going on?"

"Have you seen it yet?"
"Oh God," Maddie groaned, her eyes rolling as her head tipped back. "Please tell me there's not more."

"There's more."

"Fuck." Maddie exhaled, her head lifting from the back of the couch, her eyes pressing tightly closed. "Do I even want to know..."

"Probably not," Harry shook his head, his own face sad and tense as he brought this news to his wife who was already dealing with something so much bigger.

"Another ex-boyfriend? More salacious pictures of my ass?"

"No," Harry let out a soft laugh. "This one's about me."

"You?" Her eyes opened. "What about you?"

"Well..." He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Me and Greta."

"Lilli's Nanny?!" Maddie's forehead scrunched up. "What about you and Lilli's Nanny?"

"There are photos and an article," Harry huffed a laugh at the irony of it all. "Or a work of fiction more like..."

"About you and Greta?" Maddie's confusion held on for just another minute. "What do they have to say about..." And then the realization washed over her; the air pushing from her lungs as she sat back on the couch, a bitter sound pushing from her lips. "Oh."

"Yeah. Oh." Harry sighed. "Listen..."

"They think you're having an affair with Greta."

"They do."

"Based off of..."

"There are pictures of the two of us at the park with Lilli yesterday," he was matter-of-fact about it.

"But you've been to the park with Greta and Lilli before..."

"They have those pictures too," his jaw was tight as he looked at the article he was talking about.

"But..."

"And an anonymous tip." He bit off the words.

"What the hell kind of anonymous tip?!" Maddie waved her hand out at the room, her frustration reaching new levels.

"Well..." He searched the article for the exact wording.

"Wait." Maddie's voice was loud as something on the tv caught her vision. "Hold on." She reached for the remote as she rose to her feet. "Mother fucker..." She spoke between clenched teeth, her eyes widening as she focused on the image on the screen.

"What?" Harry called out to her. "What is it?"
"It's on the news here." She moved in closer, watching as image after image of Harry and Greta flashed across the screen. Pulling the phone away from her mouth, she stood right in front of the tv and listened as the anchor brought her up to speed.

"With his wife reportedly out of the country, Prince Harry was seen frolicking with the beautiful young woman working as a Nanny to Princess Lillibet. They were seen laughing and playing and sharing more than a few private jokes. Insider sources report that all of the drama surrounding the Royal Couple as of late has driven a wedge between them and that the ever-randy Duke may be doing as he's always done--seeking comfort and entertainment in somebody with less baggage. Additionally..."

With her stomach rising in her throat, Maddie turned off the tv, tossing the remote to the couch, trying to calm her breath, control her heart rate.

"Maddie?" Harry called out to her, his own anger taking a backseat to his worry for her. "Are you still there? Are you..."

"I'm here," she answered; her voice quiet and tense. "I'm here. I'm...ha...less baggage?!"

"Yeah," he breathed. "I heard that. Listen..."

"Is that what the article says?"

"The article quotes an anonymous source who tells them that we're fighting, that were struggling because of all of this...shit. And then they go on to allude to something between Greta and I, sighting how close we seem and how much I'm drawn to how ordinary and easy things are with her as opposed to..."

"Yeah." Maddie cut him off. "Got it."

"Madeline," he felt terrible for her; more than he ever did for himself. "You do know that I'm not..."

"Fucking the nanny?" She finished; bitter and tired of it all. "Yes Harry. I know that you're not fucking the nanny."

"Jesus," he groaned.

"Have you talked to Greta?" Maddie felt bad for her, horrible that she was being dragged into this nonsense that seemed to be trying to drown them.

"Yes," Harry nodded, his feelings echoing his wife's.

"Did she turn in her resignation?" Maddie asked with a sigh. "I can't imagine she wants to keep working for us after all of this bullshit."

"No," he shook his head, allowing a moment of laughter. "She apologized."

"Perfect," Maddie groaned.

"She's okay." Harry offered. "She was honestly more worried about how you were doing than about any of this..."

"She's a better person than most."

"Yes she is. She wanted to know if there was anything she could do, wanted to know if she
should stay away..."

"Did you tell her..."

"I told her she should come over today," Harry finished Maddie's thought with a slight smirk of his lips. "Told her maybe we should get coffee, maybe we should offer up a great big 'fuck you' to whomever was steering this craziness..."

"Good," Maddie sighed into a laugh, happy that Greta wasn't taking it to heart. "Good." And then, quite unexpectedly, her eyes began to fill with tears.

"Maddie..." Harry heard it; even over the phone, he heard it sweep over her. "Baby are you crying?"

"I just..." She sniffed, trying to keep it all at bay. "I hate this. I hate it. We haven't even had time to stand up from the last hit and here they come with this. And they're dragging Lilli and Greta into it now!"

"I know," Harry hated how much he understood it all. "I just don't understand," she shook her head, wiping at her cheeks. "I don't understand why all of these people are choosing now to come out of the woodwork and come at us. I don't understand how there can be so many people who are so bitter and off base that they...It feels personal Harry. It feels like somebody is out to get us." She sighed, blinking at the tears in her eyes; shaking her head as she looked out and around their room. She was trying to get a grasp on it, trying to keep her head, to maintain her perspective. "And what's next?" She let out a breath. "What happens next? Yesterday Travis was all over the fucking place saying whatever bullshit he was making up about he and I. Today it's you and the nanny. What's tomorrow? What craziness is going to be accepted as truth tomorrow?"

"I don't know," Harry shook his head; quiet and defeated. "I don't know why it's happening and I don't know what happens next."

"Yeah..." Maddie nodded, letting it all slip silent for a moment. "What does Thomas say? What are we going to do?"

"Nothing," Harry answered, knowing it wasn't good enough. "You're going to go to the hospital to be with Kyle and I'm going to go to the park with Lilli and Bishop and Buckie..." Sucking in a breath, he shrugged and let out a small laugh. "So, you know, look out for some sort of gay scandal tomorrow morning I guess."

"Ha!" Maddie's eyes brimmed with tears as she laughed. "Well, at least that would be more realistic than you and Greta."

"Hey!" Harry was relieved to hear laughter instead of crying. "I appreciate your vote of confidence in my fidelity but I would like to think that I could still..."

"Oh Captain," Maddie sighed. "Greta likes women. And Bishop...he's always loved you. So you know..."

"I see," Harry nodded, his own laughter rumbling in his chest. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Ha..." She exhaled, moving to look out her windows, trying to let it all go. "I'm sure I will be. I always am. You?"

"I'll be better when you're home Maddie," he was being sweet and genuine and it made Maddie
want to cry for entirely different reasons.

Saying good-bye to Harry was difficult, but she had somewhere to be, had somebody who needed her support a little more than he did in that moment. So they said their good-byes, said their I love yous, and Maddie went back to what she had been doing before this latest round of bullshit had dropped into her lap.
"Maddie..." Kyle groaned as he looked around them, his eyes squinting as the sunlight bounced off the rippling water that surround their little boat. "Want to tell me why in the hell we're out in the middle of a lake in the mountains?"

"I do," she nodded, giving the oars a few more heavy pushes.

"You know my wife is being discharged from the hospital in a matter of hours."

"Yes Kyle, I know that," she shot him a look, pulling the oars into the boat with them. "And you know that your wife asked me to get you out of the hospital, to help get the tense look off your forehead."

"She's just..." He took a breath, looking out at the view from the middle of the lake as his words drifted away from him. It was a beautiful day; sunny with the slightest breeze. It had been easy for the two of them to row out to the middle of the large lake nestled in the valley of the peaks that surrounded them. Maddie's security team had waited ashore and Kyle smiled as he looked over at them, at how small they seemed from where they were bobbing in the water.

"She's worried about you," Maddie's voice was soft.

"Yeah," Kyle nodded, swallowing at the lump in his throat, knowing Maddie was right. He had been so stir crazy, so worried about Amy and her recovery and how she was feeling that he had nearly driven her over the edge. Just before she kicked him out of her room, she had turned to Maddie and begged her to take Kyle out to the middle of nowhere and let him be crazy there. So there they were; in the middle of the lake. "Now what?" He looked to Maddie across the small boat. "We're in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of this lake all alone..."


"Scream?" His eyebrows shot up over the tops of his sunglasses. "Now I scream?"

"Yep," she nodded, her smile pulling higher on her cheeks. "Just as loud as you want."

"What do I scream?" He couldn't help but laugh at her words, at just how serious he knew she was.

"Whatever you want to."

"Just like that?" Something about it sounded freeing, something about it made him nervous.

"Mmmm." She kept her eyes on him. The smile on her lips, the open expression on her face--she meant what she was saying.

"I don't know if I..."

"You can." She cut him off, leaning forward, her hand closing over one of his. "Trust me Kyle, it will feel...amazing. We're out here all alone and...you can do it."

His hand patted over hers as he nodded, knowing that she wasn't going to let him out of the boat unless he did was she asked. "And?" He nodded his head to her. "You gonna scream with me?"

"Me?" She pressed her hand to her chest. "What would I have to scream about?"
"Are you kidding?" He laughed, loud and easy. "The pictures of you and Harry, the ones of...some lady's ass. Maybe the fact that Travis told the world that..."

"Yeah okay." She cut him off, her face hardening as the events in her own life refreshed in her mind. "Fine. I'll scream with you."

"On three?" Kyle smiled wider and Maddie nodded, clearing her throat as Kyle began to count. "One. Two. Three...."

With her head tipped back and her face lifting up to the sunny sky, Maddie's mouth opened wide and she let it all out.

A loud, high-pitched scream that echoed against the trees and the mountains, mingling with the deep pitch of Kyle's own release.

It felt amazing, to both Kyle and Maddie. It was unbelievably freeing, erasing tension and anger and upset.

But to the security team on the shore, it set off every one of their alarms. Standing quickly to attention, they ran around in flustered motion, trying to get a good look at the two of them, searching for their own boat for access to the duchess.

As Kyle laughed, he pointed to the shore. "I'm not so sure your PO's liked that as much as you did."

"What?" Her eyes turned to where he was pointing and her smile wavered for a split second before she started laughing. "It's okay!!!" She called out to them, cupping her hands around her mouth to project her voice. "We were just screaming! We're fine! We're..." She looked over to her cousin who was laughing; wide and happy--even with tears in his eyes. "We're fine!" She called again.

As the team on shore calmed, the two of them in the boat slipped into laughter, into tears, into a place that was less tense than it had been for quite some time.

"Great idea Maddie," Kyle shook his head, relaxing as he looked up at the sky. "Scared the shit out of your officers but an inspired idea no less."

"Yeah..." Maddie nodded, her laughter fading into a sigh. Looking across the boat at her cousin, she watched him thoughtfully for a moment. "Are you going to be okay? If I go?"

Kyle's eyes met hers and for a split second he looked sad at the idea that she had to leave. But in the very next beat, the flicker returned to his eyes and he lifted his eyebrows mockingly to her. "Quite the ego on you there, Your Royal Highness. Does that come with the title or is it something you've always had?"

Without missing a beat, Maddie grinned. "It's something I've always had."

"Fair enough."

"I get it from my older cousin," she shrugged. "Quite the egotistical fool."

"Sure," Kyle laughed, his hand stretched out to squeeze hers. "Thank you for this."

"Mmm," Maddie nodded with a smile, returning the squeeze before she reached for her oars. "Come on. Let's get you back to shore, back to your wife."
"Get you back to your POs?" Kyle chuckled, nodding his head towards the shore as he reached for his own oars and dipped them into the water.

With a bit of laughter and some lingering sadness, the two of them rowed to shore; returning to the demands of their lives. After they returned to the hospital, Maddie hugged and kissed them both once more and then left them to their own grieving process; left them to each other.

Though she very much wanted to return to London, to snuggle up with Lilli in her arms and Harry by her side, she couldn't quite leave Colorado without going to see her mother; at least for a night or two. So after she said her good-byes to her extended family, she headed east towards her childhood home and Hannah.

Harry was sprawled out on the couch in his office when Maddie called him. It was late at night and Lilli had been sleeping for quite some time. With a freshly poured drink and handful of briefings, he had settled in to try to catch up on the stuff that had been aside while dealing with all of the other bullshit that kept dropping in their laps. But the call from her was a welcome interruption.

Tossing his papers onto the couch next to him, he swiped his finger across the screen and pressed the phone to his ear. "God I miss you."

Despite the warm, welcoming tone of his voice, hers was small and tight. "Harry."

"Oh God," he groaned, his fingers rubbing at his eyes. "Did something happen?"

"Yes!" She spoke in a mix of a rushed, angry whisper. "Yes something happened...or it's about to anyway."

He blinked in confusion, his imagination trying to sort out what it could possibly be now. "What are you talking about? What's going on?"

"My mother..." Her voice dropped lower. "Is going on a date."

"What?" He blinked.

"She's going on a date! Tonight! Right now she's upstairs getting ready for a date."

Exhaling his relief, he let out a laugh. "Oh thank God," Harry shook his head, relaxing back onto the couch. "Good for her."

"Good for her?!" Maddie's voice rose. "What do you mean 'good for her'? She's going on a DATE Harry."

"Oh," his lips curled up in a grin, amused at Maddie's reaction. "Really? We're not going to be excited for her?"


"That bitch."

"Hey!"

"Okay look," Harry's head tipped back with a chuckle. "You're going to have to tell me what reaction you want, cause I'm not reading you well over the phone and..."
"Really? You're going to sass me right now?"

Despite the tone of her voice, the pointedness in her words, despite the way she was being
defensive with him--it made him smile. It made him breathe a little easier to have her like this--
closer to her 'normal' than she had been for a while; focusing on something else.

"Maddie...love..." He sighed as he shrugged. "I know it's hard but...he's been gone for, what?
Five years now?"

"Yeah?" He could almost see the cock of her eyebrows with the way her voice tilted. "So if
something were to happen to you, is that how long you want me to wait till I start dating Bishop?
Five years?"

"Oh so we're going to go there are we?" His eyes narrowed.

"I'm just saying..."

"Bishop is married by the way," Harry cut in, taking off on his own tangent. "Happily married. To
your best friend. You think you'd have no problem swooping him up once I'm gone."

"I think I'd have no problem convincing Ella to let me be his second wife..."

"Oh for the love of God Madeline..." He laughed; loud and easy, sighing back into the couch.
"When are you coming home? I miss you."

"I miss you too," she eased up. "I'm going to stay tonight and tomorrow night. I'll be home the day
after...just in time for the Ascott."

"Speaking of," Harry leaned forward. "My Grandmother called."

"Oh?" Maddie felt her stomach tighten, her nervousness returning as she thought of all that had
been going on in the media. She tried to push the image of Gran watching that interview with
Travis out of her mind.

"Mmm," Harry nodded. "She and my Grandfather want us to ride with them in their carriage on
Day One."

"What?" Maddie was shocked. "She knows what's been going on? What people are saying about
us? About me?"

"She does."

"The interview with Travis and..."

"She knows all of it," Harry cut her off, rubbing at the back of his neck to ease the irritation that
came every time he thought of Maddie's first boyfriend and the havoc he was wreaking on their
lives.

"And she still wants us with her?"

"I think that's exactly why she wants us with her. I'm thinking this is her opportunity to show her
support for us, for you...but she did call to ask not to tell. So if you would rather not..."

"No!" Maddie shook her head. "I would love to. I would...it would be an honor." She felt her
emotions surge back. "What a wonderful thing for her to do."
"Yes well...she loves you Maddie." Harry felt a tug in his chest. "We all do."

"I love you too," she blinked at the tears that rose to her eyes.

"I'll see you soon?"

"In a few days."

"Give your mother my love..." Harry's smile twisted into a smirk. "And tell her new boyfriend..."

"Hush!" She cut him off. "He's just a date. Not a boyfriend. Got it?"

"Got it." Harry laughed. "Goodnight love."

"Goodnight Captain."

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"You do know that you're being just a tad bit childish," Hannah's voice was low as she spoke to her daughter, a soft smile on her face as they navigated through the little antique store she liked to stop at once every other week.

"About what?" Maddie batted her eyes, the smile on her face incredibly reminiscent of her childhood years; adorable and trying to get away with something.

"About Paul."

"Paul," Maddie couldn't even help the way her lips sneered as she said his name.

"My point exactly." Hannah chuckled, nodding to the look on her daughter's face. "It was just a date, Madeline. He's not a boyfriend..."

"Mother," Maddie shook her head.

"I didn't even kiss him," Hannah shrugged and Maddie's nose twisted up.

"Jesus, mother, please." She took a breath and shook it off. "The last thing I need is to think about you kissing...Paul." Maddie looked up from the table of items she had been perusing and caught her mother's narrowed eyes, caught the stern cross of her arms. "And yes..." She sighed, rolling her eyes as she did. "I do know that I'm being childish."

Hannah relaxed, turning a corner. "Just as long as you know."

"I'm sorry," Maddie groaned as she said it, following her mother around the corner. "I know it's ridiculous and I know that it's unrealistic for me to even think you should be single for the rest of your life. I just..." Pausing for the emotions that were surprising her.

"I miss him too," Hannah had stopped and turned to face her, the smile sweet and comforting. Glancing around at the other customers who were minding their own, Hannah stepped closer to her daughter. With a gentle hand on her arm, she leaned in. "The truth is I probably won't see Paul again."

"No?" Maddie blinked. "Why? I mean...please don't let my pouting discourage you from dating mom. I know I'm being crazy and..."

"It's not you," Hannah shook her head with a laugh. "Though I agree with all of those things. It's just..." She shrugged and took a deep breath. "It's different when you're widowed. Paul was
married before but they divorced. It's different...he doesn't understand that I'd give anything to have my husband back...and I can't really expect him too."

"I'm sorry mom."

"Don't be," Hannah squeezed her arm and continued on looking through the shelves. "I am who I am and I just don't think Paul's it for me."

"Okay," Maddie tried to mask her relief.

"But someday, if I find a man who gets it..." She couldn't help the tease in her eyes.

"Yeah," Maddie breathed deep. "You're ready to date?"

"I just might be."

"I suppose I should prepare myself for that prospect."

"I suppose you should," Hannah agreed. "Now come on. Let's see what we can find." Linking her arm through Maddie's, she pulled her further into the store.

Maddie really hadn't seen it coming; hadn't seen him coming.

She probably should have. The town held less than twenty-thousand people and the selections were slim. But it was mid-week and mid-day and it was in the shopping district and still--with most everything that had been thrown at them--Maddie simply hadn't seen it coming.

In fact, it was Hannah who saw him first. They had finished up in the antique store and she had bought a new stand for the entryway. After arranging for it to be delivered that afternoon, Hannah had pulled on her sunglasses and stepped out into the beautiful summer day; her daughter and her daughter's PO close behind her.

They were making plans for lunch, debating the merits of the handful of restaurants in town versus whatever it was that was home in the fridge. Hannah was mentally going through her freezer when she looked up and she saw him.

Travis Meeks; completely unassuming and unaware as he walked right towards them.

For a split second Hannah wasn't sure what to do. Drag Maddie back into the antique store? Pull her into one of the shops nearby? Hurry to the car? She wasn't sure which steps she wanted to take to evade this moment that could only go poorly. But she knew she needed to do it quickly because any minute now one of them was going to look up and...

"Maddie?"

The sound of his voice struck Maddie like a truck. Her feet slowed to a stop, her eyes widening as they looked up at him--registering nothing but surprise.

"Oh my God," Travis shook his head, a flash of regret and shame shining over his eyes. "Maddie, I..."

"No," Maddie shook her head, needing a second longer to process it all. "No." She held up her hand, took a breath. Her heart was hammering in her chest, her lungs desperate for more air.

"Come on," Hannah reached for her daughter's elbow, turning them both in the other direction.
"Wait!" Travis called out though not one of them stopped moving. "Maddie!"

"Leave me alone Travis!" Maddie called back, trying to catch her breath as she hurried in the other direction. Out of the corner of her eye, she was certain she saw Arthur's hand pat lightly over his sidearm; making sure it was still there as he moved in closer to her, falling into quick step beside her.

"Maddie please!" He was catching up with them, hoping she would turn and talk to him, give him a chance to explain; to apologize.

"Ma'am?" Arthur spoke softly, his hand right at Maddie's back.

"I can't fucking believe him." She was breathing fast, trying to control her anger, trying to control the heaviness in her stomach. "Of all the Goddamn nerve..."

"Do you want to say something to him?" Hannah asked, keeping up with her.

"If I turn around, I'm going to scratch his fucking eyes out." Maddie looked right up to Arthur who nodded his understanding.

"Then we keep walking," he answered. "Because if you do that and he gets physical, then I'm going to have to draw my gun and shoot him here on the street."

"Shoot him?" Hannah looked over to him, wondering if he was kidding, wondering if she cared either way.

"Well that would certainly mean more paperwork for you," Maddie grumbled, not at all pulsed by his words.

"To be honest, it's not the paperwork I'm worried about ma'am." Both women caught the tone of Arthur's voice. While he was nothing but professional, while he always acted with the utmost discretion and integrity, it was clear that he wasn't fond of Travis or what he had done.

And Maddie was stuck; a great big part of her longed to turn on him and give him a piece of her mind while another part wanted to disappear from this moment altogether.

