

Finding Freedom: how Harry and Meghan's blind date in Soho rocked royalty

What began with a mystery matchmaker rapidly turned into a secret romance. The third of three days of exclusive extracts from Finding Freedom

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It was summer, and she was newly single. Although her two-year relationship (her first serious one since her divorce three years earlier) had only recently ended, Meghan still very much believed in finding lasting love. During her visit to London, however, she joked to a pal that she'd settle for "a nice English gentleman to flirt with".

The couple prefer to keep the story of their matchmaker a mystery, even to close friends. Meghan's only clue to pals at the time was that her first encounter with Harry was "serendipitous".

On that first date at Soho House's Dean Street Townhouse Harry quickly realised that impressing Meghan was going to be tougher than just giving her one of his big smiles. "I am really going to have to up my game here," he said of their first meeting. "Sit down and make sure I've got a good chat!"

Perhaps she sensed his nervousness, because the couple were somewhat bashful at first. However, it didn't take long for them to start chatting easily. Very easily. On two individual velvet club chairs, the pair were "in their own little world", a source said.

Over drinks (beer for him, a martini for her), they asked each other questions about their work. Nibbles may have been out on the low table in front of their oversize chairs, but neither touched the food. They were also too engrossed in their conversation, and too involved with each other, to notice the rather rude wallpaper featuring photos of women's private parts that adorned the walls.

Harry talked about his charity work, excitedly telling her stories from his extensive trips to Africa. Their “passions for wanting to make change for good”, as Harry described it, was, as Meghan said, “One of the first things we connected on.”

At the end of the evening, which had lasted almost three hours, Harry and Meghan went their separate ways. Despite the palpable attraction between them, there was no goodbye kiss, no expectation, just a hint that something was there and they hoped to see each other again soon.

No one expected what happened next. “Almost immediately they were almost obsessed with each other,” a friend said. “It was as if Harry was in a trance.” Meghan called one of her girlfriends. “Do I sound crazy when I say this could have legs?” she asked.

That night, Harry and Meghan made plans to meet up again. They returned to Dean Street Townhouse the next evening for a romantic dinner. No front entrance for the pair, they were given directions for how to get into the building using a discreet door away from prying eyes — and familiar only to staff and delivery trucks bringing in produce and fresh fish from Billingsgate Market. A glamorous start, it was not.

Staff did all they could to keep details of the dinner private, allowing just one trusted waiter to serve them the entire evening.

According to a friend, Harry and Meghan “chatted a lot” that evening, which ended chastely with Harry returning to Kensington Palace. Still, their chemistry had been electric throughout the meal as they both flirted. A touch of an arm here, direct eye contact there.

“Harry knew they would be together at that point,” a friend shared. “She was ticking every box fast.”

Although she shared much of her London visit on social media, Meghan knew she had to keep her dates a secret. But the clues were there. Around the time of their first encounter, she began to follow a mysterious-looking Instagram account by the name of @SpikeyMau5. With no face visible in the profile photo, just a mouse-shaped helmet, it would have meant nothing to most people. But it was in fact Harry’s private account. A big house music fan, he crafted the pseudonym by using part of the name of one of his favourite DJs, Deadmau5. Spikey came from a Facebook alias that Harry used for an account he had under the name of Spike Wells. “Spike” was a nickname sometimes used for the prince, particularly by Scotland Yard officers. Harry’s Facebook account (before he shut it down) had a profile photo of three guys in panama hats taken from the back in an MGM Grand Las Vegas hotel suite. The account said he was from Maun, Botswana. Prior to that photo, Harry used the image of King Julien, the eccentric lemur from the Dreamworks movie Madagascar.

Much bolder was Meghan’s public Instagram post the same night of their first solo date: a photo of a Love Hearts candy with the inscription “Kiss Me” and the caption “Lovehearts in #London”.

Whether it had meaning to anyone else, Harry got the message.

