

Maddy

TWENTY-SIX YEARS OLD . . .

Only fifty-two feet stood between me and my husband-to-be. All that was left for me to complete the transformation from Miss Maddy Hurst to Mrs. Maddy Miles was to walk that fifty-two feet and say my vows. Then I'd be able to leave the past behind and look to the future with security, dignity, and the love of a good man, knowing that I deserved to be receiving it.

But even though I knew it was what I wanted, it was still the most difficult fifty-two feet I'd ever had to walk. I knew I was walking away from someone who had the potential to take me to new dizzying heights with his love—a love that was mine for the taking, but never truly within my reach. Perhaps if the circumstances were different we'd have had something magical. It pained me to be walking away from those feelings, from him, but I'd said all I needed to say. He knew I loved him and that my love for him was unconditional, as it had always been.

“Give Me Joy in My Heart” started playing inside the church, tearing me away from my wandering thoughts, and letting me know it was time for my entrance. One by one the bridesmaids calmly walked through the giant wooden archway. Pearl, the last of the bunch, turned to give me a big wink before following suit, the little train of her mint chiffon dress floating behind her.

“You ready?” asked my dad—who looked incredibly cute in his light gray suit and emerald-green tie—which I noticed was slightly wonky. His salt-and-pepper-colored hair was mostly covered up by a big top hat, which bizarrely made him appear shorter than usual, even though it gave him extra height. He looked as nervous as I did—something I wasn’t prepared for!

I straightened his tie and gave him a little nod.

He checked over my veil in the way Mum had clearly instructed him to—so that it creased at the sides and not in front of my face. Then he stood beside me and lifted my arm before hooking it through his.

“You look beautiful, Maddy,” he whispered.

“Thanks, Dad,” I managed to say, the nerves seeming to have taken hold of me.

“Feeling nervous?”

Another nod.

“You’ll feel better when you see him. Come on, grip hold of your old man. It’s time for your groom to see his bride,” he said, firmly squeezing my arm into his side.

At our cue, we started to walk at the steady pace we had agreed on—not so fast that we were almost running to the altar, but not so slow that people started yawning with boredom either. We’d practiced it that morning to ensure it wasn’t a complete disaster.

I found myself clutching tightly on to Dad’s arm as we turned into the church and walked through its doors. A sea of faces welcomed us—all of the congregation were on their feet, looking at me with the broadest smiles I’d ever seen. And there were so many of them! It was a wonder to think we even knew that many people.

During my wedding dress fittings I was told numerous times to enjoy that particular moment, to look at those faces, the ones of the people we both loved and admired, and bask in their warmth. Their love that day was for us. I’d been told to embrace it. But as I took in their faces, their happy smiles, filled with joy, they made the feeling that had been mounting in my chest for weeks tighten further.

That was it.

There was no going back.

A surge of happiness bolted through me as I spotted him, staring back at me from the altar, looking simply divine. My wonderful man, Robert Miles—strong, reliable and loving. My best friend. I pursed my lips as my cheeks rose and tears sprang to my eyes at the very sight of him, looking more handsome than ever in his gray suit. His tall muscular frame visibly relaxed as his dazzling green eyes found mine, his luscious lips breaking into a smile that I couldn't help but respond to.

And then I stole a glance to the right of Robert, to see my other love, Ben Gilbert—kind, generous and able to make my heart melt with just one look. But he wasn't looking back at me. Instead, he had his head bowed and was concentrating on the floor in front of him; all I could see was the back of his waxed brown hair—the smooth olive skin of his face and his chocolate-dipped eyes were turned away.

His hesitance to look up struck a chord within me, momentarily making me wobble on my decision.

Suddenly, something within me urged him to look at me. Part of me wanted him to stop the wedding, to show me exactly how much he cared. Wanted him to stop me from making a terrible mistake . . . but is that what I thought I was actually making? A terrible mistake?

I loved Robert, but I loved Ben too. Both men had known me for seventeen years—each of them had seen me at my worst, picked me up when I'd been caught in despair, been my shoulders to cry on when I'd needed to sob. They were my rocks. Plural. Not singular.

Yes, I'd made my decision. I'd accepted Robert's proposal, I'd worn the big white dress and walked up the aisle—however, if Ben had spoken up, if he'd even coughed suggestively, then there's a possibility I'd have stopped the wedding.

Even at that point.

But, as the service got underway, as the congregation was asked

for any reasons why we should not have been joined in matrimony without a peep from Ben, it started to sink in that he was not about to start fighting.

He was letting me go . . .