But he wasn't backing off on his approach. He was tall and quicker than she expected and he wasn't letting up.

But Maddie's mother had had enough. Stopping suddenly, she spun on her heels and took a few quick, angry steps towards him; her eyes glaring and her voice lowering. "You stop this right now Travis Meeks." Her face was red as she stood right in front of him, tall and unafraid.

"I just want to..." He reached his hand out towards Maddie who was slowing as she turned to watch her mother.

"No," she shook her head, holding up her hand. "You don't get to want anything from my daughter right now." She took half a step towards him, her finger pointing at his chest. "You should be ashamed of yourself, ashamed of what you did."

"But I..."

"I know I'm ashamed for you," she continued, following his movements as he tried to step to the side. "And I can't imagine how your mother must feel."
His eyes shifted away from Maddie, looking to Hannah with nothing but guilt and regret in his eyes. Swallowing it all back, he looked back to Maddie who had stopped several yards away. "Maddie, please..."

"Enough." Hannah stepped into his view. "Go home Travis." Turning her back on him, she moved towards her daughter and Arthur, the three of them falling back into motion.

"God damn it," Travis spoke through clenched teeth. "There's something I want to say and..."

And that did it. All of the emotions that had been boiling up inside of Maddie had reached full steam. Every step she had taken away from him had been fueled by thoughts of his interview, of the photos, of the stories. And now, her anger had topped over. She had had it.

With a fury, she turned around to face him. "What could you possibly have to say?!" Arthur was right on her heels, his mind already preparing to pull her out in a second flat. But for now, he was going to let do this. "Something you didn't cover when you were on international television making up your own fictional version of us?!"

Her words, and the sheer force behind them, stunned Travis and he stopped moving; his eyes big as saucers as he blinked and looked at her. And suddenly he couldn't find his words.

But Maddie could. With Arthur at her side and her mother right behind her, she began towards him; her face red as she moved. "I cannot believe you did this to me Travis. I mean....I've seen it with my own two eyes, I've read the fucking transcript of the bullshit you had to say and I still can't believe it!"

Her voice was loud and full of spite and a handful of people stopped what they were doing to watch as Travis blinked and snapped back to the moment; his shock beginning to melt away. "Maddie..."

"What exactly did I do to you to deserve you smearing me like that?!" She was surprised by the emotion that welled up inside of her; not the anger, but the tears. "Was it really because I wouldn't marry you when we were teenagers?! Was it really because I decided to go to college instead of becoming your wife?!"

"No!" He yelled back, his head shaking as he moved closer, his eyes glancing over to Arthur who stood tall and ready at her side. "I knew it was a bad idea and I tried to stop it but she wouldn't let me back out. Mads I'm so sorry, I...."

"Don't call me Mads!" Her voice rose. "And don't fucking apologize! It sounds just about as real and authentic as the trash you told that reporter!"

"Maddie..." Hannah's voice was soft and low, her hand resting on Maddie's arm, wanting to pull her daughter away from all of this, wanting to remove her from the chaos.

But Maddie wasn't hearing any of it in that moment. She had been juggling too much craziness for too long and here he was, one of the contributors to all of this stress and worry. And he was standing right in front of her and nothing was going to pull her away before she let out some of the tension that had built because of him. She had felt ready to snap for far too long. "You know," she moved forward, making both Travis and Arthur the slightest bit nervous. "It would have been one thing if you had at least told the fucking truth about what I laughingly refer to as the sex we had."

"What are you..." His eyes grew dark as he stammered.

"What am I talking about?!" She laughed, loud and boisterous, oblivious to the small crowd of people who were watching. "I'm talking about the tale you wove that was our sex life..." She
watched as his eyes snapped up; hard. "I mean, if we're going to let the world in on it, maybe we should tell the truth."

"I don't know what you mean," he shook his head, standing taller, pushing his shoulders back; his ego kicking in.

"Yes you do!" She yelled out. "Yes you do. Because while I may very well be a wild woman in bed..."

"Madeline," Hannah could see the anger in her daughter's eyes.

"While I may be willing to go for just about anything, just about anywhere, we both know that that's ONLY been the case with my husband."

"Maddie..."

"And we both know that that wasn't the case with you."

"Look..." He held up his hand, wanting to stop this conversation but Maddie continued.

"Because you--unlike Harry--couldn't find your way out of missionary with a map. Isn't that right Travis?" Her eyes scanned him over with disgust. "What's wrong Travis? Didn't think the reporter would find it quite as entertaining if you told her that all we ever had was boring sex in the back seat of the car? Didn't think they'd be as impressed if they knew that I really only came once in a blue moon, that..."

"Madeline..." Hannah's hand was soft on Maddie's arm, her voice quiet but authoritative. "People are filming this."

"Good." Maddie spoke through clenched teeth. "Good..." She was furious and so far past caring what anyone thought. But her mother's hand on her arm kept her calm. Blinking, she turned her gaze from Travis to her mother and she relaxed. And then she looked at Arthur and it all came rushing back to her. In a moment of clarity she remembered; she was a Duchess, her husband was Prince Harry, and whatever it was that was on those phones that were pointed at her would most definitely end up on the internet. Taking a breath, she nodded her head. "Okay." She turned to Arthur, effectively dismissing Travis from the moment, from her mind. "Okay...let's go."

Without a word, without a blink, Arthur was ushering them away from the center of the chaos, away from Travis, away from all of it.

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It was nearly an hour before Maddie got the call from London.

When they had arrived back at her mother's place, Maddie wasn't hungry any longer. Her appetite had vanished there on the sidewalk outside the antique store. Seeing Travis had done something to her psyche, something had shifted. Up until that moment, she had been trying to take on all the craziness with grace and ease. But seeing him, having the chance to say something to one of the people responsible for all of the shit, it had opened up a side of Maddie's attitude, a side of her natural temper, that she had, so far, been able to keep under control.

"Fuck him," she spoke out loud to herself. "Fuck this. All of this." She was so tired of all of it. "I'm going for a walk," she had offered as much of a smile as she could to her mother and then she had taken off towards the back of the house, towards the acres of property; hoping that a walk would clear her head, that some fresh air would help cool the steam coming out of her ears.
When she finally returned, nearly an hour later, she had put in a few miles and was finally, finally calming down. With a deep breath, she decided it was time to call him; wondering just how Harry and the family was going to react to what was most certainly going to be the highlight of the next article featuring them.

She stopped at the edge of the lawn, pulling her phone out of her pocket as she sat down on a stump and took a deep breath. She swiped her finger across the screen, pressed the button to call him, and closed her eyes tight as she waited for him to answer; nervousness creeping into her throat.

"Well, well, well," he answered with a hint of humor in his voice. "If it isn't the internet's newest viral sensation." He sucked in a breath. "You look beautiful today by the way."

"You've seen it."

"Boy have I," he chuckled. "Me and nearly four hundred thousand others."

"Oh God..." Maddie groaned, leaning forward as her head fell between her knees.

"I'm sure your numbers will go up, just give it time."

"I think I'm going to be sick." She took a breath and sat up. "How bad is it?"

"Well," Harry's voice was more amused than she had expected. "We all now know that Travis can't find his way out of missionary with a map..."

"Ugh," she nodded her head, her eyes pressed tightly closed. "I did say that."

"Yes you did," he chuckled. "Really know how to hit a guy, huh Sussex?"

"You're finding this way too funny," she shook her head. "How much did they get?"

"Not too much more," he sighed. "Though we did manage to catch the bit about how wild you are in bed..."

"Fuck," Maddie exhaled. "I'm sorry Harry. I just...snapped. It's been one thing after another after another and all of a sudden I was faced with...HIM. And he wouldn't let me just turn and walk away. He wanted to talk and I just..."

"It's okay," Harry was calm, comforting. "I understand Maddie. Sometimes it's just...too fucking much. You snapped. Anyone in your shoes would have done the same thing..."

"Still," she sighed. "I should have known better. The last thing we need is more shit on the internet."

"At least this is shit we're actually involved in, at least this shit is real."

"Ha...shooting for the silver lining are we?"

"Shooting for something." He shrugged his shoulders. "You okay?"

"Yes...no...I don't know..." She let out a small laugh, looking out over the land that sprawled out in front of her. "How mad is your father?"

"He's not mad."

"What?"
"Not at all actually," Harry laughed. "Even I was surprised by that one."

"No kidding."

"I think...I don't know, Maddie. I think we all get a pass every once in awhile. Maybe this one is yours."

"Well that's awfully thoughtful of him."

"Yeah...." They sat together in a comfortable silence for a moment before Harry took a breath. "Did it make you feel better?"

"Ha..." She let out a small laugh. "Yeah. It did. But only a little bit. And now instead of sad and worried I just feel...angry."

"I'd rather have you mad than sad so...I'll take it," he was quick with his response, the smile on his face curling higher.

"Yeah..." She breathed. "Tell me. What do I need to do now? What happens now...because of my lovely new video?"

"Nothing," he answered with a shake of his head. "I've spoken to my father and to Thomas and it seems like we're going to just...let this run its course. There's not much use in fighting it. It is you."

"Yes it is," she groaned.

"And who knows...maybe this will garner up some sympathy."

"Sympathy?" Her eyes squinted at the sun.

"You know, from women who only come once in a blue moon..."

"Oh Jesus," she groaned through her laughter. "I can't believe I said that. Out loud! On the street!"

"Ha..." Harry laughed, lowering his voice with a smile. "Between you and I? I kind of love this video."

"Of course you do," Maddie sighed, easing up only a bit. She felt...better; relieved. The sadness had definitely slipped away, along with a bit of the weight she had been carrying around since all of this had begun. And in its place seemed to be a bit of a "Fuck the World" attitude--one that was only strengthened by the fact that Harry didn't seem to mind, that Charles wasn't angry.

"I miss you Maddie." Harry's voice cut into her drifting thoughts, bringing her right back to him. "This is the longest we've been apart since I came home from Khundu and..."

"I hate it too," she cut him off, wishing she were back home in London. "I'll be home tomorrow Captain. Maybe make a little room in your schedule for some cuddling?"

"Done," he grinned. "Enjoy the night with your mother..."

"I will."

"And, you know, try to stay off of youtube?"

"Ha..." She let out a long breath. "I'll try."
"And remember this..." Harry's voice slipped serious for a moment, in a way that made her almost see the sharpness of his jaw, the darkness in his eyes. "We're going to get the people behind all of this. We're going to get all of them. Ernie in Nebraska. Whoever is behind those edited photos and the stories about Greta. Travis. We're going to get all of them Maddie."

"Is that so?" She whispered, her heart beating in her ears.

With such absolution in his voice that it made Maddie sit taller, he answered. "Absolutely. Nobody gets to fuck with us like this and get away with it Maddie. Nobody."

Nodding to herself, she let his words, his certainty, wash over her. She let it convince her. This wasn't over, this battle that had been waged. And now, now that she had her moment of release, she was more than ready to go back to London and face it all. And, for the first time in a while, she was just as sure as her husband was.

They were going to win this.
Chapter 184

As cliche as it seemed, returning home to London felt like she was turning a page to a new chapter in this crazy saga that had become her life. Landing in London alleviated the weight on her shoulders, allowed her to breathe a little easier. As important as it had been for her to be at home with Kyle and Amy, as big of a step as running into Travis had been for her rebound from all of this, she only felt whole as she returned to Harry and Lilli.

It was very early in the morning when she stepped through the front door of their home. The sun was barely beginning to tip up over the horizon. Quietly she slipped from her shoes, leaving her bags by the door as she made her way through the comforting silent home. For a moment her heart was torn; slip into bed and snuggle up against her husband, or sneak into her daughter's room and take in some cuddle time with her sleeping baby.

Because she couldn't help herself, she took quiet, careful steps into Lilli's room. Peeking at her asleep in her bed, she restrained herself from picking her up. A quick glance at the clock told her that she would be up in about two hours to eat anyway and she knew she could use the sleep. She ran a soft thumb over the curve of her chubby cheeks, light fingers over the tuft of red hair that stood out from her head in kinks and curls. With warmth returning to her heart, she watched for a drawn out moment before she slipped from the room and let her sleep, already counting down the minutes till she knew she'd be awake for the day.

Her breath was coming up normal now; an easy in and out as she made her way to her own bedroom. The tension from the week, from the trip, from the last twenty-four hours seemed to have vanished now that she was safe within the walls of their home. As she stepped into their bedroom, she still hadn't quite decided if she wanted to let Harry sleep or if she wanted to wake him. She knew they had a long day ahead of them, knew that it was only a matter of time before they were up and minding Lilli, not too much longer before they were being rushed around to ready for the Royal Ascot.

But standing at his side of the bed, looking down at his scruffy, sleepy face, Maddie felt a warmth stir deep inside of her and a decision was made.

Tugging off her shirt, stepping out of her pants, she left them in a pile on the floor. As a flush rose up over her skin, she tossed aside her bra, her underwear and with a breath of hope and a smug grin on her face, she lifted up the blankets and moved into the bed next to him. He only stirred a little as she slid in closer, her hands hungry as they reached out to him.

"Mmm..." He mumbled, stretching closer to awake as her hands moved over the broad span of his chest.

"Harry..." Her voice was low and deep as she tucked in close to him, her body responding with fever from the heat radiating off of his. "Harry..." She pressed a kiss to his bare chest. "Wake up Captain. I'm home..." Moving higher up his body, he began to respond. His hips pushed up towards her, his hands moved to wrap around her. And just as her lips kissed his collarbone, just as her tongue lapped warm against the soft skin of his neck, Harry stirred and woke up.

"Maddie..." Her name fell from his lips in a breath of disbelief; his eyes bouncing quickly as they looked her over, his mind trying to decide if this were reality or another dream from which he did not want to wake.
"Good morning Captain," she grinned, adjusting herself so that she was straddling his waist, leaning down and close; her chest pressing against his as she met his lips with hers. Midway through the second tease of her tongue, Harry woke completely and realized this was not a dream.

"Maddie," he moaned into her mouth as he moved. His hands stuffed into her hair as he sat up, his lips parting as his tongue moved out against hers. "Oh God...it's really you."

"I'm sorry I woke you," she was breathing heavy as his hands ran over her skin, the feel of him growing hard beneath her bringing a flush to her skin, a shock to her nerves.

"Nonononono," Harry shook his head, his lips still tangled with hers as he pressed her to him; his body longing to be closer to hers. "My God..." he breathed, his eyes widening as his hands slid down over her bare skin. "You're completely naked."

"I am," Maddie nodded, biting at her lower lip as his fingers teased over her hips, sliding around in between them. "And you...you've still got your clothes on."

"Merely a slight bump in the road," he grinned, his hips rocking up against her. "One which I would be more than happy to take care of..."

"Allow me," she kissed him long and slow before she pulled away. She was quick as she tugged at his shorts, at his boxers. Her smile pulled higher when he sprang free. "Well hello there..." She sighed, tossing his shorts aside before she wrapped her hand around him, stroking over him a few times before he groaned and pulled her hand away.

"Get up here," he commanded, tugging her towards him, settling her back into his lap. His arms wrapped around her as he buried his face in her neck; kissing a path from her ear to her chest. The fuzz on his face made her giggle.

And when she giggled, it made her squirm.

And when she squirmed, it made the both of them moan.

"Captain..." She knew she sounded desperate but found that she didn't quite care too much. "I want you..."

His smile tugged higher, his eyes flashing naughty as his fingers slipped between them. "Tell me."

Leaning forward, she wrapped her hand around the back of his neck, pulling her lips to his ear. "I've been thinking about this since I boarded the plane..." She rocked her hips in his lap. "I've been imagining your hands on me for the last half of my flight..." She nipped at his ear, felt him groan as he held her tighter to him. "All I've wanted to do was this..." She maneuvered herself right over the tip of him. "Tell me...can we do this?"

"Oh God yes," he nodded, his voice low and husky in his throat as he wrapped his arms tightly around her. "So long as it's not in missionary position." As he pulled her down onto him, as he pushed up into her, Maddie's head tipped back half in laughter, half in ecstasy.

As Harry fell back on the bed, Maddie began to move over him and somewhere in their collective moaning, the laughter began to fade.
"I have some bad news," Harry smiled at Maddie cuddled up in their bed as she played with a giggling and cooing Lilli.

"Oh?" She could tell by the easy smile on his face that it wasn't serious.

"Tara is here to do your hair and makeup for Ascot," he moved over to the side of the bed, bending to kiss her lips. "She's on her way through the gates now."

"Boo..." She frowned against his lips, her heart warming as he leaned to kiss Lilli, to tickle her belly playfully.

"I know it," Harry shook his head at his daughter. "We don't want to share Mum quite yet, do we?" Lilli squealed as his fingers moved over her chubby legs. "No we don't."

Laughing, Maddie sighed, the weight of her responsibilities settling in. "Is Greta here?" She sat up in their bed, lifting her daughter up into her arms.

"Mmm," Harry nodded, turning towards his closet. "She's in the nursery."

"Okay..." Maddie turned a smile to her daughter, blowing raspberries on her cheeks, making her giggle. "Should we go see Miss Greta so Mummy can get ready?"

Though Lilli laughed, though she clapped her hands, Maddie absolutely wished she could have just a little more cuddle time with her. After she and Harry had had their reunion, they had fallen back asleep until Lilli had woken them. Maddie had brought her to bed to feed her, snuggling up with the both of them before they were called to start their day. She was tired, but it was all well worth it.

Kissing Harry's shoulder as she passed by him, Maddie snuggled Lilli closer to her and made her way towards the nursery, ready to pass her daughter over to Greta.

"Good Morning..." Maddie called out into the room as she bounced Lilli in her arms.

"Ma'am!" Greta turned a surprised smile to Maddie. "I'm so happy to see you again."

"Thank you," Maddie returned her smile. "It's good to be home."

"I'm sure the Duke is thrilled to have you home."

"I hope so," Maddie laughed, her cheeks flushing just a bit as she remembered their morning. "Listen, I wanted to apologize..."

"Sorry?" Greta's eyes flashed confusion.

"For the articles," Maddie shrugged. "For dragging you into whatever this mess is that's happening around us right now."

"There's absolutely no need to apologize ma'am," Greta shook her head; adamant in her response. "And if there's anything you need me to do..."

"Nothing," Maddie cut her off. "Nothing except look after this sweet little baby of mine..." She kissed Lilli again hating that she had to hand her over, but thankful for the wonderful woman who stood ready to take her.
"Hello there Miss Lilli," she smiled down at the happy baby, lifting her up into her arms. "I bet you're happy to have your mother home as well, aren't you?" As Lilli cooed and clapped her hands, Maddie took a deep breath and swallowed back her desires to cancel the rest of her day and stay home.

"Thank you Greta." Maddie's words were laced with emotion. "For taking such great care of her, for being here while I had to be away...for looking out for both of them." She lifted a genuine smile of thanks. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

"Of course," Greta nodded, returning the smile. "We're all happy to have you home Ma'am."

"I can't tell you how happy I am to be here." Maddie leaned in to hug the nanny, to kiss Lilli and then, with just a hint of sadness, she stepped out of the nursery and returned to her room.

It was time to shower, time to dress, time to be made up.

Time to report for duty. And for the first time since the photos had landed, she wasn't walking on eggshells, she wasn't sick at the thought. In fact she felt stronger, fiercer than she had in a very long time.

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"Thank God..." Harry breathed in relief as the car pulled to a quick stop outside the racetrack, their doors pulled open almost just as quickly as they had stopped. "We made it on time."

With a smirk on her face, Maddie stepped quickly from the car, waiting for him to round to her side before they moved inside; long, steady strides. "I told you we would be fine."

"Oh yeah?" He arched his eyebrows, his hand at her back as he leaned closer. "Was that before or after you took off my top hat and dropped to your knees?"

With pride in her eyes, she smiled wider. "Both." Whether the move was subtle or not, she wiped at the corner of her mouth, her eyes flashing as she did.

Harry groaned next to her. "Would you please stop?" He cleared his throat. "We're about to sit in a carriage with my grandparents and while I'm...thrilled to have this side of you back..."

"I get it." Giggling, Maddie gave in, smoothing down her skirt and taking a breath. The fluster of the people around them alerted her to their arrival. Turning to look in the direction of the excitement, Maddie found she was right. The Queen and The Duke were there; on their way down the causeway to join them for the carriage ride.

"I'm happy too," Maddie leaned in quickly, squeezing his hand before she dropped it to turn to his grandparents. "To have this side back." And she was. She was walking taller, carrying so much more of her former confidence; the events of the past month seeming to have lessened their hold on her psyche.

Harry tossed her a wink, a smile full of relief and adoration and then, with more effort than he would have guessed, he pulled his eyes away from her. "Grandfather!" He clapped his hands together and took a step forward.

"Henry. I see we're keeping the beard around a bit longer," Philip smirked as Harry bowed his
head and leaned in to kiss his cheeks.

"Jealous?" Harry lifted his eyebrows wearing a nearly identical smirk of his own and for a moment Maddie was struck at the stark resemblance in the two men. "Or do you really just not like it."

"It's not me you need to be concerned with." He patted his grandson's cheek as he stepped away. "Is your wife a fan?"

"You can ask her yourself," Harry made way for Maddie who stood tall; her smile wide and bright.