The next night, Meghan left her hotel and got into a taxi like any ordinary citizen. Except as the cab wound through London's dark winding streets, it had no ordinary destination: Kensington Palace. The car pulled off the main road and drove up the private Palace Avenue that took Meghan to an industrial-looking security gate and guard's office that was a far cry from the palace gates she had imagined. But the humdrum entrance, often used by staff or those visiting the estate for meetings, was the most discreet way in. Meghan was then met by a protection officer. She was ushered down a cobbled path of small mews cottages, which she later commented looked so tiny and perfectly appointed with manicured flower boxes and pots that they hardly looked real. When Harry opened the door, the prince towered in the small hallway with lots of coats hung on hooks and his boots by the door, just like any regular home.

Meghan had enough dating experience to know a charmer when she saw one, and Harry was obviously not at all that. If anything, he was unfiltered. While it was clear he wanted to impress her with details about his work, he spoke without overthinking — and he never mentioned anything about being a royal or a prince. The most he had admitted at that point was that his life was “sometimes a little mad”.

Six weeks later Harry said he wanted to take her on a trip. He told her to arrive in London and he would handle the rest. Having flown in from Toronto, Meghan spent one night with Harry at Kensington Palace before boarding a flight to Johannesburg the next morning. That was followed by two hours on a private light airplane to Maun International Airport. Then they jumped into a 4x4 to Okavango Delta — a stunning 5,800 square mile wetland in Botswana's safari country. They stayed for most of the trip in one of the \$1,957-a-night deluxe tents.

A friend said, “She came back smiling and just completely spellbound.” Her phone was full of photos — the nature they had seen, candid snaps of herself, and selfies with Harry. According to the friend, if Meghan didn't have to return to Canada for work and Harry to his life in London, “they would have happily spent the entire summer there together”. Meghan said that she and Harry talked so much, about things she rarely shared with anyone.

“I've never felt that safe,” Meghan told her friend, “that close to someone in such a short amount of time.”

What followed were months of clandestine meet-ups. Harry took commercial flights. (Although he was usually the last on the plane and the first off.) But in an effort to maintain a low profile, he flew into Toronto with just one plainclothes protection officer instead of his normal two. A generic-looking sedan would be waiting just outside the terminal to whisk him the 12 miles to Meghan's two-storey townhouse.

ver since the couple's trip to Africa, their romance had been on a fast track. "Technically the getaway was just their third date," said a friend about Botswana, "but by then, they were each already dancing around the idea that this just may be a for ever thing."

For Meghan, she was all in. Nothing could get her to slow down, not even a friend who cautioned her about getting involved with Harry. "They hate royal wives and girlfriends. They will come after you," he said. "Look at Diana."

Three months into their relationship, a Meghan friend said, they had already begun swapping the words "I love you". It was Harry who said it first, but Meghan immediately replied, "I love you, too." From there it didn't take long for them to begin talking in non-oblique terms about their future.

While Harry and Meghan kept a low profile, the prince's presence could not go unnoticed in her neighbourhood. It didn't take long for Harry's visits to become an open secret among the residents. As one of Meghan's neighbours said, "When a black SUV was parked with guys inside wearing headsets and eating burritos, we'd say, 'Hey, Harry's in town!' " But the news never went further than the community Facebook page, typically devoted to discussions about shovelling snow and dog poop.

One night late in October in Toronto, Harry was happy, and so was Meghan. Until they received a call from one of Harry's aides at Kensington Palace. It wasn't good news.

A tabloid was going to run with the story of their relationship. Their main worry was that her place would be besieged by photographers within 24 hours. They had a little time to think, because there were only a couple of paparazzi in Toronto. (One of them had already texted Meghan to ask if the news was true; she didn't reply.) But it wouldn't be long before photographers flew in from New York and LA, all hoping to get that first picture of the happy couple. Another media outlet had also confirmed their pairing and knew that they were together in Toronto, but agreed with the Palace to hold off reporting the news until Harry had returned home.