"Your Royal Highness," she dipped into a curtsey before moving in to greet him. "It's good to see you again."

"You too my dear," he pressed his cheek to hers, squeezing her shoulders with warmth. "You're approving of the beard?"

"I am," Maddie nodded, her smile shifting to her husband. "I think it makes him look quite distinguished."

"Well I suppose you need all the help you can get sometimes," he couldn't help but joke with him, as was the nature of their relationship, the gene that ran through the both of them.

"All of the time," Harry chuckled, his attention shifting as the Queen stepped up to join them. "Your Majesty." Harry's head dropped in a bow to his grandmother, Maddie following suit as she curtsied to her.

"Henry," she turned a warm smile to her grandson as he kissed her cheeks, her eyes shining as she reached next for Maddie. "Madeline." She kissed her in greeting and then, in that wonderful way that was unique to her, she held onto Maddie's hand. "I was so sorry to hear about your cousin and his wife. What a horrible thing to happen to them."

"Thank you Ma'am," Maddie nodded, touched. "It's sweet of you to think of them."

"Of course," she patted her hand. "I'm happy you were able to go and be with them."

"I was too, thank you," Maddie swallowed back the emotion that welled in her throat. "But I'm happy to be back home."

"Yes," she nodded, looking around them towards the carriages that were lined up. "You've been through quite a bit lately as well. How are you holding up?"

"Standing tall," Maddie took a breath, squaring her shoulders. "Trying my best not to give it more merit than it deserves."

"A good approach," the Queen nodded and then, in a move that was so much more grandmother than monarch, she placed a comforting hand on Maddie's arm, smiling up to her with such sweetness. "You're doing a marvelous job my dear. Don't let it sink in and you'll be just fine. You're stronger than this."

"Thank you," Maddie's voice fell to a whisper as the Queen took a step forward, as the carriage pulled up to take them all out onto the track.
"You know..." Philip stepped up next to her, his voice lowering as he kept his eyes trained outwards. "I saw your recent video."

"Oh?" Maddie felt her stomach flip flop.

"A...street performance, if you will..." He nodded his head, turning a soft smile in her direction. "I'm a big fan of your work."

"Oh." Her eyes snapped to his.

"Big fan," he nodded and she swore she saw the same rebel tint in his eyes as she saw in her husband's. "Keep that spirit with you. You'll need it if you're going to be married to this one for the next sixty years." His head nodded to Harry who had stepped up next to her.

"Are you harassing my wife, grandfather?" His eyes flashed from Maddie to Phillip and back again, catching the mood between them.

"No no," Philip shook his head. "Though you can rest assured that this one can handle herself." And just like that, the moment turned to business. "Come along then. Let's get this parade on the way."

"My God..." Maddie's voice was low and under her breath, meant only for Harry. "Your grandfather just told me that he saw the video..."

"Oh..." Harry kept his face calm and trained as they all loaded into the carriage. "And?"

"And he's a big fan of my work."

"Ha!" Harry couldn't help the loud laugh that pushed through his lips. "Of course he is. He's a Windsor man, Madeline. We're drawn to short sassy women who can hold their own." With a wink and a nod, Harry turned his smile across the carriage to his grandparents. "Beautiful day for a win."

"Why yes Henry." the Queen nodded, folding her hands in her lap as the carriage lurched forward, the smile on her face laced with excitement. "Excellent day for a win."

Maddie wasn't sure exactly what it was that had come over her. Maybe it was traveling to be with Kyle and Amy in the wake of a true tragedy. Maybe it was being at her home, with her mother and getting back to her confident, stubborn roots. Maybe it was the release she had had that afternoon she had lost it with Travis–maybe it was the pass she had received from the family when she did.

She didn't know what it was, but whatever had been the catalyst, it had set in motion this new air of conviction. It had been with her that morning of the Ascot; in the carriage ride, in the Royal Enclosure, throughout the entire day at the races. She didn't care so much that there was a low murmured chatter that seemed to surround her. She didn't care that people took an extra beat when looking her over. And, when she and Harry stepped out of the enclosure to make a quick round, she wasn't even terribly bothered when a small group of adoring fans approached her husband asking him to sign their maps.
In fact, she found a bit of humor in that.

"Jesus," Harry had shaken his head, his hand sliding possessively around her waist. "I think you single handedly elevated my stud status with that rant of yours."

"Mmm..." Maddie had smiled cheekily. "I think you single handedly elevated your stud status with that..."

"Madeline," his eyes grew dark, his tone serious. Though his smug grin betrayed him, Maddie cut her comment short.

"I love you Captain."

"It's a good thing you do," Harry shook his head and, holding her close to his side, made his way back to the confines of his family; the safety of the enclosure.

He loved that Maddie was more confident, that she wasn't quite as shaken. But there was something that had stuck with him, a hint of nervousness that was born of a lifetime lived in front of the public. He didn't feel quite as secure as she did and, for now, he wanted to keep her as close to him as he could; as protected as possible.

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"Alright..." Maddie breezed into their bedroom. "Lilli is dressed and ready to go. Our bags are packed and loaded for the trip to Foxgrove after your match and..."

"Oh Maddie," Harry stopped to look her over, his head shaking as he chuckled. "Really?"

"And the Bishops are meeting us out there." She finished her thought, standing tall as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Really what?"

"You know what," he nodded to her, the corners of his mouth twisting higher. "You're going to wear that shirt."

"I am." Maddie's eyes shone bright as she stood tall in their bedroom, smiling up at her husband in white pants and a bemused gleam in his eyes.

His eyebrows lifted, his fingers running over the green fabric. There was no denying it, he loved the way his t-shirt looked on her; belted over skinny jeans. And he loved the image that sprang to his mind whenever he looked at the graphic of the woman joyfully eating the hot dog. But he knew that very same image would pop into the minds of everyone looking at his wife that morning. "To the polo match?"

"To the polo match," she grew smug as she watched his expression change, knowing exactly what was going through his mind. "Unless you'd rather I take it off..." She bit her bottom lip, smiling up at him in heavy flirt mode.

Trying his best to ignore her diversion tactics, he took a breath. "You know people will be thinking..."

"I know what people will be thinking," she nodded, shrugging her shoulders and reaching for a light, cropped jacket. "And I simply do not care."
"You don't?" He followed her out of their room, down the stairs.

"Nope," she shook her head. "It's not as if they don't already know that I'm a fan of..." Turning a smirk up to him, she waved her hand over the image on the shirt. "Hotdogs."

"Nice." His voice went flat as they stepped through the foyer, joining Greta who was just finishing up with Lilli.

"Do you mind?" Maddie asked him, slipping serious for a moment as she took Lilli from Greta. "Thank you."

"Of course I don't mind," Harry shook his head, leaning to kiss them both; first Lilli and then Maddie.

When his lips lingered longer on hers, when she felt his hand press at her hip, Maddie felt her cheeks flush. With her voice dropping to a whisper, she lifted her eyebrows to him. "Maybe you want to meet me at the stables after the match? Prove all of their assumptions about us correct?"

"Ha," he kissed her again. "You know I'll always take you up on that offer." His hand slid down to slap her lightly on the ass before he stepped away.

"Prove it." Maddie winked at him before he stepped from the room to finish collecting things for the match, for their weekend out in the country with their friends. "Okay Miss Lilli. Are you all ready to go?"

"She is," Greta smiled warmly, humbled by these small, private, intimate moments she witnessed between the Duke and Duchess. "Her bag is packed with an extra change of clothes and a sweater in case it cools." She turned around the room, taking stock of everything. "There are bottles, toys...the normal run of the mill and there's more in the car for the weekend."

"Thank you Greta," Maddie couldn't put into words just how much it meant to have somebody she trusted so much. "How about you? Any big plans for the weekend?"

"No Ma'am," she shook her head. "Nothing exciting. Maybe some reading, mindless tv."

"Sounds like an exciting weekend to me." Maddie smiled as she adjusted Lilli in her arms. "Enjoy yourself."

"Of course," Greta nodded, leaning to kiss Lilli's head, smoothing her hand over her hair. "Have a lovely time in the country."

"We will," Maddie grinned, bouncing Lilli in her arms. "Are you excited to see daddy play polo today? Are you?" When the baby cooed, they all laughed; nothing but warmth and familiarity in the room.

"Madeline!" Harry's voice called out before he moved back through the room. "The car's loaded and ready..." He paused to thank Greta, to kiss her cheeks and then he turned to Maddie and Lilli. "Look at my girls. Are you ready to go?"

Pulling the packed bag up over her shoulder, Maddie nodded. "Let's do this."
The shirt was, just as they had both expected, quite the spectacle at the polo match. More than a few heads turned, more than a few photos were taken. Even Mike Tindall eyed her with a chuckle and a shake of his head.

"It's almost like you're taunting them now."

"Noooo...." Maddie answered playfully, her smile lighting up her eyes. But there was some truth to his words. Ever since Philip had given her new attitude his full-throated support, Maddie had embraced this side of her personality.

She couldn't do much about all the shit that was circulating about them, but she sure as hell could make it a point to make sure they knew--she didn't give a shit.

So she wore the shirt with the pointed innuendo and she set the place a buzz with chatter. She created her own little controlled scene.

Though not quite the scene Harry created when he dismounted his pony after a roaring victory and pulled his wife flush into his arms, not quite so much as when he kissed her; longer and rougher than maybe he had intended.

Maybe he didn't give much of a shit either.

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The mood at Foxgrove that night was light; relaxed and easy. As Maddie and Ella took the kiddos up to bathe them, to ready them for bed, Harry took Bishop off on a tour of the place, still awaiting a few minor renovations.

Sipping on a glass of Scotch, Harry pointed out what would be the game room, took him through the wine cellar, pointing out the bottles already waiting for them. But when they stepped into the room that would be Harry's office, adorned with dark wood and a feel of elegance, Harry's eyes narrowed as he watched his friend take a look around.

Though it looked like he was taking in the intricacies of the crown molding, though it looked like he was appreciating the architecture, Harry could tell that something was different. Something was off and it had been since the Bishops had arrived.

"I think we're going to keep this mostly how it is," Harry shrugged, sipping at his drink as his eyes followed Bishop's walk around the room.

"Sure." He nodded.

"New carpet...furniture..."

"Mmm Hmmm..."

"Some mirrors on the ceiling," Harry's tone didn't change, his eyes didn't blink.

"Of course," Bishop nodded thoughtfully.

"Of course..." Harry's mouth turned up, his arms crossing over his chest. "Of course? Bishop...what the hell's wrong with you man?"
"Huh?" Bishop turned to face him, his eyes seeming to drift back into the moment, as though they had been in some far off place in his mind.

"I just told you I would be putting mirrors on the ceiling."

"Oh." Bishop swallowed, his smile was small as he realized he had been caught. "Interesting style choice."

"Interesting," Harry nodded, eyeing him as he moved in closer. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on." He answered way too quick, with way too much excitement.

"Ha!" Harry's head tossed back. "Even Lilli would call bullshit on that one. What the hell's the matter?"

"Nothing," Bishop repeated with a shake of his head, though this time his voice had faded, his eyes had shifted away.

"You're not hearing a word I say."

"Work has been..."

"You haven't touched your Scotch," Harry cut off his excuse, pointing at the still full glass in his hand. "Come on man. What is it?"

With a deep breath, Bishop's eyes lifted to look at Harry and when they did, when they leveled with his gaze, the look in them was dark; heavy. It nearly made Harry take a step backwards. "I really didn't want to do this here. Tonight."

"Do what?" Harry was more than confused now, a tingle of nervousness settling in the pit of his stomach.

"Okay, listen..." Bishop's voice dropped conspiratorially as he moved around Harry, glancing down the hallway before he shut the door to the office and turned to face him. "There's something I need to tell you..."

"Jesus Bishop, you're scaring me." Harry watched him as he moved in closer. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he nodded quickly. Patting the pocket of his jacket, he took a deep breath and went for it. "I just...I did something I maybe shouldn't have and I already know it's going to piss you off..."

"Bishop." Harry exhaled his name, not sure he had it in him to handle anymore bullshit. "It's been a long month and I'm finally back to a place where my wife isn't walking on eggshells and..."

"I know, I know. But I couldn't help myself." He shrugged his shoulders dismissively.

"What did you do?"

"Well..." He took a few steps closer, his voice dropping as he moved. "When we were at the park earlier this week with the kids, just after the story dropped about you and Greta...you said something that got me thinking."
"Yeah..." Everything about Harry was leery; his voice, his eyes, the way he stood tall and tense in this immaculate room.

"Yeah," Bishop nodded, continuing quickly. "You said that Maddie had said something to you about the possibility that all of these media attacks were maybe...personal."

Harry knew instantly where this was headed. "I should have never told you that."

"Yes you should have." Bishop's tone changed, his eyes leveling with Harry's in a way that made the later nervous.

"I don't want to know what you're about to tell me, do I." He could feel the heat building behind his ears.

"Yes you do," Bishop's arms crossed over his chest. "I made a couple of phone calls, put a couple of people on it..."

"Damn it Bishop!" Harry groaned, his eyes rolling as his hands rubbed up over his face. "You can't do that. The last thing I need is somebody getting wind of investigators poking around the media. I can't even imagine the shit that we would get. Can't you just leave well enough alone?"

"You don't even want to know what I..."

"No," Harry shook his head, his eyes wide. "I don't. I want to be able to say that I had no idea what..."

"It's personal." Bishop's voice was soft and quiet and more than a little scary as it settled over the room like a heavy, dark cloud.

Harry stumbled on that, his eyes blinking as the statement echoed in his mind. "It's...what do you mean it's..."

"I'll tell you," Bishop nodded, finally taking a drink of the Scotch in his glass and Harry thought maybe this was the most serious he had ever seen him. "If you want to know, I'll tell you."

"I don't know." Harry shook his head, looking out around the room as his mind worked it over. "I..."

"Harry," Bishop's voice was low, a bitter chuckle on his lips, anger in his eyes. "Trust me, you want to know."

With a glare fixed on his best friend, Harry took in a long, slow deep breath and let it out; his jaw clenching and relaxing. He felt like he was standing on the edge of a very dark, steep cliff. "You know who's behind all of this."

"I do." Bishop didn't move, didn't blink. "Maybe not all of it but most of it and Harry..."

"Who." Harry spoke the word and held his breath, all of the stress from the past month gathering on his shoulders, all of Maddie's tears, all of the chaos. Everything was weighing on him as he watched his best friend take a breath, steel himself for the impending reaction.

And then he told him.
Maddie and Ella were up in the room that would be the Bishop's for the night. Buckie was bathed, dressed for bed and playing with his trucks on the floor as Ella rocked Lilli; bundled up for the night and nearly half asleep. They were just making loose summer play plans when they heard the crash of shattering glass.

"What the..." Maddie glanced towards the doorway, then to Ella. "Did you just hear..."

"Yes," Ella nodded, adjusting Lilli in her arms as Maddie rose from her spot on the floor. "Maybe it was the boys. They were drinking Scotch and taking a tour...Maybe they dropped something."

"Maybe," Maddie nodded, biting at her lower lip, thinking that the crash didn't sound so much like an accident. "Do you mind if I..." She gestured towards the door.

"Go," Ella smiled, hugging Lilli closer. "I'll cuddle your daughter while Buckie plays."

"Thanks," Maddie grinned at the scene, at how content they all looked, and then she slipped from the bedroom.

It didn't take her long to find them. The light was on in the office and she could hear the murmur of their voices as she rounded the corner. But when she saw Jim step out of the door, she stopped in her tracks.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes Ma'am," he nodded, offering a small smile before he stepped around her.

Maddie watched him walk away, confusion creeping deeper in her thoughts, and then she continued on to the office. With a soft knock as she pushed the door open, she put on a big smile that faded nearly the instant she saw them; tense and poised in what she thought might be an argument. With a quick sweep of her eyes around the room, she saw the shattered glass against the fireplace, she saw her husband's muscles bunched in anger and she saw a look on Bishop's face that told her they weren't fighting.

But something was most definitely going on between them.

Looking between the two friends, she stepped further into the room. "I heard the glass all the way upstairs." Her arms folded over her chest. "Somebody want to tell me what the hell is going on?"

Harry was facing away from her, the stress and tension in his neck evident even from where she stood. Bishop took a deep breath as he watched his friend, waiting for him to answer. But when he didn't, he shook his head and turned his best rendition of a smile to Maddie. "Nothing. Nothing's going on. I just..."

"Nothing?!!" Harry spun around to face him, his eyes wide and furious. "Nothing. Yeah. Nothing." He didn't even look to Maddie as he shook his head. "I love you Bishop but don't lie to her. Tell her. Tell her what you just told me."

Maddie's eyes narrowed, confused at the way Harry was speaking to his best friend, confused by the fury in his face. "Bishop?" She turned to look at him.

But Bishop was looking at Harry, a sort of plea in his eyes. "Listen. Maybe you should calm
"Maybe you should fucking tell her." Harry took a step forward, his hand reaching for a glass of scotch resting on the table between them. Swallowing back what was remaining in the glass, he held it out to Maddie, his eyes dark as they met hers. "Here. You're going to want this."

"I..." She looked down at the glass in her hand, watched her husband turn away from her and then she looked to Bishop. Bishop who looked sad and afraid and like he wished he could be just anywhere else in the world. "Bishop? What's going on? What's all this about?"

"I..." His voice cracked and he cleared his throat. Taking a deep breath, he smoothed his hands down the front of his shirt and he stood taller. "I found out some information about this...attack that's been waged against you."

"Attack," Maddie repeated the word, her voice wavering just a bit. "You mean..."

"The story about Greta, the edited photos of you, the interview with your ex-boyfriend..." He exhaled and pressed his hand to his chest a move that both comforted and concerned Maddie.

"The pictures of Harry and I in Colorado?" Her voice was small and quiet, her heart hammering in her ears as her mind worked to piece it all together.

"No," Bishop shook his head. "As far as I can tell, that guy acted on his own accord. I think she just took advantage of the opening..."

"She." Maddie felt her heart jump into her throat, the air in her lungs draining. "She?" She looked from Bishop to Harry and back again. "What do you mean...there's somebody behind all of this?"

"Most of it, yes," Bishop nodded, his eyes softening as he watched her absorb what he was saying, as he watched her begin to buckle. "Maddie..."

"Who?" She looked between the two of them, reading the room with such accuracy that it made her stomach hurt. "You said she? Who is...she? Who would even want to..."

And then it hit her.

The glass slipped from her fingers as her hand moved to her tightening throat, her eyes flashing wide as she met Harry's lifted eyes. He stood tall as he held her gaze; his jaw hard, his eyes dark. And he didn't flinch even a little bit as Bishop answered her question. "Cassandra. It's...it's been her since the photoshopped pictures dropped. Well...her and her brother who has controlling holdings in a few 'media' outlets." His voice faded into the background as he watched the two of them look at each other, as he watched the unspoken conversation begin. "I'm so sorry. I just...I thought you should know what I know and..."

"Put me in a room with her." Maddie's voice sounded foreign to her own ears; too angry, too bitter.

"What?" Harry blinked, coming back from his angered trance.

"What?" Bishop echoed, a slight tint of laughter on his lips.

Maddie turned to look at Bishop, her fingers still stretched around her throat. "Put me in a room with her. You must know where she is, if you know all of this other information and I'm

Bishop felt the force of her words, nodding as he pulled his eyes from her; shifting down to the floor in front of him. "Yeah, listen..."

"And what?" Harry spoke up, cutting him off as he took a step towards his wife. "Why would you possibly want to be in a room with her?"

"You know why." Maddie stood taller.

"Jesus Maddie," Harry groaned, shaking his head.

"What?" She lifted her eyebrows. "Tell me that if Bishop hadn't just told you that some man was responsible for....for all of this HELL that's been dropped on us in the last month!" She tried to calm herself, tried not to yell. "Tell me you wouldn't want to be in a room with him for just FIVE FUCKING MINUTES!" She slammed her hand down on the desk next to her. "Put me in a fucking room with her!"

"I can't," Bishop's shoulders had dropped, his eyes were full of sadness and something in the way he was looking at them made them worry he wasn't quite done.

"Yes you can," Maddie nodded. "Yes you can. I couldn't kick her ass the FIRST time she started shit with us because I was pregnant, but I'm not any longer..."

"Jesus Christ Madeline, do you hear yourself?" Harry was shaking his head, his fingers working over the tense muscles in his neck. The room felt out of his control, this conversation flying out of his reach. "You cannot kick her ass."

"Yes I can."

"Maddie..."

"YES I CAN!"

"No," this time Bishop spoke up. "No, he's right. You can't."

"And why the hell not?!" Maddie turned her glare to him.

"Because..." He sucked in a breath. "Because she's pregnant."

And just like that the room deflated; silence settling eerily over them.

"She's...she's what?" Harry could barely speak over the loud hum ringing louder and louder in his ears.

"You heard me," Bishop's eyes locked with Harry's. "That's why she's been able to get away with all of this, why she's been able to convince her brother to print all of this even when it's..."

"But..." Maddie stammered, her head shaking as she tried to catch up. "But how does that..."

"Because," Bishop swallowed the lump in his throat, his heart aching in his chest. "Because she's convinced him to believe what she's telling others, what I'm 99 percent certain she's going to drop on the rest of the world very very soon..."
"Wha...what?" Harry asked the question, his breath held in his lungs, his heart stopping in his chest.

"That the baby is yours."
Chapter 185

The tension in the room had taken over everything, it had settled into the bones of everyone around that table.

Sitting tall and stoic in her chair next to Harry, Maddie tried not to fidget. She tried not to rub at the makeup on her face, tried not to run her fingers through her well-coiffed hair. Tara had spent nearly an hour working to get her look just right, she would hate to destroy it because of nervous anxiety.

Even if it was the third day in a row she had sat in that chair getting prepped for the press.

Even if it was the third day in a row that the bomb they had been expecting hadn't dropped.

Letting out a breath she didn't realize she was holding, she looked down at her hands clasped together in her lap; her fingers playing mindlessly with her wedding ring, twisting around her engagement ring.

The room was enormous; a sitting room at Saint James Palace that they had taken over as a makeshift war-zone. It easily held two large conference tables and chairs, easily held the small sitting area in the corner, the lighting equipment, the cameras, the multitude of people who had been gathered–for the third day in a row. It was enormous, but Maddie felt claustrophobic; shut in. Clearing her throat she looked up and around, taking in the stress filled faces of those who had been assembled around them. Attorneys. Public Relations experts. Thomas. And Andrew Bradley.

When she and Harry were told they were going to do an interview the day the story about Cassandra and the baby dropped, they were given only one allowance. They could choose the reporter. Maddie had clung to the one element of control and she had insisted on Andrew Bradley. He had been kind to her on the trek, he had protected her reunion with Harry–one of the bigger, more intimate moments of her life, and he had taken their first family portraits after Lilli was born.

She trusted him. As crazy as it sounded for her to be saying that about a member of the press–especially at this time in their lives–she trusted him.

And, in turn, so did Harry. So there he sat in the tall wingback chair across from the sofa where Harry and Maddie were situated. The mass of their entourage was scattered about, behind the scenes–waiting for the word Go.

Waiting for the story to run. For the third day in a row. It had been stressful on everyone. The first day the room had been running on a crazy, adrenaline sort of high. When the story didn't break like they had expected, it had stunned them. But they had regrouped on Day Two; waiting pensively for the news to hit.

And when it didn't, the irritation began to settle in. And now, on Day Three of waiting–anger and frustration was beginning to seep into the room. And Maddie could feel it in her bones.

Trying to relax, trying to ease up, Maddie took a deep breath–as much of one as she could muster.
She hadn't been breathing normally for awhile now, since that night that Bishop had dropped it all in their laps.

Since the moment his words had deflated every resolve she had built up.

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**Foxgrove 5 Nights Earlier**

The room deflated in an instant. All of the energy, all of the passion, all of the life sucked right out of the room as Bishop's words landed. And quite suddenly, everyone was absolutely, eerily still. Nobody was moving. Nobody was breathing.

It was so quiet that the air seemed to crackle around them.

But in Maddie's mind, in the part of her brain she could still hear over the pounding of her heart, it was much much louder.

That the baby is yours. That the baby is yours. That the baby is yours.

She couldn't stop the constant loop that ran at double speed; those words that carried with them the biggest hit the two of them had taken since they had married. She couldn't stop herself from hearing them and she couldn't stop the way her insides were crumbling as she thought over all that those words were about to impact.

Maddie tried to swallow the lump in her throat, but it was too tight, too parched to do any good. The seconds ticked by in what felt like forever as she tried to focus her eyes, as she tried to see Harry.

As she tried to really see him. But it was so hard. The room as dark and his eyes were darker and...Jesus, were there tears in her eyes. Blinking at the blurriness in her vision, she took a breath and opened her mouth to speak.

But there were no words. She had nothing.

"She's..." Harry's voice, dark and sinister and sounding not so much like him, cut into the thick silence. "She's really pregnant? This isn't just some...some sick, fucking theatrics?"

"She's really pregnant," Bishop nodded once; all business as he kept his eyes glued on his best friend. "They've seen Doctor records; blood tests, ultrasounds and..."

Harry held up his hand, shaking his head quickly; not wanting more details than he needed–more than he could really handle at the moment. With his eyes fixed on some point off in the distance, purposefully avoiding Maddie, he asked, "how far along is she?"

"Thirty-eight weeks." Bishop's answer hit Maddie in the gut. She didn't need to do the math, none of them did. The wave of that particular reality hit the room with a force they all felt and Maddie reached out to the table in front of her, needing it to steady herself from the dizzy way her mind felt.

Harry took only five seconds to absorb it, and then he took three steps over to the landline sitting on the built in shelf behind him. Without looking back to either of them, he reached for the phone
and dialed. As much as she wanted to close her eyes and take a moment, as much as she wanted to go back upstairs and pretend this wasn't happening, Maddie couldn't take her eyes away from Harry.

As she watched him, her heart began to break. Because even as he tried to stand tall, his shoulders began to slump, his head began to hang. His body began to give way to the heaviness of what was running through his mind, to the gravity of what was happening for them now.

And this—this horrible, despicable, lie that was going to change so many more lives than those in this room—this was happening.

When Harry began to speak, his voice was a deep, low hum. Maddie could barely make it out over the ringing in her ears. She knew he was calling Thomas and she knew what he was telling him—as much as he could over an unsecure line, as much as he needed to to get him out there in the middle of the night.

Maddie glanced around the room then, suddenly aware of just how much the night was about to change. No more easy weekend in the country with their friends. In a matter of an hour, she suspected she was going to have a full house; Thomas, attorneys, Spin Doctors. She looked down to the floor, her forehead beginning to throb.

"Maddie..." It was Bishop; his voice soft and low and trying for comforting as he reached out to her. "Maddie, I..." His hand closed over hers but she jerked hers back; an innate, protective reflex that had set in the moment she realized they were about to be attacked.

"I'm sorry," she looked up to him with wide eyes, her head shaking as she caught her reaction. "Bishop, I'm..."

"Don't be," he tried to smile, holding his hands up in front of him. "I understand. Are you..."

"No," she shook her head, the tears she had managed to shake away before returned and she wavered. "No." Her voice was more forceful this time, as though she were commanding herself not to lose it, as though she were ordering away the tears, the worry, the sick feeling in her stomach.

Harry's phone call ended with a click of the phone, a thunk as Harry hung up. Turning away from the shelves, he looked to the tall windows that lined the far wall. His jaw flexed and his arms crossed over his chest. "They're on their way," rather he couldn't or wouldn't—he wasn't looking over to the two of them. "In an hour, we're going to..." He cleared his throat and looked down to the ground. With a breath, he looked up to the windows. "I think I'm going to take a walk."

"Harry..." Maddie's voice cracked as she took half a step towards him.

But a small shake of his head, a lift of his hand, kept her from going to him. "I need some air. I need a minute to just..." He trailed off, his face flooding with emotion as he frowned. And then he moved away from the both of them. "I'm going to step outside for..."

"But..." Maddie moved again, wanting to stop him, wanting to go with him; wanting him. But just as he stepped out of the room, Ella stepped in; completely unsuspecting.

"There you are!" Her smile was wide as she looked directly at Maddie; oblivious to the feel of the room. "Lilli's nearly passed out but I wasn't sure if there was anything else I needed to do before I put her down and..." And then she caught it; the tension radiating off her husband, the ill look in
Maddie's eyes. "Hey, are you two okay?"

Blinking at tears, Maddie shook her head. "No. I just..." She glanced towards the house, towards Lilli and then, with her bottom lip tucked between her teeth, she looked to where Harry had disappeared.

"I'll go," Bishop stepped forward, the look in his eyes sympathetic, the warmth of his hand on her arm comforting this time. "You go take care of Lilli. I'll go after Harry."

As torn as her heart was, she knew Bishop was right. Wiping at her eyes, stuffing down her own worries, her own questions, her own insecurities, Maddie took a breath and left the room; a confused and concerned Ella reading the look on Bishop's face and following right behind her.

The air was colder than Harry thought it should be at this point in the summer; a heavy chill hanging over him as he walked further and further from the house. He wasn't sure where he was going, he wasn't sure what he was doing. All he knew for sure was that he was suffocating there in that office and if he didn't move, he was going to explode.

He was going to fucking lose it.

He heard Jim fall into step behind him but didn't bother to turn and greet him, didn't even think about letting him in on what was spiraling around him. In the small part of his brain that was still thinking rationally, he had the utmost gratitude for Jim's ability to be with him without having to be involved. Had he had more peace of mind, he might have told him so. But things being as they were.

His breath was coming up in quick, heavy bursts as he put physical distance between himself and the house. They reached the bottom of the hill, passed over the taller, thicker grass at the far end of the yard. As they crossed into the line of trees, as he pressed into the more heavily wooded part of his property, he heard Jim come to a complete stop and spin around; flashlight and sidearm rising up into the night. Harry looked back, momentarily paused on his path away from it all.

"Stop right there." Jim's voice was cold and authoritative and even if he didn't know what was happening that night, he knew something was happening and he wasn't taking any chances. Just as he knew Arthur had moved in closer to the house, he moved in closer to Harry. "Who's there?"

"Ian James Bishop the Third." Bishop stepped into the beam of the flashlight, his hands held up in front of him and his best attempt at smug smiling across his face, taking a chance that humor might ease some of the tension. He was wrong. Neither Harry nor Jim cracked a bit of a smile.

"Sir?" Jim turned to Harry with raised eyebrows, easing up only a little. Though he lowered his weapon, he kept the flashlight right on Bishop's face as he waited for Harry. Only when he finally nodded, did Jim stand down. Lowering the flashlight, he met Harry's eyes for a beat and then nodded off to the side where he would be.

And there they were; Bishop and Harry, just on the edge of the woods. Cold and dark and ominous.

With his arms folded over his chest, Harry stood tall in front of Bishop, his eyes looking right at his best friend. "Go ahead and ask."
Bishop didn't even blink as he mirrored Harry's stance, his voice. "Ask what."

"You know what." Harry tossed back, his shoulders squaring.

"No," Bishop shook his head, his lips twitching up just slightly. "I won't."

"Come on Bishop," Harry's voice rose. "We're out here in the middle of the fucking country, in the middle of the fucking night and the sky is fucking falling. Just go ahead and fucking ask."

"No," Bishop let out a puff of a laugh as he stood up to this great force that was Harry of Wales. "I don't fucking care what you say. I am not going to ask you if that baby is yours."

"Everyone's going to ask, Bishop. Everyone." Harry looked up towards the house. "Thomas. My father. They're all on their way out here. You know they're going to ask. The attorneys and the publicists and the fucking..." Harry tried to tamp down his fury and in its place moved a great, overwhelming sadness. His eyes pulled away from the house as his shoulders drooped, as his head sagged. "And my wife. My..." Tears rose to his eyes, bile to his throat. And the great Harry Wales wavered there in the dark night. "I don't know if I can handle Maddie asking me if..." When his eyes lifted to meet Bishop's, they were young and afraid and the saddest Bishop had ever seen them.

And Bishop felt his heart sink. His head tipped to the side in sympathy, his hand pressing to his chest as he took a step in. "Maybe she won't."

"Come on..." Harry shook his head.

"Maybe she won't."

"You wouldn't?" Harry lifted his eyebrows. "After all of the bullshit that that..." Harry couldn't find the right word for Cassandra; bitch, whore, life-ruining wench. None of them seemed to do her justice. "After all that SHE's brought into our lives, after all that's happened, you wouldn't ask? Not even once?" Harry looked so scattered, so scared. "Fuck Bishop...I would ask and I know better."

"Yeah..." Bishop let out a sigh, his shoulders shrugging slowly. "I suppose I would ask. But Maddie, she's...she's a better person than you and I are."

"She is," Harry agreed with a whisper. He stood still for a moment, struggling with all that was trying to take him down. Looking up to his best friend with a pleading sort of look in his eyes, he nodded to him. "Please. I need the first person to ask me to be somebody who knows that I could never..." He swallowed and pulled his shoulders back. "Please Bishop, could you just..."

And Bishop caught it. With an ache in his chest, he nodded and did what his best friend was asking him to do. "Did you sleep with her?"

As tears watered heavy in his eyes, he shook his head. "No. Not even once."

"So the baby...it can't be yours?"

"No," Harry whispered. "It's impossible."

"Okay."
"Okay." Harry nodded, looking at his feet as he tried to pull himself together, as he tried to bring it back to center. "And you...you really believe me?"

"I really believe you," Bishop answered without a beat. "Without a doubt, without suspicion, without any sort of reservation. I believe you."

"I swear to God Bishop, I'm so afraid that you're going to be in the minority..."

"Yeah," Bishop nodded, wishing it weren't true. "But the people that matter..."

"I know," Harry agreed; hating that this was his consolation. "I know."

Bishop took a breath and looked up at the house, remembering the look on Maddie's face, the confusion in Ella's. "They're on their way?" He looked to Harry who was looking up at the house, mentally preparing himself for anything that could be waiting for him inside.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "They'll be here sooner rather than later."

"Thomas? Attorneys? Palace officials?" Bishop checked off the usuals.

"Yes, yes, yes..." Harry took a breath. "My father."

"Yes..." Bishop sighed. "Listen, if you need a walk, you should go but I think that maybe I should head back in and..."

"No," Harry shook his head. "I need to check in with Maddie. I can't imagine what she's..." He trailed off, stopping himself from wishing he could pull his wife out of this mess, stopping himself from wondering if she wouldn't be better off in Bendal married to a local who didn't drag her through the layers of bullshit he had.

"Come on," Bishop's hand was supportive as it rested on Harry's back, his eyes focusing in on him. "I know what you're thinking..."

"You have no idea what I'm thinking."

"Yes I do," Bishop shook his head as they both began to walk back. "And it's much too late to unmarry her, even if it were possible. And at any rate, she'd kick your ass for even thinking you could send her away from...all of this. She's much too stubborn for that." Harry's eyes flashed wide as he looked at his best friend who allowed as much of a smirk as he could muster. "No idea what you're thinking? Please. I know you better than you know yourself." Patting his back, he nodded his head to the house. "Come on. Let's go gear up."

Harry and Bishop had arrived back at the house just as the convoy began to roll in. The first to arrive was Charles. Already out in the country for the weekend, his trip was exceedingly shorter. When he stepped from his car, his aura was all business, though concern had settled into his eyes. Buttoning his suit coat, he looked between Harry and Bishop; his brow furrowed as he nodded to the later.

"Mr. Bishop. I should have guessed you would somehow be a part of this..." He shook his head, still mostly in the dark. "Whatever it is."

"Yes Sir," Bishop swallowed, nodding his head with a sheepish smile.
"Do either of you care to bring me up to speed?" His hands folded in front of him, his gaze settling back on his son.

"Of course," Harry nodded, stepping aside and gesturing towards the door. "I'll show you back to the office and bring you in." Glancing up to Bishop, he lifted his eyebrows. "Will you show the others where we are?"

"Of course," Bishop nodded, taking a step forward and holding out a folder Harry had only then realized he had. "Take this with you. This has...everything I know."

Harry's eyes shifted down at the folder, disgust etching into the lines of his face. With a nod he snatched it up and with a low, muttered "thank you", he stepped back into the house with his father at his side.

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It took Maddie longer to put Lilli down than it normally did. She rocked her, she fed her, she even hummed a bit of her favorite lullaby. But Maddie guessed her daughter could sense the tension, she guessed she was feeding off of her own anxiety and worry. As much as she wished she could take a deep breath and clear her head, she simply couldn't. Not with Harry out of the house, not with the way he had taken off.

She tried to relax, tried to push pause on the disaster that had begun in the office. Bishop was with him, she reminded herself. And though that normally would have given her a bit of relief–nobody loved Harry like Bishop did except for maybe her–it wasn't working quite as well as it normally did.

Eventually Lilli gave in to the exhaustion, to the sheer will of her mother, and she passed out; her little head bobbing, her red curls bouncing as sleep won out and she drifted off to a deep slumber. Maddie was careful as she settled her into her crib and she took an extra moment staring down at her, she took an extra kiss to her chubby little cheeks, took an extra stroke to her soft mess of hair and she prayed that this innocent little girl wouldn't be forced to deal with this chaos that she was about to go face.

And then, with the monitor in her hand, she stepped out of the nursery and closed the door behind her.

"Alright." Ella was standing right outside the door; rigid and worried. With her arms folded over her chest and her foot tapping worriedly, she lifted her eyebrows. "What in the hell is going on downstairs?!

"Right now?" Maddie took a breath and moved away from the door, heading towards the stairs. "Nothing. Unless the boys have come back in." She peered down the stairs. "Have they come back in?"

"I don't know. I've been up here waiting for you," Ella's hand stalled Maddie. "And I was talking about before. What was going on downstairs when I walked into that room? And don't tell me nothing because I know you're lying and..."

"Cassandra's back." The matter-of-fact tone of Maddie's voice threw Ella off, causing her to take a step back. "She's..." Maddie blinked, her eyes beginning to well up. "She's been behind nearly all of the hits that have been thrown at us lately and the next one that's coming is the fact that she's pregnant. She's...she's..."
"Pregnant." Ella breathed. "But..." She shook her head, not connecting all the dots.

"She says that the baby..." Maddie gulped, refusing to cry about this. Not there, not now. Not yet. "She says that it's Harry's."

"Oh my God." Ella's hands moved to her mouth as she took another step back. "Is it?!"

"No!" Maddie's eyes narrowed, her shoulders pulling back. "You can't really be asking me if my husband..."

"No! I don't know!" Ella answered, her eyes as scattered as her mind was as it tried to wrap around this. "Some husbands do and..."

"Mine doesn't." Maddie shook her head as she took a step towards her best friend, her steps halting as she heard voices downstairs; a loud muffled, male sound that brought her careening back to the present. "They're back. They're here..." She whispered, taking to the stairs with Ella right behind her.

"Maddie I'm sorry. I didn't mean that Harry would," Ella followed her down the stairs. "I just had to ask and..."

"He doesn't Ella," she shook her head, stopping in the foyer to take a breath. Turning to her best friend, she met her eyes and with absolute conviction, she shook her head again. "He didn't. He wouldn't...he couldn't. And it's not even about his loyalty to me. It's...his reverence for fatherhood. He....he couldn't."

"Okay," Ella whispered, watching as Maddie pulled herself together, as she stood tall and straight and looked down the hallway, back at the office. "Okay."

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It took Maddie three tries before she could bring herself to step back into that room. She had handed Ella the monitor, making her swear she would come and get her if Lilli needed anything and then, she had stood there in the hallway, staring at the dark wood door.

First she reached for the doorknob, ready to walk into whatever was happening on the other side. But she stopped.

Then she lifted her hand, ready to knock.

But she stopped. And she felt ridiculous. This was her home. This was her husband and no matter who was on the other side of that door, neither of those things were going to change.

With a deep, heavy breath in, she reminded herself just who she was, she reminded herself of all of the things she knew for sure and she opened the door and stepped right inside.

All conversation came to a halt when she moved through the door and closed it behind her. All eyes snapped up to her and every single one of the men in the room—including her father-in-law with a warm sympathy in his eyes—rose to their feet.

And for a split second she thought she just might lose it.
But her eyes sought his and when she found them, she found her steadiness.

"I'm sorry I'm late," her voice cracked as she spoke to him. "I was putting Lilli down and it took a little longer."

With a shake of his head, Harry moved to take a step towards her, his hand stretching out to bring her in. But at the same moment one of the attorneys at the other end of the table spoke up.

"Actually," his voice came out louder than he intended in the silence that surrounded him. "I'm sorry Ma'am. Maybe it would be best if we spoke to the Duke alone? At first?" With a misguided confidence and an air of authority about him, he glanced around the room for the support he was sure was going to be there.

With a twisted expression on his face, Harry stood taller. His hand falling away from Maddie as his eyes glared across the room. "Excuse me?"

"I'm sorry Sir," he nodded his head to him. "I simply thought it might be best if we had a moment alone before she..."

"SHE," Harry cut in with a clenched jaw and a red face, the tension inside of him soaring. "She is my wife."

"Yes Sir," the attorney grew nervous. "I'm sorry. I thought you might be able to speak more freely if..."

"I can speak more freely in front of her than I can in front of you." He pointed his finger at him angrily, furious at the suggestion, at the assumption that was behind it. "Now if there's something you think needs to be said..."

"Henry," Charles spoke up, his voice comforting, even in the most dire of situations. He watched as his son stood down–but only just a little bit–and he turned to his daughter-in-law. "Madeline," he moved to kiss her cheeks, to hug her close. "Come on in Darling. We were just sorting through this file of information Mr. Bishop has...acquired. Please join us." With a look to the rest of the people in the room, he pulled out the chair between him and Harry and he motioned for her to take a seat.

The hours that were spent in that office that night comprised one of the longest, more grueling nights in Maddie's recent memory. Going over everything they knew, every bit of information they had, and putting together a plan of action had drained every single one of them; emotionally and physically. And when it was finally all over, when they finally showed the last person out the door, Maddie wasn't sure she had anything left inside of her to give to anyone else.

And then she turned around to face him and her heart sank. It had been so much easier to think about it all in an abstract way when they were in a room full of people. But now, in their foyer with their friends asleep upstairs and the baby monitor she had taken back in her hand, Maddie couldn't escape how very real this all was.