Harry's phone wouldn't stop pinging with word from the Palace. Aides suggested it would be best for Harry to cut his trip short and quietly return to London, his minimal security now something of an issue. But the prince wasn't having it. He wasn't budging.

The following day Meghan felt somewhat bittersweet about the situation. On the one hand, she was disappointed that their secret was out. It was no longer just the two of them. While Meghan, before she met Harry, had occasionally set up a paparazzi photo here and there or let info slip out to the press, she did everything in her power to protect the privacy of her relationship with the prince. She knew that keeping things quiet meant that they could get to know each other without pressure or further worries that came from reporters covering and commenting on their burgeoning romance.

But there was also a part of her that was relieved. She had struggled to keep the secret from friends and colleagues (only a handful of castmates and production staff at *Suits* knew) and didn't like lying about the purpose of her trips to London.

Harry knew this day was "inevitable" and had told Meghan as much soon after they met so they could, he explained, "make the most of this time we have". Of course, Meghan couldn't really understand what it would mean to be famous on the level Harry had been for his entire life. "We were very quietly dating for about six months before it became news," Meghan said later. "And right out of the gate it was surprising the way things changed."

After they were outed, Meghan received close to 100 messages in 24 hours from people she hadn't spoken to in months, even years. Everyone wanted to know: is the news true?

Universal Cable, *Suits*'s production company, provided security to escort Meghan to and from the studio. But the paparazzi quickly became familiar with her daily routines. Prior to meeting Harry, the only times she experienced cameras were on a set or a red carpet. The security was necessary. Shortly after the news broke, a photographer from an LA-based photo agency had scaled the fence into her back garden and waited for Meghan by her car, hoping to get a picture before she headed out to run errands. Meghan was terrified and called the police. "This is how it's always going to be, isn't it?" she said to a friend.

Race, snobbery — Harry's fallouts with his own circle

When their relationship was revealed, some took to Meghan's Twitter and Instagram accounts to express racist feelings that were anything but subtle, including calling her the n-word or a "mutt". Members of the royal family had dated and married commoners, but no senior royal member, apart from Princess Diana post-divorce, had ever publicly dated anyone who was not white. This was a first.

Harry was incandescent with rage. For the prince, Meghan was his personal introduction to the ugliness of racism. While it might have been new territory for Harry, bias — both unconscious and intentional — had always been a part of Meghan's life.

When he first started seeing her, Harry, sensitive to even the slightest hint of prejudice, had fallouts within his own circle. When some questioned his new relationship, and whether she was suitable, he would wonder, "Is this about race? Is it snobbery?" An old friend of Harry's spent an afternoon gossiping about Meghan, making disparaging remarks about her Hollywood background. Word got back to Harry, and the prince immediately cut him off. If he was willing to confront those close to him, when it came to the media, Harry was poised for outright war.

Meghan's mother, Doria, was under constant siege. When a tabloid published a set of unflattering photos showing her on her way to the laundromat, pushing the narrative of a struggling woman in a rough part of LA, Meghan remained silent publicly. But behind the scenes she was in tears. Worried he might lose her, he frantically tried to protect her.

When Harry decided to make an official statement, the only stumbling block was Prince Charles. On a diplomatic tour in the Middle East, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall had just arrived in Bahrain to meet the country's King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. It was a critical moment that had been in the works for months. A statement from Kensington Palace condemning the press and, in the same breath, confirming Harry's new girlfriend would all but eliminate coverage of Prince Charles's tour of the Gulf.

The Palace decided to go ahead with the statement nonetheless, much of which was drafted by Harry himself. Charles learnt of it just 20 minutes before it went out. Sure enough, as soon as Harry put out his declaration, the statement dominated the news cycle. The team at Clarence House, which had spent months putting together Prince Charles's tour in the hopes that it would be covered significantly, was crushed. While disappointed that his son didn't wait for him to come back, Charles also understood that the situation with Meghan had reached a tipping point. Harry had felt the need to prioritise the woman he loved over duty to the greater royal family.