"Monday afternoon then?" Her voice was soft as she spoke, her shoulders shrugging slightly as she watched him lock the door and turn back into the foyer.
"Monday afternoon," he answered with a nod, coming to a stop in front of a long table under a
painting on the wall.

"Saint James Palace..." Maddie whispered. Right after the story dropped at noon.

"And Andrew Bradley," Harry leaned back against the table, his shoulders heavy with the weight
of the world as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Maddie nodded her head, the wall she had put up between her feelings and reality was beginning
to fall. "It's a date."

"Ha." Harry let out a bark of a laugh, his eyes lifting to her as they softened, as he softened.
"Wouldn't you rather just...run away with me?"

"Run away? With you?" She smiled, the tears in her eyes beginning to well up. "Of course.
Where would we go?"

"Wherever you want," he shook his head, his own emotions getting the best of him. "We could go
back to Bendal or to Colorado or to France. We could go to France. When we were younger,
Bishop and I used to play at his parent's home in the country and we had this fort..."

"A fort in France?" Maddie smiled, her hands reaching out to him. "That's where we're going to
live the rest of our lives?"

"I could think of worse things," he shrugged, sniffing at the tears in his eyes as he lifted her hands
into his.

"Me too," she gulped back the sobs she felt building her throat. "But...I don't speak any French.
Do you speak any French?"

"Not really," he shook his head, blinking. "But Bishop does."

"So now Bishop's coming with us? When we run away?" She took one last stab at a smile but her
resolve was beginning to fade as Harry pulled her closer.

"I don't know," he whispered, his lips turning down as his emotions washed forward. "Maddie..."

"It's never going to be over...is it?" She beat him to the punch, her eyes welling over as tears
began to fall. "This story she's invented. It's never going to go away. Is it."

"No." Harry shook his head, his eyes mirroring hers; his heart breaking with hers.

"Even after there's a baby, even when it looks nothing like you, even when the paternity test
comes up negative..." She trailed off, her teeth biting at her lip to keep from falling apart.

But it was too late for Harry; he wasn't as strong as she was. Not this night. Not this time.

"Did you just..." His hands lifted, pressing her fingers to his chest. "Maddie...did you just..." He
let out a breath and lifted his eyebrows. "When?"

And she caught it; his relief, his gratitude. "Yes," she nodded, her fingers tapping his chest
underneath his hand. "Without a doubt, when. Of course...when. Harry, there hasn't been one
second that it's been even close to an 'if' for me. Not one. Not one."
And that did it. With her hands gathered against him, Harry's hold gave way. His head bowed, his shoulders slumped and he began to weep. Maddie's arms moved around him in an instant, pulling him in; wrapping him up in her. She wished she could protect him, in the most instinctual, literal way possible, she wished she could shield him from this moment in their lives, from these lies that were about to be broadcast for the entire world to see, to judge.

As her husband cried there in her arms, Maddie felt such loss. Loss of privacy, loss of control, loss of the truth. Her heart broke for him, for the assumptions that were going to be made about him, for the stories that were going to be told.

And she had never in her life hated somebody like she hated Cassandra. She had never before wanted to see a wrathful vengeance exacted quite like she did in this moment.

"I'm so sorry Harry," she whispered against his hair, wiping at the tears on her cheeks as she tried to comfort him. "I'm so sorry this is happening. I'm so sorry she's doing this."

"No," Harry shook his head, lifting his eyes to look at her. "Don't you apologize Maddie. Jesus..." He wiped at his eyes, his hands moving to her shoulders, rubbing warmth into them before smoothing down her arms. "I just...if it were just me in this, it would be one thing. But it's not. It's you..." His hand moved to her face; sweet and loving as his thumb swiped over her cheek. "It's Lilli..." He gulped. "And it's this baby..."

"Hey..." Maddie pulled his hand from her face into her fingers, bending to kiss it as she looked up at him.

"This baby who has a father somewhere," Harry shook his head. "This baby that didn't ask for his mother to be a lunatic, who didn't ask for any of this." He sucked in a deep breath and blew it out. "This baby's going to have to live with the fallout of this for the rest of his life."

"I know," Maddie nodded, her throat closing tight as she thought of this poor child who would forever live in the shadow of Harry. Despite the paternity test results, they both knew the harsh truth. This would follow every single one of them around for the rest of all of their lives.

Maybe even longer.

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Saint James Palace-Present

Twirling her engagement ring around her finger, with the sound of the clock literally ticking in her ears, Maddie took a long, deep breath. She felt, rather than saw, Harry rise from his chair next to her. His frustration level was at an all-time high. She could see it in his face, she could feel it in the strained muscles of his shoulders. She could feel it in the room. Like an angry storm cloud that had been hanging over them for days.

"Could somebody please," Harry's voice tensed as his hands gripped the back of his chair. "Please, for the love of God, find out what is going on?"

"Yes Sir," Thomas nodded from where he stood, his hands folded easily in front of him; the very model of proper decorum and professionalism as his staff worked around them. Maddie's eyes lifted thoughtfully to look at him, wondering how exactly he could remain so calm on the third day of this will-this-story-actually-print circus that had become their lives. "We are working on it right now Sir."
"And I don't just mean today," Harry shook his head, pushing away from the chair. "I mean the last three days! This has been insanity! Sitting around waiting for the story to drop, waiting for the madness to begin! Waiting and waiting and waiting and WAITING and nothing!" He let out an ill-humored laugh. "And then we're back again the next day; dressed and primped and ready to go...to sit here and wait again!"

"Harry..." Maddie turned her tired eyes up to him, her hand reaching out but he wasn't hearing her; wasn't seeing her.

"And how many days are we going to bloody do this?!" He threw his hands up in the air, walking away from the group with a long, heavy sigh. "I swear if it doesn't happen today, we're just going to...let it go. It'll hit when it hits."

"Yes Sir," Thomas nodded, knowing just as well as everyone else in the room that is not how it would play out. This was too big; too heavy. And there was way too much at stake.

Maddie, offering Thomas a small smile, rose to her feet and turned towards her husband. She could see the stress in his back, in his shoulders, in the pensive way he stood as he looked out the windows at the city of London.

She took a few, slow steps towards him, not at all sure what she was going to say. She knew there weren't really any words she could summon that would ease the tension in their lives. She knew there was very little she could do but wait for the shoe to drop, pull it all together, and react—in the well-rehearsed, strategically planned way they had settled on that night at Foxgrove.

But that had been three days ago and when the story continued not to run, when it continued not to leak, everyone in that room was at a loss at what to do—especially her and Harry.

The staff was swarming around the room. Some were watching the wires, waiting for the alert, waiting to signal "go." Some were on phones, talking to their sources, talking to their outlets; searching for some kind of hint. And still some were working with investigators, trying to deduce the puzzle of it all; trying to figure out the mystery.

And it was a mystery for sure; one that had left Maddie and the rest of them with a multitude of questions. Why had this story been amped up and ready to go on Monday, oblivious to the fallout that would be left in the wake? Why had every single source they had pointed them right to Monday at noon? Why had they been lead right to it all only for...nothing? Why had it been days without a peep? Why hadn't the story even leaked through?

"I have no idea," Maddie whispered to herself, her bottom lip pulling between her teeth as she shook her head. Taking a few more steps towards him, Maddie smiled at her husband; a true, genuine smile full of the love and affection that had, in actuality, only increased over these hits they kept taking. "Harry..."

"I know," he sighed, nodding his head without turning to look at her. "I know."

"It's just, they're doing the best they can and..."

"I know," he agreed with her; he absolutely agreed with her. All of the people in that room had been working nonstop with them for the last five days, had been running through this chaos since the night Bishop had dropped it in their laps. "I just can't help but..."
With a crash, the door to the room flew open. All eyes lifted towards the sound, just in time to see an agent, a young, somewhat flustered, agent burst into the room. Holding onto a large manila envelope, he scanned the room quickly. When his eyes fell on Harry, Maddie swore she saw the smallest of smiles. "Sir." He moved with authority into the room, looking taller–and older–with every step he took. "I have something you should see."

As he moved over to where they were standing, the room seemed to move with him; a group closing in around Maddie and Harry, most of them nearly as anxious as the two of them for some sort of answers. Standing tall, Harry looked down at the envelope and up to the agent who held onto it. "What is it?"

"We know why the story hasn't run," he waved the envelope in his hand.

"Why?" Maddie asked, unable to keep a lid on her own curiosity any longer.

The young man cleared his throat and stood taller, his shoulders squaring. "The story was set to run on Monday at noon as planned. But Sunday night, Ms. Whitworth went into labor."

"Oh." Harry's eyes flashed wide, the slightest hint of fear pushing in. "She had the baby..." He looked down at the envelope again, taking a step back as realization set in. Somehow that fact made it suddenly all the more real.

"She did," the agent nodded his head, lifting his hand, holding the focus of so much attention out to Harry. "We've secured a photo of her and her son."

"A boy..." Maddie felt her stomach drop, felt her heart thud. In that envelope was a picture of the baby that was said to be Harry's; a picture that she guessed was about to run on every media medium in the entire world. A picture that would follow them forever. And quite suddenly she wasn't sure if she wanted to see it. "Oh my God." Her eyes welled up, her throat growing tighter and dryer and all she could seem to think of was just how many pale, red-headed men there were in the UK. All she could think of was just how high the possibility actually was that this little boy could look like her husband.

"Sir," the agent held the envelope to Harry, nodding for him to take it; encouraging him to take it. But Harry's hands were planted firmly on his hips, his head shaking. "I don't know if I...I don't know..."

"Okay, okay," Thomas's voice called out above the crowd as he approached. Having just ended a phone call, he slid his cell phone in his pocket. "Everyone take a breath and take a step back." As he moved in next to Maddie, he put a reassuring hand on the small of her back and took the envelope from the agent. Patting Maddie, he took another step forward, into Harry's space. With a low voice and a pointed look in his eyes, he held the envelope out to him. "Sir. It's time. You need to take a look at what's inside this envelope."

Nodding, Harry heard him. This was it. It was happening. Three days of waiting for this moment and here it was—regardless of if he looked at the photo or not, his whole world was about to spin. And he couldn't hide under the covers of ignorance any longer. "Fine." He swallowed and took the envelope. "Fine. Let's get ready." Standing tall, standing proud, Harry took a step back, wanting as much privacy as he could have in this room full of people, and he pulled the picture from the envelope.

His jaw fell open, air rushing into his lungs.
The color drained from his cheeks.

Tears built up in those deep blue eyes.

And Maddie thought she was going to be sick. "Harry..." Her voice was choked up, her hands were shaky. "He...does he...oh God..." She took a breath. "Does he look like he could belong to you?"

Harry's eyes slid up to meet hers and even with the tears, Maddie could see; something was off, something was different. "No..." He exhaled. A small, foreign-sounding chuckle pushing from his lips as he held the picture out to her. "Dark, kinky hair and...He looks like he could belong to Collins."

"You're drunk," Harry's voice was deep, his breath hot as he spoke into the soft crook of Maddie's neck.

Her head tossed back with a giggle, with an abandon she hadn't felt in so long. "Who? Me?" She pressed her fingers to her chest and batted her eyelashes as she smiled flirtatiously up at him.

"Yes," he nodded, standing tall next to her chair as he grinned down at her. "You're drunk."

"That's..." She sighed and shrugged. "That's a fair assessment of the situation." She snickered at herself. "But whose idea was it to stop off for shots on the way home?"

"Mine," Harry's grin widened; unbelievably happy, completely proud. "Absolutely mine." He leaned to kiss her, tasting the tequila and salt on her lips. "We're celebrating."

"Yes..." Maddie exhaled, her body relaxing as the air pushed from her lungs. "We are fucking celebrating." Lifting the shot in front of her up to him in a toast. "To...the end."

"Ha!" Harry laughed, picking up his glass and clinking it against hers; the golden liquid sloshing around. "To the end."

They tipped back their glasses, finishing them off cleanly. Maddie sat her glass on the bar and shrugged. "At least the end of this."

And it was—the end of the Cassandra wave of destruction that had been beating against them for weeks. The second they had the picture in their hands, the second it had all been confirmed, the room at Saint James Palace had erupted into celebration. Applause rang out, shouts of victory.

All except for the two of them. Maddie and Harry—who had moved right into the arms of each other; tears and laughter and every single emotion they had rushing to the surface as they wrapped themselves together, as they shut out the rest of the world—even there with everyone around them.

It didn't take long to clear the room, people were ready to be done with this debacle. So Maddie had hugged Thomas, had kissed his cheeks and thanked him profusely for holding them together in the midst of all this.

And Harry had shaken the hand of Andrew Bradley—the reporter who had had a first row seat to the Biggest Story that Never Was.
"I'm not sure I know how to thank you for being here for this...mess..." Harry waved his hand at the room around him, his eye catching on his wife who was thanking yet another staffer. "I know we promised you a story..."

"No, no," Andrew held up his head, seeing the look on Harry's face as he smiled at his wife. "I'm happy that things worked out this way. I would much rather cover philanthropy over rumor any day."

"A man of my own heart," Harry turned his attention back to him. "Thank you, for agreeing to do this. I know that Maddie trusts you and you were really the only name on our list we felt comfortable handling this."

"Well I appreciate you saying that," Andrew nodded, a warm smile pulling at his lips. "I have always admired the work you do and, of course, I have a great, great respect for your wife Sir."

"Yes," Harry nodded, the smile coming easy; the laughter second nature. "I have too."

"Of course." Andrew clapped his hands together. "If you'll excuse me."

Harry had nodded again, shook his hand again and watched as he stepped away, watched as Maddie hugged him and thanked him and promised that next time she'd bring more substance to the table.

As the room cleared out, there was really only one thing either of them had wanted to do–and that was get the hell out of that room, out of that Palace; out of this place that had held them captive for days.

So they left. They had planned on going back to Kensington. They had planned on showering and changing and heading out to the Bishops' to collect their darling little daughter. They had planned on escaping for a few days as the dust settled around them. Thomas and the attorneys were moving forward; pressing on with the lawsuits that had been filed, laying down pressure. And though the entirety of it all wasn't put to bed–they had made it through this round. Though there was still much to discuss, to debrief, they would get to that tomorrow.

They had planned on a quiet, peaceful night. But as they drove through the streets of London, Harry had leaned forward and spoken to the driver and before Maddie could ask what exactly his cheeky little smile meant, they were pulling to a stop outside a small pub she would remember for the rest of her life.

The very same they had stopped at just before their engagement had been announced. That night they had stopped for only one shot before hurrying off to the cameras; to the press. But this night, they were hurrying away from the media, away from the stories. And this time they were having more than one shot.

In fact, they were looking at six collective overturned shot glasses with another couple lined up in front of them. Yes–they were tipsy. Yes–people had begun to notice them, to recognize their faces even though the majority of the clientele were old enough to have served in the Navy with Philip. And Maddie guessed there would be a bit of a story in the morning–a few tweets, a grainy picture or two and some lovely paragraph that went about, talking about the Royal Couple getting tipsy in London.

But she didn't care and, from the way Harry was laughing with the retired veteran sitting at the bar
next to him, he sure as hell didn't care.

Because no story that could be born in this pub on this night could come anywhere near the one they had narrowly missed.

"But...what about the baby?" Maddie had asked him as they had left SJP less than an hour ago. "He still has her for a mother and..."

"And..." Harry had cut her off with steady eyes and a reassuring smile. "And a father who will be suing for custody."

"Really?"

"Really," Harry had nodded as he opened her car door. "And...rumor has it his attorney might....MIGHT have very 'loose' connections to Bishop Industries."

'Ahhhh..." Maddie understood and, as cynical as it all felt–she was happy to hear it.

Not as happy as she was that this was over.

Not as happy as she was to be there in that pub with her husband.

Not as happy as she was to see him laugh, to see him breathe without tension. Not as happy as she was to see that the light in his eyes was back.

"You're drunk," Harry's voice called out to her as he held a shot glass out to her.

"I am," she nodded, taking it from his fingers. "And yet you keep handing me more. Are you trying to take advantage of me Captain?"

"Hmmm..." His eyes lit up, his smile turning smug as he nodded. "Tell me, Doctor..." His voice dropped as he said it, bringing her eyes right up to his. Moving in closer, making a space that was just them, he licked his lips and lifted his eyebrows. "What's a guy have to do to take you home?"

Maddie's smile twitched higher. Without a word, she tossed back her drink and sat the empty glass overturned on the bar. Rising to her feet, her fingers reached out to hold onto his tie, stroking down the length of it as she sighed closer to him. "Pay the bill and call for the car." She pressed a kiss to his cheek. "I'm going to powder my nose and when I come back..." Her fingers slipped off the end of his tie, teasing at his stomach, at the button to his pants before she stepped away from him.

Clearing his throat, he watched her walk away from him and only once she was out of his line of sight did he pull his wallet from his pocket and signal to the bartender. "It's time for me to go." Reaching for the last of the shots lined up in front of them, he finished it off; his eyes glued on the back of the pub; waiting for his wife to return. Waiting to take her home.

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Maddie couldn't stop giggling, she couldn't stop laughing; couldn't stop smiling. The entire ride home she sat in the backseat with her hands roaming over her all-too-agreeable husband, snickering and grinning and sighing as she anticipated their arrival at home. She felt positively giddy.
It had been so long since either of them had really laughed, so long since they had smiled so much their cheeks hurt. And now she couldn't seem to stop.

Not as she skipped up the walk, pulling a laughing Harry along behind her.

Not as she watched him unlock the door, not as she stepped past him into their home.

Not even as Harry locked the door behind them and turned to face her. His eyes locked on her as he took off his suit coat, so in love with her smile that he hardly knew what to do with himself. And the only thing he really wanted to do, for the rest of the night--for the rest of his life--was make sure that smile never left her face. His own smile wavered as he tossed his coat aside, as he tugged his tie from his neck.

"Hey Captain?" Maddie called out to him.

"Doctor?" His eyebrows rose, his smile curving higher.

"Something on your mind?" Her head tipped to the side as she leaned back against the table in the foyer.

"Only you," he shook his head, moving closer. There was more but it was heavier, more serious than he wanted to be in that moment. He wanted to tell her how much it meant to him that she had stood so quick and ready at his side over the last few days, he wanted to make sure she understood how big that was. But there would be time for that later. This was a time for something else entirely. "Only you."

"Well I like to hear that," she grinned up at him, her cheeks warming at his proximity, at the broad span of his shoulders, at the taper of his waist. She found him resoundingly sexy in that moment; so much so that an involuntary sigh slipped from her lips, bringing grins to both of their faces.

"And you?" He took a step closer, invading her space in the most wonderful way. "Something on your mind?"

"Mmmm..." She bit at her lip, her eyes scanning him over; his mouth, his groomed beard, his wide, warm chest. "I was just thinking..." Her eyes lifted up to his; dark and smoky. "About this table."

"This table?" Harry's smile pulled higher, his eyebrows arching as his arms moved around her, his hands falling on either side of her hips, resting on the table behind her. "This one right here?"

"Mmm Hmmm," she nodded, her breath sucking in at just how close he was, her pulse kicking into high gear as the smell of him, the heat coming off of him, invaded her senses. "Can I ask you a question?"

"About this table?" The corner of his mouth curled up as he pressed closer, his body grazing hers. Feeling breathless, Maddie nodded. "You can ask me anything you'd like."

"Just..." She swallowed as her hands reached out to him, sliding up his chest in a hungry, possessive way. "Just how...sturdy...do you think it is?"

Harry's eyes darkened as he nodded thoughtfully. Pushing in closer, he pushed his hands against the table and he leaned in to kiss her neck; just below her ear. "I think it's incredibly sturdy."
"Oh?" She sighed, her head tipping back as he continued to kiss her.

"Mmm..." He nodded, his lips brushing against her skin. "The finest craftsmanship in all of England."

"Only the best?" Her eyes pressed closed as his mouth moved lower and lower, grazing against her collarbone. Her hands gripped his shoulders and she gasped.

"Always." His face lifted from her neck, his hands moving from the table to her; hot on her hips, sliding even higher. "Why do you ask about the table?"

"Well," her eyes pulled open, her smile sexy and flirty, as her hands slipped down his chest, her fingers beginning to undo the buttons of his shirt. "I wouldn't want us break it."

"No?" His eyes snapped up to hers, his hands rounding to the zipper at the back of her dress.

"No," she bit her bottom lip and shook her head, her fingers finishing up with his buttons as her hands pushed inside his shirt.

"Well," Harry pulled at the zipper of her dress. "You know what's one great thing about being a Duke?"

"The uniforms?" She answered with a cheeky grin, her hands pushing his shirt from his arms.

"No," he shook his head, bringing his hands right back to her, finding the hem of her unzipped dressed and pulling it quickly and easily up and over her head. With a smile wide in appreciation, he moved in, gathering her closer to him as he bent to kiss her. "If we break this table, I can just...buy another one."

"Ooohhh..." Maddie groaned into his mouth as he kissed her; hot and open and full of all of the amazing sexual tension between them. "I knew there was a reason I married you."

"Ha..." Harry laughed as his hands moved over her chest, over her hips, down over her ass. "For my sturdy tables?"

"Mmm," she nodded, breathless as she made quick work of his belt, of his button and zipper. "And your willingness to...test them."

"Good God," Harry groaned as she tugged at his pants, as she tugged at his boxers. And when she looked him over, when her cheeks flushed red and her smile shone bright across her cheeks, he had to take a breath to steady himself. And then he moved in. With his hands on her hips, he lifted her up and back onto that table behind her.

And it didn't even budge.

Not when he pressed forward and took her mouth with his.

Not when he tugged her panties from her legs.

Not when he tossed her bra aside.

Not when he stepped between the warm, welcome of her parted legs.
That table didn't move once, didn't give way at all.

Not as Maddie pulled him to her.

Not as he pushed inside of her; as deep inside of her as he could possibly be.

Not as she braced herself against the force that was him.

Not even as they ravished each other there in the foyer. With moans and groans and laughter, he took her. And she took him.

There on that unwavering table in the foyer.

And when they were finished, when they were hot and sweaty and spent—and still a little tipsy—Harry pressed his forehead against her shoulder and he sighed; a heavy weight having been lifted from his shoulders.

"You were right," Maddie spoke softly, catching her breath as she ran her fingertips over his back.

"Hmmm?"

"The table..." She laughed lightly. "Finest Craftsmanship in all of England."

Chuckling, Harry nodded. "I would give it a rating of ten out of ten."

"Sure," Maddie giggled. "The Royal Seal of Approval?"

"Ha!" He kissed her shoulder and lifted his head, his eyes finding hers. "Yes. Something like that..."

"Mmm..." Maddie smiled, her hand moving around the back of his head, pulling him to her for a kiss. "Now what Captain?"

"Well," he sighed, hugging her closer to him; not ready to be parted from her yet. "We should go out to the Bishop's, see Lilli..."

"We should," Maddie's smile lightened at the thought of their daughter.

"But first..." He leaned in to kiss her once more. "A shower?"

"Yes," she nodded eagerly, her body arching reflexively towards him. "A shower. Tell me..."

"Yes?" His arms tightened around her, lifting her up off the table as her legs tightened around his waist, her hands steady on his shoulders.

"Our shower..." She giggled as he adjusted her in his arms, as he took to the stairs. "Finest Craftsmanship in all of England?"

Stopping on one of the stairs, Harry looked down at her, catching her eyes and smiling. With a shake of his head, he felt his body come back to life at the thought. "Of course." He shrugged. "Only the best."

"Only the best." She echoed his words and then, with a wink, Harry slapped her ass and
continued his journey upstairs. And her laughter sounded out throughout the house; loud and bright and easy—for the first time in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

We’re nearing the end of Part One of this story. Would you, the readers, rather have Part Two as a separate story? Or as a part of this one?
Chapter 186

Chapter Notes

This will be the last full chapter of Part One of The Unexpected Journey. Chapter 187 will be a retelling of Chapter 1 but from Harry's point of view. Then we will have a big time jump and we will start up Part Two. Thank you for reading this part of the story. I hope you've enjoyed it and I really hope you follow me over to Part Two.

A/N: This is going to be the last chapter of The Unexpected Journey. But no worries. I'll be back with Part Two...and a significant time jump. If you want to know where the Sussexes end up in five years, stay tuned. I hope you've enjoyed this.

The next month of their lives was a time of reconciliation. As they stepped out of those dark, angry days that had surrounded the wave of attacks hurled at them, Maddie and Harry were finally able to see things begin to settle.

The Polo Team of attorneys had negotiated and out-of-court ending for Ernie and his illegally obtained photos. There was an admittance of guilt, a very public apology and monetary compensation—the full amount of which was immediately donated on behalf of the Sussexes. It felt too easy after how big it had become but it had brought with it decisions made by the court that would forever impact the coverage of the royal family and on the eve of those announcements, Maddie and Harry received more than a handful of phone calls from royalty from around the world—all offering their support.

As full attention turned to Cassandra, she found herself knee deep in litigation and upside down in a child custody case that couldn't possibly end well for her. Though her personal involvement in the attacks on the Sussexes would continue to be fought out in the courts, the media outlets who had participated in the stalking and harassment of the Duke and Duchess were brought to a quick and swift justice.

"Do you think it's enough?" Harry had asked Maddie late one night when they were reviewing the notes from the day over a bottle of wine.

Maddie gave it a moment of thought as she finished a sip and shrugged. "Honestly, I'm not sure I'll feel completely vindicated until I get to personally deliver a black eye to the bitch..." She punched her right fist into the air, making Harry chuckle. "But short of that..."

"Yeah..." Harry had sighed; deep and heavy and resolute.

He wasn't sure it was enough either. But the best possible scenario seemed to be laying out in front of them, and that was something—especially given where they had thought they would be. So they let the legal team continue to press, they let the spin doctors do their thing, and they turned
their attention forward.

To Bendal.

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"I can't believe we're going to be back in Bendal..." Maddie shook her head over the salad she was eating.

"I know," Harry nodded, smiling as they finished up a quick lunch in his office.

"Tomorrow. We're going to be back in Bendal tomorrow." Her smile was so wide, her demeanor so giddy that Harry was half curious if she had been drinking champagne with her meal.

"Yes," he chuckled, finishing his food and wiping his mouth with his napkin. "After one incredibly long afternoon today and a night of packing, we'll fly to Bendal tomorrow."

"True," Maddie sighed, allowing her mind one last moment imagining the honey colored sand and the heavy heat. "Speaking of...what's your busy afternoon look like?"

"Meetings," Harry groaned as he rose from the table, tugging down his shirt sleeves, buttoning up the cuffs. "Nothing but meetings until I walk out the door."

"Important ones?" Her eyes followed him as he put himself back together, tucking away the casual, bringing back the formal.

" Mostly last minute details for Bendal," he answered with a small smile.

"Very important ones," Maddie replied.

"Yes," he straightened his tie. "And you? You're picking up your mother at the airport?"

"Mmm," she finished a sip of her tea and rose from her chair. "First I'm going to swing by the doctor's office to get signed off to travel, then my mother at the airport, then back to the house to deliver grandma to Lilli and back to the airport for Collins and Isaiah..."

"You know," Harry cut in as he pulled on his suitcoat. "You could have sent a car for either of them..."

"For shame!" Maddie's eyes flashed wide as she shook her head, laughter pushing from her lips. "Send a car for my mother...tsk, tsk." She narrowed her eyes at him for a moment before tossing a wink. "I'm going to tell her you suggested that."

"Fine by me," he laughed along with her. "It's been awhile since I've gone a round with one of you Forrester women. I'm getting rusty. I could use the practice."

"Oh...Captain..." Maddie shook her head with a low, deep chuckle. "If you didn't have meetings lined up all afternoon, I'd give you some practice right now."

"I can literally cancel my entire day with one phone call," he held up one finger, teasing as he moved closer.

"I know..." She sighed, stepping up to him, smoothing down his tie. "Tempting. But don't. I'll be busy all afternoon and then we have to get ready for tomorrow...maybe later tonight?"

"After all the packing?" He lifted his eyebrows, excited about the trip, happy they were all heading to Bendal.
"Yes," Maddie nodded, tipping up to kiss him. "Okay. It's time for me to go. I'll tell Anya you're ready to clear the table."

"Thank you."

"I'll see you tonight," she kissed him once more, patting his chest before she stepped away.

"I love you," he called after her, turning to watch her walk away.

"Oh I love you too Captain!" She lifted her hand in a wave and hurried off through the door, off to the rest of her day.

It was a beautiful day; warm and sunny and it felt new and fresh; just like their lives were starting to feel. And though this day would be busy, all of it was leading up to a trip that was going to be packed with family and friends and a nostalgic sort of reminiscing that was sure to bring both tears and laughter.

But first, duty. Her first stop was the doctor. It was a customary part of their travel, particularly to this part of Africa. The doctor had to sign off that they were up on immunizations, that they were healthy and able to travel. Harry had gone in the day before and today was Maddie's turn. It was quick and easy and she had done this multiple times before. So when Maddie breezed into the office, she fully expected to be in and out in under ten minutes with the required approval in her hands.

But never in a million years had Maddie expected the news the doctor had laid in her lap. In fact, she would be hard pressed to find a moment in her life that was more surprising than this particular doctor's visit turned out to be.

There she sat in the chair across from her doctor, a wonderful sort of giggle rising up from deep inside of her, shattering the stunned silence that had washed over her. She could feel her heartbeat quicken, could feel the blood return to her fingers and her toes; could feel the shock start to slip away and in its place, the bubbliest sort of joy.

"I'm sorry..." Maddie whispered, gulping back her nerves as she shook her head and looked wide eyed at the doctor. "Did you just say..."

"Pregnant," the doctor nodded, her smile slipping higher as Maddie's heart skipped in her chest. "Yes Ma'am. I did."

"But..." Maddie exhaled; flabbergasted. "But I can't be."

"But you are." The doctor's tone was warm and sweet and everything inside of Maddie wanted to believe her.

"Are you...sure?" Her heart was warming, swelling in her chest, her pulse a quick, rapid beat of building excitement.

"I am sure."

"But we haven't even been trying!"

The doctor shrugged, amused at Maddie's timidity. "Sometimes accidents happen; a broken or defective condom..."

"But I'm on the pill."
"Yes, well," the doctor crossed her arms over her chest, smiling as she watched the realization wash over Maddie. "Sometimes the effectiveness is compromised. Any chance you've been on antibiotics recently?"

"No."

"Under an unusual amount of stress?"

With tears welling up in her eyes, Maddie nodded. "Yes," she whispered; that was putting it mildly. "Yes. That must...that can make the pill less effective?"

"It can," the doctor nodded, leaning forward as her smile turned sympathetic. "Ma'am, I know this is big news, news you hadn't planned on. Without judgment or supposition on my part, is this surprise a happy one or..."

"A happy one!" Maddie nodded enthusiastically. Snapping out of the shock, out of the numbness and questions, she wiped at the tears in her eyes and let the smile take over her face. "Absolutely a happy one. It's just such a BIG surprise and it's so soon...oh!" Her eyes went wide, a flash of fear rushing across her face. "Is it too soon? Lilli is only seven months old and..."

"It's perfectly fine," the doctor was quick to wave off her fears. "We suggest waiting a year, but our bodies are made to do this sort of thing. You and your baby will be perfectly fine starting out a little early."

"My....my baby..." She whispered the word, gave reverence to it. "I can't believe I'm really...pregnant? Really?"

"Really," the doctor's grin returned.

"And everything is fine?"

"It appears to be," she nodded. "But if you would like, I could do a quick exam and we could listen to the heartbeat."

"I...yes. Yes. Please. Let's do that because I'm not sure I could walk out of here without..." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Pregnant?"

"Pregnant." The doctor chuckled this time. Though she had certainly given surprising news to many clients, the genuine stun she had seen flash across Maddie's face, followed by the absolute joy--this was a special moment.

"I'm sorry," Maddie shook her head, taking a breath. "I know that I sound crazy..."

"No you don't," the doctor disagreed, reaching out to pat her hand reassuringly. "It takes a little bit of time for it to register, particularly when you haven't been trying."

"We haven't..." Maddie's smile turned soft. "It took us so long with Lilli. We tried for months and months and now...just like that?"

"Just like that."

"My God...my husband is absolutely going to just..." Maddie bit her bottom lip, shaking her head as she tried desperately to contain her excitement; she felt like she was floating. "He's going to burst."
Harry. Harry, Harry, Harry...Harry.

That's all she could think about, all she had been able to think about since the word pregnant. She had left the office with his name on her lips and his smile in her mind and all she really wanted to do was speed back to his office and tell him this news.

She was pregnant; pregnant. With a baby they weren't even trying for and the sheer enormity of it all made her want to laugh and cry and it made her want to skip instead of walk. But she was trying her level best not to--and it was taking all of her efforts. Her smile stretched from ear to ear, her eyes were bright and full of this abundance of joy that had risen to the surface there in that doctor's office. There she was with this great big, wonderfully joyous secret tucked away--and the picture of the ultrasound along with it. And for now it needed to remain just that; a secret--at least until she could tell Harry.

Harry.

She sighed; heavily, audibly--blissfully. And she didn't even have the wherewithal to blush when Arthur glanced over at her with only the mildest tint of confusion in his eyes. Harry was going to be over the moon--she knew that for sure. These last few months had been their own version of hell as they weathered blow after blow. The fact that they had been preparing to stand up against Cassandra's claim to be pregnant with Harry's child only to find out in the wake of it all that Maddie was pregnant with their second child. The sheer irony of it all was impressive.

Though every single instinct she had told her to go directly to him, to bring him in on this perfect little secret, she had to wait just a little bit longer; at least long enough to pick her mother up from the airport and deliver her to Kensington Palace. After that, she had just enough time before she had to collect Collins and Isaiah that she would be able to hurry over and tell him.

Tell Harry. About the baby.

Her skin flushed warm and her emotions stirred and she truly had to make herself remember who she was and where she was headed and just how important it was to this secret that she not skip through Heathrow like the giggling fool she felt. And she did. It took some effort, but she managed to put it together. She managed to put on a calm face, she managed to steady the energy that ran through her. All the way through the airport, all through greeting her mother and escorting her out. Even the ride to her house was easy; catching up with Hannah, channeling her excitement into the plans for Bendal. She did fine--all the way up until she walked through her front door with her mother and was greeted quite quickly with the sweet laughter of her daughter, her red curls bouncing as she clapped her hands and gave them both a wide, cheeky smile.

"Harry..." Hannah laughed, oblivious to the tears in Maddie's eyes as she scooped up her granddaughter. "My goodness, Maddie. She looks so much like Harry when she does that."

"I know," Maddie whispered over the emotion in her throat. Turning away for just a moment, she swallowed and blinked and smiled. "I know she does. They have so many of the same expressions, it's comical at times."

"I would imagine," Hannah nodded without so much as a second glance back at her daughter. "Do you look like your daddy Miss Lilli? Do you?" As Lilli clapped her hands together and Hannah laughed--a grandmother entranced--Maddie tried to keep her mind from spiraling away from her, tried to hold it together for just a little bit longer. "Now what's next on your list of things to do?" Hannah called out to Maddie while she continued to hug and kiss Lilli. "Picking up your friend at the airport?"

"Mmmm," Maddie nodded. "Actually, if you're fine with Lilli..."
"I'm more than fine with Lilli," Hannah was quick to assure her.

"Then I'm going to head back out. I have one stop to make before the airport and then I'll be back for the evening."

"Sure, sure," Hannah nodded. "What's your stop?"

It was physically impossible for Maddie to keep the light from her eyes as she said his name. "Harry...I um...I need to stop back by Harry's office."

She really had no other option when she left their home at Kensington Palace that afternoon. She had to tell him. As crazy as it sounded, it had become so much more than just a want. It was a physical need. So she kissed her mother and her daughter and she hurried out the front door. With a grin that widened with every beat of her hammering heart, she slipped into the car, gave her driver the request and she sat back, impatiently tapping away the minutes with her foot. It was all she had to keep from overflowing with the energy and excitement that had been boiling up since her doctor's visit.

The car had barely pulled to a complete stop before she was bounding out the door, all of her focus tied to one very specific task. She wasn't sure she had ever had a more singular, driving thought in her entire life; this goal she had to get to him--to tell him. She went quickly up the stairs, hurrying down the corridor to Harry's office, her face flushed pink from the elation of it all. With Arthur two paces behind her, she glanced at Anya's empty desk and went right for his door. Without even thinking twice, she delivered a quick, sharp knock on the door as she pushed it open and stepped right into the room.

Then, and only then, did she pause to realize that she was quite literally bursting into a meeting. All eyes turned towards the sound of her interruption, towards her, and upon realizing who it was, the people around the table rose to their feet--her husband included.

"Maddie?" His eyebrows drew together in confusion as he stepped away from the table.

"I..." With her hand still on the door handle, Maddie blinked, looking around the room apologetically. "I'm sorry. I..." She trailed off, not entirely sure what exactly her explanation was. Her smile wavered only for a moment as a hint of embarrassment slipped over her face.

"It's okay," Harry shook his head, moving to her side, concern taking over his features as his voice lowered. "What's going on? Is everything okay?" His hand reached for her elbow and the simple touch of him brought the heat and excitement soaring back to Maddie's heart.

"Yes," she whispered, clearing her throat before she turned a smile to the room, barely registering a handful of faces she was sure she was supposed to know. "I'm sorry to just...burst in like that. Please forgive me," she turned wide, warm eyes up to him. "I need to speak to you."

"Right now?" He felt his nervousness ease just a little and the light in her eyes, at the smile on her lips.

"Yes," Maddie nodded quickly. "I'm sorry. I know you're busy but I really do need to speak to you right now. Please?"

"Yes, of course," Harry nodded, his hand moved to her back as he turned to the group. "If you'll excuse me for just a moment. You can continue on, Thomas knows where I'm hoping to go with this..." He smiled and met Thomas's eyes. "I'll be right back."
"Of course," Thomas nodded, concern settling in as he smiled to Maddie before he returned to the group, moving the conversation forward.

"Can we step out?" Maddie reached out for him, her fingers settling on his suit coat.

"Yes," Harry guided her back towards the door. Wordlessly, they walked the short distance to her office; him knowing without asking that whatever it was she had to say, it should be said behind closed doors. He opened the door for her, following her inside before he shut it behind him and turned to face her.

"Okay Madeline," he let out a breath he had been holding since he saw her push into his office. "I hope you know how worried I am right now..."

"Don't be worried," she shook her head, her eyes wide and bright as she stepped up to him, her hands drawn up to his chest; her fingers sliding down the lapels of his jacket.

"Don't be worried?" He laughed. "You bust in and pulled me out of a meeting with the Mayor of London and..."

"The Mayor was in there?" She looked towards the door, surprised to hear that; shocked that she had missed it.

"Yes! Maddie..." Harry laughed, his hands wrapping around her shoulders as he bent down, his eyes leveling with hers. "What's going on darling? What's brought you here in such a hurry?"

And there it was; the moment. She had hurried all over town, nearly ran up the stairs and into his office just so she could tell him. Her feelings surged to the surface as she looked up at him, her voice and her knees giving in just a little bit. "Harry..." She swallowed and blinked and took a deep breath.

"Maddie..." His eyes scanned hers, a scattered sort of concern splashed on his face. "Please. You're not easing my worry at all right now. Tell me what's happening."

"Okay," she nodded. Pulling it together, she released her hold on him. Slipping her hand into her pocket, her eyes filled up with tears, with emotion, with something bigger than all of that. "It turns out..." She wiped at her eyes and smiled up at him, holding out a piece of paper. "It turns out you're going to be a father again after all." Her voice was so soft, so quiet, and it cracked and wavered at the end.

And even given all of that, Harry had heard every single word she had said.

"I..." He stuttered, he blinked, he was at a complete and utter loss. "What?"

"You're going to be a father again," she began to cry as she said it; warm, happy tears. "Today at the doctor...she had results from my blood work and along with my approval to travel she handed me this...news."

"Wait..." Harry breathed. "Wait." His mind was slow but it was working and the understanding was creeping in, making him warm and dizzy. "A father...again?" He looked down at the paper in her hands, snatching it up and focusing in. "This is..."

"A picture from the ultrasound, yes," Maddie nodded, leaning up on her toes to point at it. "This right here is the baby and this...if you remember from Lilli's first one, is where you can see..."

"The heartbeat..." With a breath, Harry finished her sentence. Before she could respond, before
she could even nod a teary affirmation, Harry was moving in. He was gathering her up and bringing her close and he was kissing her.

Hot and heavy and teetering right on the brink of this bliss she had been juggling all afternoon. Harry...she sighed against his lips, leaning into him, into this moment. This, THIS is what she had been waiting for since the doctor had spoken the word.

"Pregnant?" Harry pulled back just enough to give them both some air, his eyes searching hers for the last bit of confirmation. "Are you really here to tell me that you're pregnant?"

"Yes," Maddie's voice wavered with emotion, her heart pounding with joy. "I'm really here to tell you that I'm pregnant."

"But..." He shook his head as his smile crept higher. "We weren't even trying."

"I know," she nodded, a puff of a laugh pushing from her lips. "Apparently we're just getting that good at it..."

Harry's laughter roared out into the room as he hugged her tightly to him; his arms wrapping all the way around her, tucking her into his chest as he kissed the top of her head. "Wow..." He sighed, stunned and happiness widening his eyes. "I can't believe it."

"Me neither," Maddie grinned up at him. "I swear when she told me, I about fell over."

"I bet!" He laughed, pulling back so that he could look at her, knowing he wouldn't see any changes but unable to help himself anyway. "You had no idea?"

"No," she shook her head wildly. "I mean...apparently my period is late but what with all the stress over the last few months, I just thought..." Her words stumbled over the lump of emotion that rose to her throat and her eyes welled up with tears--a crazy mixture of happy and sad. "She said that sometimes an inordinate amount of stress can interfere with the effectiveness of my birth control and..." She laughed as she wiped at her eyes. "Can you believe it? All of the bullshit that's been going on..." She shook her head. "And in the end, we get another baby..."

"Another baby..." Harry's voice carried great reverence and awe. "We get another baby."

"Can you believe it?"

"No," he laughed with a shake of his head. "I mean, it took so long with Lilli and we weren't going to even try until...hold on." A flash of concern passed over his joy, his hands holding onto hers as he looked her over again. "It's not too early is it? I mean...for you to be pregnant and..."

"No," she was quick to ease his concerns, ease his mind. "She said they recommend waiting but that it's completely fine that I'm pregnant again..."

"Pregnant again," he repeated the words, still amazed at it all. "And you're okay? Everything's feeling okay and doing okay?"

"Everything's perfect," Maddie whispered, her fingers reaching up to scratch his beard. "Everything is absolutely perfect." Tipping up on her toes, Maddie kissed him; soft and warm and full of the great big love that flowed between them. "Okay..." She nuzzled his nose, kissed him again and stepped back; pink in the cheeks and red in the lips. "I'm sorry I just burst in like that, dragging you in here and..."

"Try apologizing for this Madeline and I swear to God," he shook his head, the warmest sound of laughter rumbling up from his chest.
"Okay," she bit at her lower lip, catching his point. "Though...you really should get back to that meeting."

"What meeting?" He didn't even blink as his hands moved to her.

"The one in your office," she eyed him teasingly as he brought her closer, as his hand slipped to her belly. "You know, with the Mayor of London..."

"The Mayor's in my office?" His eyes danced as he looked up to her, his hand still warm against her.

Maddie laughed, shrugging as she brought her hand to his cheek. "Apparently."

"And how exactly is it I'm supposed to go back in there and pretend like everything's normal?"

"Years and years of practice," she rubbed his face with her thumb and leaned up to kiss him again. "I have to go pick Collins and Isaiah up at the airport but I had to come and tell you first. I couldn't keep it to myself."

"I'm glad you did," he held onto her for just a bit longer. "But speaking of Collins and, you know, the multitude of people we're going to be with for the few days..." He took a deep breath. "Are we telling anyone?"

"Well, I think I'd like to keep it a secret just a little bit longer," she lifted her eyebrows to him. "But I think we both know who the weakest link is when it comes to secret keeping."

"You mean me?" He pressed his hand to his chest, affronted.

"Yes I mean you," she poked him in the ribs. "And don't even try to sidestep it. I know you. I know you well." With a sigh she shrugged. "Can we at least wait till after Bendal? It's going to be such a big trip as it is. Maybe we keep this to us until we're all home?"

"If that's what you want..."

"I think it is."

"Then I swear," he lifted his right hand in the air. "I will do my very best to keep it quiet."

Arriving in Bendal was momentous; beautiful and nostalgic. On board the private, chartered flight was not just Maddie, Harry and Lilli, not just Hannah, not just their royal entourage of protection officers and assistants. This particular flight was full of their loved ones, their family of choice. Collins and Isaiah. Ella and Bishop and Buckie. They were all along for this trip, all making the choice and the effort to be there when the new Community Center opened--every single one of them having a tie to it in some way or another.

Maddie was thankful for the full flight, thankful for the love and camaraderie. And she was thankful for the way Harry kept his promise and kept their secret—even though she saw him sneak several longing glances at her belly, his eyes going soft for just a blink before he caught himself and refocused. But even with the jocular mood, even with the conversation and the laughter and the drinks that everyone but Their Royal Highnesses enjoyed, the closer they got to landing, the more subdued the cabin became.

It was lost on no one that the last time they had made this trip was to say goodbye to Khenda. Even Hannah, who hadn't been a part of it, knew enough to know this was a big moment and her
heart went out to Collins. She, like he, knew exactly what it was like to have lost a soul mate. So when he sat down across from her and lifted sad eyes to the window, she offered him a sympathetic smile and held the quiet space for him; to reflect and remember.

Returning to Bendal was going to be emotional; in so very many ways.

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At first it was all business; at least for the Sussexes. While the rest of the group loaded into cars that would take them to where they were staying at the place Collins still owned, Harry turned Lilli over to Greta and Maddie turned Hannah over to Collins and they were shuffled towards another set of cars. Before they could join the others in the revelry, they were going to headquarters for a quick meeting where they would be introduced to key personnel and go over a few logistics for the opening the next afternoon.

"Take care of her," Maddie looked pointedly at Collins who had become more and more animated as he stepped foot on the honey colored dirt, as the dry heat welcomed them, as Isaiah began to dance around their feet. "Make sure she has fun...but not too much fun."

"Okay," he chuckled shaking his head at her with a smirk. "You know you really should have put together a list of rules and requirements for me before the trip..."

"I considered it," she narrowed her eyes at him, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Of course you did," he laughed at her, leaning in to kiss her cheek. "Don't worry about your mother, Your Royal Highness. I promise that I'll show her a good time."

"We'll see you all soon..." Maddie watched wistfully as they all piled into their cars, laughter already sounding out as they most likely made fun of her. And then with a deep breath and a smile on her face, she stood tall and turned towards duty; slipping into the car next to her husband as they were pulled in the opposite direction.

"Hey..." Harry's voice was soft as he reached out across the backseat of the car, pulling her hand into his. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm good," she nodded, sharing a private, sweet smile with him. Squeezing his fingers she sighed happily. "I'm really really good."

"Good," he returned the squeeze.

"Though..." She paused for a moment, biting at her lower lip as she thought over something.

"What is it?" Harry's eyes focused in on her.

"Well, I was just thinking..." She turned to face him a bit, her voice dropping low as she leaned in. "After this meeting we're going to go back to Collins' house..."

"Yes," he nodded, following her lead as he lowered his voice and leaned closer; amused.

"And there will most likely be some drinking, no?"

"Are you kidding? Bishop? In Bendal? There will most DEFINITELY be drinking." Harry laughed, his head shaking as images flew into his head.

"Exactly," she tugged at his fingers, placing them on her stomach and when his eyes rose to hers, she tilted her head to the side and smiled. "I was just thinking about how I would even begin to
explain why I'm not drinking without telling them why I'm not drinking."

"Ah," Harry nodded, not wanting to move his hand from her. "I see. Any ideas?"

"Well, yes," she took a breath. "But it's going to require some extra effort on your part."

"Hey, whatever it is, I'm in."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely."

"Great," her smile slipped higher as she sucked in a breath. "I think that tonight, and for the rest of the trip probably, you're just going to have to drink for two."

"Sorry?" Harry's eyebrows shot up as he laughed.

"You heard what I said. I'll have a drink in my hand that you'll just have to...help me out with it."

"Ha!" Harry's head tipped back as he laughed again. "You want me to drink mine and yours?"

"Think you're up to it?"

"Well, I suppose this is exactly the sort of thing the army trained me for."

"There we go," Maddie snickered, leaning to kiss him quickly as they neared the meeting. "Thank you Captain."

"Anything for you, Mum," he leaned in to kiss her back, stroking soft fingers over her belly before he pulled his hand, regrettably, away.

Stepping into the Bendal home that Collins and Khenda had shared was more difficult than Maddie had imagined it would be. So much had happened there; a great many of the more important moments of her life had passed through those halls, some of the more important conversations had occurred within those walls. And when she and Harry stepped inside, despite the already spirited laughter and howls of their friends, she had to pause.

She had to stop and collect herself because the absence of Khenda was abundant and her spirit—just as much so.

"You okay?" Harry held onto her hand, seeing it wash over her.

"Yes," she nodded, tears building up in her eyes. "I'm sorry...I think I'm just going to cry for a little bit."

"Okay," he leaned in to kiss her, struggling with his own bubbling emotions.

"Hey, hey," Collins' voice called out as he came to greet them. "How was the..." He stalled when he saw Maddie, stopping short and growing soft. "Hey."

"I'm sorry," she looked up at him with teary eyes. "I just...."

"I know," he nodded, pressing his hand to his chest as he moved in. "Come here." With the strength and grace that had always been his, he took Maddie from Harry's arms and hugged her close.
Harry, swallowing back the lump in his throat, ran his hand down Maddie's back, patted Collins on the shoulder and left the two of them to their moment, making his way further into the house. While Maddie craved the tears and the moment of solitude, he craved the laughter and the revelry towards the back of the house where the kids were playing together while the adults snacked and had drinks.

"Hey!" Bishop looked up from behind the bar, smiling as he saw Harry join them. "Can I make you a drink?"

His head was heavy as he nodded, his hand reaching out to squeeze Ella's shoulder as he passed her. "Two please." Sharing a smile of understanding with his wife's best friend, he bent to ruffle Isaiah's hair and he scooped Lilli up into his arms; cuddling her close, making her giggle with the soft hair from his beard. "Oh my little Lilli-bean....I have so much to show you tomorrow...so much to teach you."

"Yes..." Bishop agreed, coming around the bar with drinks in hand. "But first..." He offered the first of two to Harry.

"Thank you," Harry took the glass from his hand, lifting it to Ella before he took a drink.

"Now tell me..." He took a seat, his attention turning back to Lilli. "How was your afternoon?" With a loud giggle and a mumble of coos, Lilli clapped her hands and brought a warm round of laughter to the room around them.

Hours later, after the children had gone to bed and several drinks had been poured and finished, the group sat around the large living room; happily settled in the nostalgia that came with this visit, that came with this house.

"I'm so glad you kept this house, Collins," Maddie smiled at him from across the room.

"Of course I kept the house," he met her eyes and shrugged. "There are too many wonderful memories here."

"Yes, yes there are," Maddie's smile slipped higher, her eyes lifting to meet her husband's, her mind drifting to memories of him. "I think we have a few."

"Yes," Harry nodded slowly, his double intake of alcohol catching up with him. "I know I tried to pick you up several times in this house."

"Several?" Maddie snorted.

"Several." Harry repeated.

"Please."

"I did!"

"Once." Maddie held up one finger to him. "You tried once. And not very well at that."

"Excuse me?!" He sat upright in his chair, leaning to look at her as their friends chuckled around them.

"Come on Captain," Maddie's head tipped to the side, sweet and innocent--a move Harry found more than slightly seductive. "If you had tried, really tried, we all know you would have
"succeeded."

"Ooohhhh." He shook his head at her, easing up in an instant. "God I want you."

"My mother is right over there." Maddie pointed to where her mother sat, curled up in an oversized chair next to where Collins' sat.

"It's okay,' Harry shrugged, rising to his feet to refill his drink. "I think she knows how much I want you. I think it's pretty clear at this point."

"Relatively," Hannah piped up to the amusement of the group, sharing a knowing smile with Collins.

"Can I get you another?" He leaned down to Maddie, his eyes meeting hers with a quick wink as he reached for her glass.

"Mmm..." She smiled up at him, letting her fingers brush against his as she handed it over. "Thank you."

"Of course," he kissed her quickly, moving over to the bar. "God. You know, I still remember the first time I saw you, at the old Community Center. You were unloading that truck and bossing people around..."

Ella's giggle was the loudest as they all laughed at the easy-to-conjure image. "Well that really could have been any day," she joked with her friend.

"Hey!" Maddie shot a quick scowl her way.

"You know I love you," Ella winked, snuggling even closer to her husband on the couch. "Though I'll never forget walking up to find you ordering this one around."

Harry nodded as he returned with drinks, purposefully handing Maddie a non-alcoholic version of their drink as he took a seat next to her. "And I'll never forget the way you looked...the most beautiful thing I had ever seen."

"Nice," Bishop commented, amused as ever at his best friend.

"You're so drunk Harry." Maddie eyed him as their friends laughed along.

"I had to come over and get your name. And then when you smiled at me..." He exhaled, pressing his hand to his chest as he shook his head. "God. I swear all I wanted was to see that smile on my children."

"Smooth," Collins commented over his glass.

"Oh I'm sure that's all you wanted to see."

"Hand to God." He lifted his right hand in the air.

"You know when you swear on something that ridiculous, you make it hard to believe everything else you swear on."

"No lie, love," he pressed a kiss to her shoulder, his hand moving to rest on her knee. "I knew then."

"No you didn't."
"I absolutely did. Ask Bishop!"

"Ask Bishop what?" Ella laughed.

"Ask Bishop nothing," Bishop shook his head, smirking into his glass of scotch as Harry narrowed his gaze on him. "What? Like you texted me about some girl you met in Bendal?"

Though everyone laughed, everyone waited, seeing the look passing between the two friends.

"Bishop..." Harry pointed at him.

"Bishop?" Ella raised her eyebrows.

With a blink of his eyes, Bishop caved. "Fine. He did. He texted me about some girl he met in Bendal."

"What?!" Maddie turned wide eyes to her husband as the laughter increased around them. "You did not!"

"I did!" He exclaimed. "Would Bishop lie?!"

"I want to see that text!" Maddie called out even though what she really wanted was to haul Harry off to their bedroom and kiss that smirk right off his face.

"I do too," Ella sighed through her laughter.

"Oh sure," Bishop rolled his eyes. "Cause I saved that particular conversation."

"I'm telling you..." Harry turned sweet eyes to her. "I knew then. I knew then...and I was right! Look at us now. We're married!" He leaned in to kiss her, caught up in the moment, in her. "And we have little Lilli and another one on the way and..." As Harry's hand skimmed over her stomach, Maddie's face went pale, her eyes wide.

And the room went stone silent.

"I'm sorry..." Ella leaned forward. "What?"

"What?" Harry blinked, genuine confusion covering his slip up for just a beat.

"Harry..." Ella warned.

"Maddie," Hannah moved, her feet landing on the floor as she watched the two of them.

"Harry!" Maddie elbowed him, biting at the smile that threatened on her lips.

"WHAT?!" He looked to her, his confusion fading, his entire face giving way to the enormous grin that he simply couldn't hold back any longer. "Baby...I'm sorry, I..."

"YOU were supposed to keep it a secret!" She pointed an accusing finger at him.

"Well then you should not have gotten me this drunk..."

"Can't keep your mouth shut to save your life," she shook her head at him.

"I'm sorry." He pinched her finger between two of his, his eyes dancing as he leaned in. "Please forgive me. I swear I didn't mean to tell everyone that you're pregnant..."

And all around them, the room erupted; chaos and laughter and the most supportive kind of love.
"Good Afternoon," Harry stood at the podium at center stage. Looking clean and crisp and relaxed and happy, he held the attention of everyone in the room as he began his speech for the opening of the new Community Center. "On behalf of my wife and I, we would like to thank you for inviting us back to this wonderful country for an event that is important to the both of us."

With a smile to Maddie who was holding onto an, at the moment very well behaved Lilli, he continued. "As you know, Bendal has been an enormous part of my life for many, many years. My very first visit was as a child with my mother. To know that she's been here means a great deal to me. She's walked this land, she's seen the beauty and the struggles and she--like I--was embraced by the gracious community of people here. I have vivid, beautiful memories of our time here together. But that's not the only thing I've taken away from this sacred place. Time after time I've left here with knowledge, humility, and the greatest sense of satisfaction knowing that there is such a large, wonderful community of people working to make their corner of the world such a warm, remarkable place. You, and the people of Bendal, have given me a wealth of experience and a great sense of hope."

Looking down at his speech, he felt his smile slip soft. "Of course at the top of my list of gifts this wonderful nation has bestowed upon me..." His eyes lifted to Maddie, bringing a sweet rumble of laughter to the crowd. "Years after I first stepped foot in Bendal, I was blessed to meet my wife right here at the opening of the previous Community Center. She, like I, had grown to love the rich culture of Bendal. She, like I, continue to hold this place and the people very dear to our hearts. And now...we're lucky enough to bring our daughter Lilli with us to what has most certainly become our second home..." As Harry turned a wide smile to his daughter, she responded as if on cue. With an adorable giggle, she clapped her hands together and smiled to her daddy.

"We've trained her to do that," Harry offered much to the enjoyment of the enamored crowd. With a shared look of love with Maddie, he turned his attention to the rest of his speech, to highlight the great team of people who had worked endlessly to rebuild this center, to the people this center would impact and to all of the remarkable strides that were continuing to be made. His love for and devotion to this country was evident in abundance and his joy to be back there with his growing family was shining from his bright, wide smile.

There was so much they were going to see while they were there in Bendal. They had plans to take Hannah and Lilli out into the community to mingle with the locals and celebrate this new addition. They had every intention of taking them on the hike to the tallest peak. They were going to head into the city and sample the nightlife. And, before they all boarded the jet to take them home, they would be making the trip to the ocean where they last said goodbye to Khenda.

They had a brilliantly structured itinerary all lined up, one that would show Hannah all of the places, all of the reasons that this country had used to draw in both Harry and Maddie. They had worked their daughter into the plans, wanting her to love it just as much as they had. And so far, from the way she laughed, the way she bounced and danced to the music at the celebration later that evening, she was already an enormous fan. The community had embraced her--just as they had her father, just as they had her mother. And her grandmother before that.

They had great plans for the group of friends to tour the countryside, sharing memories and laughter as they went. But first, on this night, Harry had plans for something a little more private; something a little more personal.

"Harry..." Maddie pulled in closer to him as they walked away from the party, her hand tucked
into his arm. "Where exactly are you taking me?"

"Mmmm..." He shrugged, his cheeky grin evident even in the dark of the night. "It's a surprise. But don't worry, Lilli is with Greta and your mother...well I think your mother was dancing with Collins."

"Of course she was," Maddie chuckled, glancing back at the celebrations that continued on without them.

"You can't really blame her can you?" He wrapped his arm around her as they walked. "The food and the drinks and the music...it's pretty easy to get lost in it all, no?"

"I suppose you have a point," she agreed, leaning into him.

"I suppose I do," he nodded. They walked, just like that—wrapped up in each other, for a little while. Taking slow steps through the night, they could hear the music growing softer as they moved further away and, though Arthur and Jim were behind them, it felt like they were alone. Turning them around a corner, Harry placed a kiss to the top of her head. "Are you still mad at me?"

"Mad at you?" She looked up, confused. "Why would I be mad at you? When was I mad at you?"

"About last night..." He reminded her with an apologetic smile. "When I let the news out."

"Ah," she smiled, remembering. "That."

"Yes. That."

"I'm not mad, Captain." She shook her head and let out a sigh. "I do think we'll need to tell your family as soon as we get back. I'm not sure it's fair my mother gets to know and your father doesn't..."

"We'll tell them when we get back," he agreed with a nod.

"And...I'm glad you didn't blurt it out during your speech today."

"Oh, hey..." Harry stopped for a moment. "I know I let it go last night but those were our friends, our family. I'm gonna let you let the world in on this one. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Maddie laughed lightly, turning to face him as her arms wove around his waist. "Hey Captain..."

"Yes?"

"What are we doing out here in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night?"

"Ahh..." Harry's face lit up, his hands moving to hers, pulling them from around his waist as he tugged her along with him. "Well...it just so happens we're not in the middle of nowhere."

"No?" She looked around with a laugh on her lips. "Could have fooled me."

"Come on," he rounded another corner and waved his hand. "Look around love. You know where we are."

And she did. As they slowed to a stop, she focused and looked and then it dawned on her.

"Harry..." Her voice was soft and wavered just a little.
"I think..." He spoke softer as they stopped, as he pulled her hands into his. "I think maybe this...is right where your office was."

"My office...." She looked around them, her teeth biting at her lower lip as her emotions surged.

"Mmm Hmm," Harry nodded, moving in closer to her, drawing her back into his arms. "I kissed you here. For the very first time, I kissed you. Right here."

"Funny," she grinned up at him. "I thought it was me that kissed you." Tipping up on her toes, she did just that; pressing her lips against his.

"Maybe," he kissed her back, the light shining in his eyes. "I have something for you."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows lifted along with her smile. "Do you mean a present?"

"Something like that," he nodded with a chuckle. Kissing her once more, he took a step back, reaching into the inside pocket of his suitcoat. "Here we go..." When his hand pulled out, he was holding onto a bag that Maddie recognized in an instant.

"My candy..." Her eyes welled up as he dropped it in her hand. "You remembered my candy."

"Of course I remembered your candy," he watched her in delight as she opened the bag and unwrapped a piece, holding it up to him in offering. "No thank you," he shook his head.

"Mmmm..." Maddie smiled as she took a bite. "This is perfect..." Sighing, she chewed at her candy, looking up at him; happy and thoughtful. "Thank you Harry."

"You're welcome," he nodded. "I'm happy you like it."

"I do," she agreed. "Though I didn't mean the candy. Well, not just the candy."

"No?"

"No," she swallowed and moved in closer, forgetting the candy for just a moment. "Thank you for...I don't know." Her eyes grew teary as she laughed, blaming the baby and the nostalgia for just how quickly she slipped sentimental. "Thank you for seeing me that day and for coming over. You...you didn't have to. You're...you. A prince...and a gorgeous one at that," she laughed as he chuckled. "You could have just...walked right on by. But you didn't. You came over and you let me boss you around and...and you didn't have to do any of that." She moved in then, sliding her arms on the inside of his jacket as they wrapped around his waist. "You changed my life that day Captain. Just...walked right over and pulled me along on this crazy journey we've had." Sniffling, she forced her smile to win out of the tears. "This journey I'm so thankful for. I love you so much Harry. And I'm so, so unbelievably happy you found your way into my life."

Harry smiled down at her as he struggled with the feelings bunched up as a lump in his throat. Hugging her tightly to him, he looked out around them. His hands smoothed over her as he bent to kiss the top of her head, as he swallowed back the sobs that threatened whenever he thought of all the right decisions he had made since that fateful day. "You know..." His voice cracked and he coughed to clear his throat. "If I'm being completely honest...finding you here, then...it was so unexpected." He laughed as he remembered. "I was at a place in my life when I was just...done." He gulped and held her closer. "And then I came here and I saw you and..." He laughed again; lighter and easier. And then he shook his head and blushed ever so slightly as he admitted, "I really had no choice in the matter at all. I saw you and I had to meet you. I had to know your name."
Meeting his gaze, she mirrored his smile, matched his emotions and then, taking a slight step back she held out her hand to him. "It's Madeline." She blinked as she looked up at him. "Madeline Sussex."

Taking her hand in his, he bent to kiss it; the top, her knuckles, the tips of her fingers. "Harry." He replied in a soft, warm voice.

"Harry," she repeated. "I was wondering...maybe there's one more place we could stop by before we head back to the party."

"Yeah?" He lifted his eyebrows. "What did you have in mind?"

"Hmmm..." Her head cocked to the side, her smile slipping higher as she tugged at his hands, pulling him with her as she moved backwards. "I was thinking maybe...the greenhouse."

Harry stumbled over his feet. "The greenhouse?" His eyes searched hers, making sure he was catching her meaning.

"Yes Harry..." She bit at her bottom lip and looked him over in such a way that he knew for sure exactly what her meaning was. "The greenhouse."

Letting out a slow breath, Harry's eyes tipped up to the star scattered sky of Bendal and, as the grin spread across his face and Maddie pulled him along with her, he sighed. "Thank you...thank you."
Chapter 187

Chapter Notes

A/N: So this is it for Part One folks. This chapter is meant to round out Part One of The Unexpected Journey. It is a retelling of the beginning of this story, Chapter One, from Harry's point of view. Before he met Maddie.

I would LOVE to know what you think about it and what you've thought about Part One. I really hope you've enjoyed it.

Thank you for reading.

See you in Part Two.

Harry sighed into his seat next to Bishop at Leo's bar; the stress from his day showing in his mess of hair, in his rumpled suit.

"You okay?" Bishop glanced up at him, sliding a beer to his best friend.

"Mmm," Harry nodded, taking a long, slow drink from the glass. "I'm fine. Busy day, but I'm fine."

"Yeah," Bishop rolled his eyes with a laugh. "Maybe you could use a night out with Kiki's friend from work?"

"No," Harry shook his head with a groan. "You should stop trying to set me up with women. Honestly, the last one's name was Elizabeth. Do you have any idea what it's like to try to romance a woman with your grandmother's name?"

"Tricky?" Bishop grinned as he took another drink. "Tell me, did you call her Lizzie while you..."

"Stop," Harry glared at his best friend over his glass. "You know I think that I'm almost ready to just....give in."

"Give in?" Bishop's face screwed up. "What the hell do you mean, give in?"

"I'm tired, Bishop. I'm tired of chasing...nothing," he shook his head. "Don't you ever get tired of the chase? Of the meaninglessness, of the random and boring and...."

"No," Bishop seemed appalled at the suggestions. "Nononononono. No. And you should swear to me right now that if I do, you'll take me out and put me down."

"Done." Harry leaned forward and frowned down into his drink. "I do. Sometimes I do. I think that at the end of this year, if nothing's happened, I'm going to just...."

"Let your grandmother arrange a politically beneficial marriage for you?" Bishop offered with a smirk.

"That," Harry smiled. "Or....I'm going to make your mother's dreams come true and settle down with the...Duchess of Sussex?" He clapped his friend's shoulder, wagging his eyebrows
"You know," Bishop sat up straight, running his hand down the front of his shirt. "It's not so much the title I have issue with, it's the tiara. I don't have the best head for a tiara. Do you think you could talk to Gran about that?"

"I'll see what I can do love," Harry agreed, his whole body easing out the tension. He loved having Bishop as a best friend; always ready with the joke, with the laughter.

"Listen," Bishop's laughter faded as a bit of seriousness slipped in. "Stop with the melancholy and don't give up just yet. Maybe you just need a break, need to refocus. Aren't you going to Bendal soon?"

"I am," Harry nodded, his excitement perking just a bit. "Next week in fact."

"There," Bishop clapped his hand to the bar. "Go to Bendal; do some good work. Relax and then come home, I'll take you to Vegas."

"No, no," Harry shook his head. "Last time we went to Vegas, my ass ended up all over the world."

"Fair enough," Bishop grinned at the reminder. "We'll do something else then. Tell me...what are you going to Bendal for again?"

"To open a Community Center."

"A Community Center?" Bishop's eyebrows shot up. "That's it?"

"It's important," Harry assured him, always protective of his work. "I have a good friend there who is calling in a favor."

"Ah yes. What was her name?"

"Khenda," Harry supplied.

"Khenda," Bishop drew out her name in a way that made Harry's eyes narrow. "Tall, dark, and beautiful Khenda...."

"Stop it right now. She's like a sister to me," Harry's voice grew sharp. "She knew my mother."

"Sorry," Bishop held up his hand, backing off.

"Plus her partner Collins, he's a huge man. He'd kill you with his bare hands."

"Thanks for the warning," Bishop chuckled. "Listen to me my friend. I'm wise beyond my years."

"Beyond something," Harry rolled his eyes.

"Go to Bendal," Bishop continued on. "Do your work, get some fresh Bendal air, engage with the locals. And when you come back, we'll go out, you'll start over. We'll find you somebody." Bishop shrugged with a smirk. "Or at least somebody to occupy your time for a bit. Of course they won't be quite the catch as I am, but you'll have to make do."

"I'll try," Harry sighed. "I'll try."

Over the course of his life, Harry had been to Bendal more times than he could count on both of
his hands and to say that it was a sacred place to him was a gross underestimation of just how high this country sat in his heart. His mother had introduced him to this golden place with the honey-colored sand and air that smelled of spice and spirit. He had been a young boy the first time he had come and the people he had met had embraced him as one of their own. Since that first time, he had jumped at nearly every opportunity he had to come back--no matter how small the event. So when Khenda had called him up--Khenda who he had known exactly as long as he had known Bendal--to ask him to come to the Community Center Opening, he had instructed his Assistant Thomas to make it happen.

Bendal was and would always be a Top of the List priority to him.

And when he stepped off the plane that day--when he stepped off that plane every time he returned--he felt like he was coming home in a way he didn't feel quite feel in London. He breathed easier, he walked slower, and his mind instantly felt a peace he longed for. This trip couldn't have come at a better time. Bishop had been right--he needed this.

The drive into the community always took too long. By the time the car came to a stop, his feet were tapping and his palms were itching and he just wanted to BE there. Away from cameras, away from people who recognized him, away from bowing and curtsying and 'His Royal Highness'. No doubt, he had come to terms with who and what he was and he had, as much as he could, embraced the bad with the good. But everyone need a break sometimes.

And this was his break.

The kids who hugged and played and got messy with him. The locals who fed him and danced with him and teased him when he couldn't quit drink the locally fermented spirits. Khenda who didn't blink before bossing him around or smacking him upside the head. Collins who had taken him under his wing, showing him all of the nooks and crannies of the countryside.

He couldn't wait to see them all, couldn't wait to catch up with them. But he knew they were busy; setting up, getting ready. He liked to arrive early, loved to pull on a baseball cap and roam through the community, reacquainting himself with the sun, with the air, with the feel of it all. So he did just that; stepped out of the car and thanked the driver, watched as his assistant Thomas went inside to synch up with the organizers.

"Warm enough for you?" He nodded a smirk over to Jim who was shaking his head and pulling on his own sunglasses; amused and pleased with the effect this place had on Harry.

"Be sure to put on the sunscreen, Sir," Jim rolled up his sleeves and rounded the car. "Wouldn't want a repeat of the last time we were here. I'm sure I can still hear your voice moaning about your dearly departed nose..."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry rolled his eyes, folding his arms across his chest as he laughed. "I knew I should have brought Nathan along with me."

"Aw come on," Jim joked. "You would miss me."

"I would," Harry nodded, his eyes turning to the newly finished Community Center; sweeping over the stream of action as everyone readied for the opening that afternoon.

There were a handful of people on the far end of the center, carefully looking over the walls with touch up paint at the ready. There was a team of people in brimmed hats watering and pruning what appeared to be freshly planted vegetation. And just off to the side a parade of people moving in a rhythm as they trucks packed with boxes of food.
"Come on," Harry nodded his head towards the trucks, a cheeky grin pulling at his lips. "Let's walk around back...see what kind of trouble we can get into."

"Yes Sir," Jim chuckled and followed along.

Harry was an observer of people, he always had been. He imagined it stemmed back to his childhood, so often put in the inexplicably difficult role of a child forced to be present in moments where no child could possibly be expected to be quiet and be still. So he had found ways to draw into himself and one of those ways was to become an observer of people; a surveyor of action.

And this day it served him better than it really ever had. Tucked under the brim of his ball cap, masked by his sunglasses, he took in the hustle of movement around him. His senses kicked in and charted the moment; the faint smell of food cooking somewhere, the way the heat surrounded him like he had walked into a great big oven. He listened to the sound of the dirt under feet, the laughter of those who were working, the easy chatter that flowed among peers. And just when he was about to turn to Jim and suggest they find the playground and immerse themselves in the frivolity that only came with children, his eyes settled on the back of one of the food trucks and his thoughts stalled.

Her back was to him so all he really knew was that she had a mess of blonde hair piled up on her head and a beautifully round ass and despite how cliché it was, despite how true to his "type" she already appeared to be, he couldn't help but let his eyes linger.

And then she turned around with this great big smile and inside of him something moved.

Later in life he would swear up and down that when he saw her smile, he imagined the very same smile on the faces of their children.

But there, in the sweet, dry heat of Bendal--when he saw her smile, he imagined the very same smile sighing his name.

"Hey Jim..." Harry called to his PO without turning his eyes away from this woman whose smile desperately made him want to hear her voice.

"Sir?" Jim raised his eyebrows, following Harry's gaze and knowing instantly what he was looking at. "Sir..."

"There's something I need to do."

"Need to, Sir?"

With a laugh, Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Need to...want to..." He finally looked at Jim with a smug grin already in place. "It's something I'm going to do. Any chance you're going to hang back here and give me a few minutes without my...lovely shadow?"

Jim shook his head as he laughed at him, recognizing that smile, knowing that tone. "You know Mr. Smith is going to be out here looking for you in five minutes."

"Maybe five minutes is all I need," Harry stood tall and sure; cocky. "Come on. Let me go over there and at least find out her name..."

"Fine." Jim gave in with a smile. "But if you come back with her phone number..."

"Aw now, we know I'm good..." He began to back away from Jim, towards the truck. "But I'm not sure I'm that good." He held his hands out with a smirk.
"Go on would you?" Jim waved him off. "Five minutes and I'm issuing a 'Code Black', just so I can throw you over my shoulder and haul you to safety..."

With a shout of laughter, Harry turned away from Jim and focused all of his attention ahead of him; on her. This was far from the first time he had approached a woman and though he always felt this quick rush of adrenaline, he wouldn't really say he was nervous. And he wasn't nervous now, though in all honesty when his eyes moved over her, he had a brief glimpse of thought that maybe he should be.

With a small laugh at himself, he stepped right up to the truck, turned his smile up at her and as sweetly as he could, he called out to her. "Excuse me..."

And then she turned her smile to him; wide and bright and contagious. He felt his own smile pull higher just looking up at her. Her head tipped to the side as she looked him over and he thought he recognized the look--the moment when people took a second to take in his red hair, the slant of his jaw--when they realized who he was. Squaring his shoulders, he readied himself for it.

But when she leaned forward and focused sweet eyes on him, he felt something inside him catch. "You look a little lost." Her voice was soft and clear and for a split second, he felt lost. She was an American--Bishop would love that she was an American. And she was making his heart thump louder in his chest.

Shaking off the slight stumble, Harry glanced around for a second before he could pull his eyes back up to hers. "I suppose that I am..." Recovering, he leaned his forearms on the truck and turned his trademark grin up at her. "Do you think you might be able to point me in the right direction?"

He watched her eyes brighten, watched her smile sharpen and then, standing taller, she gestured behind her. "Well, if you're here to help, I have a whole truck full of boxes that need to be moved inside. Think you can handle some heavy lifting?" When her eyes swept down to look him over, two things struck him.

One, she hadn't recognized him at all. This gorgeous woman with that smile he desperately wanted to explore, had no idea who he was. And two, her question about heavy lifting had caused her eyes to scan over his arms to check for herself.

And just like the heat of Bendal, he felt the impact of that surround him.

Recovering quickly, he nodded up at her. As crazy as it was, as mad as he knew it was going to make Jim--not to mention Thomas--if she wanted him to unload boxes, he was sure as hell going to unload boxes. "I believe that I can."

"Fantastic! Now...get up here." Though he blinked in surprise at the orders, there was something about who was giving them, and the way that she was giving them that made him long for her to boss him around some more.

In good soldier fashion, he snapped to duty. "Yes Ma'am."

"Wait, I'm sorry," her hand moved up to shade her eyes as she looked down at him. "I didn't get your name."

"I'm Harry," his cocky grin returned as he extended his hand up to her.

"Nice to meet you Harry. I'm Maddie."

When her fingers slipped into his, he had no choice but to tell the truth. "It's a pleasure Maddie."
And it was. The way she was smiling, the warmth of her skin, that she didn't know who he was—the fact that he knew she was holding onto his hand just a bit longer than was normal.

And just how fucking happy all of it made him.

"Now..." She leaned in, her voice pulling in a tone that made Harry's blood warm. "How about you stop standing around and help me unload this food?"

"Absolutely." His grin widened; instantly falling victim to the elation he felt when he encountered somebody who had absolutely no idea who he was, especially when she looked like that. With a quick glance back at Jim, he found that he had been pulled into conversation with one of the staffers. Finding him sufficiently distracted, he stepped forward and lifted himself up onto the truck and, with a sigh of relief, with a rush of excitement, he did exactly as he was told.

Moving the boxes of food was nothing; it was organized and it flowed well and honestly, he would be flat out lying if he said he wouldn't have done so much more if she had asked him too. After his third or fourth pass by her, she looked up and caught him watching her and he didn't even have the decency to blush. He wanted to know more about her and just as he took in a breath, ready to ask for more, she beat him to the punch.

"So..." She smiled at him as he walked by. "Where are you from?"

"Um..." He picked up a box, quickly debating how much information he should go for. Shrugging, he went for the truth. "I'm from England. You?"

"The United States." Yeah, he had guessed as much. She had the accent for it, the confidence, the lack of reservation he saw in almost everyone else. And, truth be told, he found it all unbelievably attractive.

"How long have you been here?" He followed behind her, unable to stop from glancing at her ass as they stacked their boxes inside.

"Ten months," she turned a smile to him. "You?"

Honesty, he thought to himself. "I arrived today."

"I guessed as much," her smile made his grin pull higher; an automatic, nerve driven response. "Well, welcome to Bendal."

"Thank you," he nodded as they returned to his truck. "I appreciate that." And he did. But this time, as he watched her walk in front of him, something inside of him spoke up.

Something about the way she had welcomed him to Bendal, nudged him in a way that made him wish he had told her. Even though he loved that she didn't know, even though it made his day that she didn't know—he didn't want to feel like he was being dishonest even though he hadn't been; even though he barely knew her.

Her smile was much too sweet for that.

And there he stood, struggling with this internal debate. Tell her or don't tell her? Did it matter? Would she care? Was he spending entirely too much time thinking about himself?

"Yes." He answered himself under his breath, his eyes watching her through the shade of his sunglasses; watching as she seemed to be in a tense conversation with a petite brunette who—at that very moment—looked right at him.
Ah. He thought to himself, a rush of resolve washing over him. The brunette knew. There was no doubt in his mind; the way she was looking without looking, the tense set of her jaw, and the sheer confusion on Maddie's face. Harry knew he was being revealed and, though he had mixed emotions about it all, he couldn't just stand there and move boxes any longer. With a quick glance at Jim, he headed their way.

"You look fine," he heard Maddie snicker as he approached. "What is wrong with..." She trailed off as he joined them, his smile already in place as he squared his shoulders and prepared himself. But when she smiled up at him with those sweet eyes, he felt his will give just a little. "Harry. This is my friend, Ella. Ella, this is Harry."

With every ounce of charm he knew he had, he turned to her friend and extended his hand. "Ella."

As he fingers slipped into his, she spoke the words that he knew would change things. "Your Royal Highness." When Ella dipped into a curtsey, his smile faltered only slightly and his eyes looked right to Maddie—who looked nothing but stunned.

"I'm sorry," her head was whipping back and forth between the two of them. "Did you just say..." And then her eyes settled on him and she looked him over. He could see it dawn on her, could see the realization settle in and he felt himself holding his breath and hoping he wouldn't see disappointment in her eyes. "I'm sorry. You..." She shook her head, her lips twitching in a smile; amusement and disbelief. "Are you Prince..."

"Harry," he finished for her; a heavy sigh hidden behind his smile. This was what he was used to. "Yes."

"THE Prince Harry?" Her eyebrows lifted; she was confused but not mad and certainly not disappointed. For that he was thankful.

"One and the same." He answered with a shrug.

"Of course," her eyes shifted away from his, her cheeks flushing with what he guessed was embarrassment and he instantly hated that more than disappointment. "Well I feel incredibly foolish."

"Please don't," he reached out to her on instinct, driven to comfort her, to take away the awkwardness.

But she was stuck in the crazy loop of disbelief and humility. "I just ordered the Crown Prince of England to unload a truck full of food." Her hand pressed to her pink cheeks.

"Yes." Her friend whispered with narrowed eyes. "Yes. You. Did."

"No," Harry shook his head quickly. "You didn't order me to do anything. I asked, you answered and..." He sighed. "And I'm not a Crown Prince. We don't really..."

But his words were lost on her as she groaned and clutched her stomach. "Oh God..." And he hated this feeling. Hated that she was embarrassed, hated that he hadn't told her and he hated that she turned to him with pleading eyes and a smile only half as bright as the one he had first seen. "I have to apologize." And he hated that most.

"No, you don't," he was quick with the protest.

"But I insist." She was determined, strong willed and steady.

"As do I." Lowering his voice, he moved closer to her, wanting her to hear what he was saying,
wanting her to know that he meant it. "Please. There is no need for you to apologize. I should have told you but I..." He smiled, hoping she could see his sincerity even in his self-assuredness. "I actually prefer it when people don't recognize me and...and I was happy to help with the truck." Best part of my day, in fact. Though he didn't dare say that.

"But I..." Maddie began again but before she had a chance to finish her thought, Harry's nearly-forgotten entourage was upon them.

"Sir!" Thomas looked him over, letting out a breath he had been holding. "We've been looking for..."

"It's quite alright," Harry assured them with a smile. He had been so fixated on this woman, on Maddie, that he hadn't even noticed they were coming. "I was just speaking...with Maddie and Ella." He nodded to the two of them in turn.

"Hello," Thomas nodded to the both of them, ever the gentleman before he turned stern eyes back to Harry; knowing exactly why it was the Prince had disappeared. "Sir. They are ready for your briefing now. We really should be going."

Ah yes, Harry thought to himself. Duty called.

"Of course," he nodded. With a warm, genuine smile that had enamored him to so many, Harry turned to the two women. "Ella, it was lovely to meet you. And Maddie," he turned his eyes on hers, allowing his public exterior to wane just enough so that she could see the sincerity in his words. "It was truly a pleasure working with you this afternoon. Thank you."

And just like that, he was being escorted away from them; being lead towards the building, towards his meetings and briefings and the reason he had come to Bendal in the first place.

But God, if wasn't thrown off course just a bit.

God, if he hadn't been nudged by something when he saw her smile...when he saw Maddie.

As he moved further and further in the other direction, he could feel the faintest hint of butterflies in his stomach, the faintest tug in his gut, the smallest of spirals in his mind.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, shaking his head as he mentally scolded himself.

It must have been the heat. And the sun. And the jet lag. And the early morning.

And her smile...and her laughter...and the way she pushed right ahead and told him what to do.

"Get it together," he grumbled under his breath.

But he couldn't let it go, he couldn't let her go. He had to know more; more than her name, more than the way she sounded when she bossed him around, more than the way her laughter rang out in his ears. He couldn't let it just...fade. And suddenly his afternoon had more than one purpose; open the Community Center, attend the party, and find out more about this woman whose smile was burned in his brain.

"Sir?" Thomas turned confused eyes in his direction. "Did you need something before we stepped inside?"

Though his first instinct was to shake his head no, there was something that stopped him; something that caught his answer and pulled it back. "Actually...yes." He cleared his throat and reached into his pocket. Pulling out his cellphone, he opened up a text to Bishop back home; his
finger sliding over the screen as he remembered the words that had bounced between the two of them just before this trip. "Just let me send this really quick and then...I'm all yours." It was quick and easy and then, with a satisfied smile and eyes full of hope, he stuffed his phone back in his pocket, clapped his hands together and took a step forward. "Okay boys. Let's do this."

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