

RED,

ROYAL
BLUE



a novel

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RED

ROYAL



CASEY McCUISTIN

On the White House roof, tucked into a corner of the Promenade, there's a bit of loose paneling right on the edge of the Solarium. If you tap it just right, you can peel it back enough to find a message etched underneath, with the tip of a key or maybe a stolen West Wing letter opener.

In the secret history of First Families—an insular gossip mill sworn to absolute discretion about most things on pain of death—there's no definite answer for who wrote it. The one thing people seem certain of is that only a presidential son or daughter would have been daring enough to deface the White House. Some swear it was Jack Ford, with his Hendrix records and split-level room attached to the roof for late-night smoke breaks. Others say it was a young Luci Johnson, thick ribbon in her hair. But it doesn't matter. The writing stays, a private mantra for those resourceful enough to find it.

Alex discovered it within his first week of living there. He's never told anyone how.

It says:

RULE #1: DON'T GET CAUGHT

The East and West Bedrooms on the second floor are generally reserved for the First Family. They were first designated as one giant state bedroom for visits from the Marquis de Lafayette in the Monroe administration, but eventually they were split. Alex has the East, across from the Treaty Room, and June uses the West, next to the elevator.

Growing up in Texas, their rooms were arranged in the same configuration, on either side of the hallway. Back then, you could tell June's ambition of the month by what covered the walls. At twelve, it was watercolor paintings. At fifteen, lunar calendars and charts of crystals. At sixteen, clippings from *The Atlantic*, a UT Austin pennant, Gloria Steinem, Zora Neale Hurston, and excerpts from the papers of Dolores Huerta.

His own room was forever the same, just steadily more stuffed with lacrosse trophies and piles of AP coursework. It's all gathering dust in the house they still keep back home. On a chain around his neck, always hidden from view, he's worn the key to that house since the day he left for DC.

Now, straight across the hall, June's room is all bright white and soft pink and minty green, photographed by *Vogue* and famously inspired by old '60s interior design periodicals she found in one of the White House sitting

rooms. His own room was once Caroline Kennedy's nursery and, later, warranting some sage burning from June, Nancy Reagan's office. He's left up the nature field illustrations in a neat symmetrical grid above the sofa, but painted over Sasha Obama's pink walls with a deep blue.

Typically, the children of the president, at least for the past few decades, haven't lived in the Residence beyond eighteen, but Alex started at Georgetown the January his mom was sworn in, and logistically, it made sense not to split their security or costs to whatever one-bedroom apartment he'd be living in. June came that fall, fresh out of UT. She's never said it, but Alex knows she moved in to keep an eye on him. She knows better than anyone else how much he gets off on being this close to the action, and she's bodily yanked him out of the West Wing on more than one occasion.

Behind his bedroom door, he can sit and put Hall & Oates on the record player in the corner, and nobody hears him humming along like his dad to "Rich Girl." He can wear the reading glasses he always insists he doesn't need. He can make as many meticulous study guides with color-coded sticky notes as he wants. He's not going to be the youngest elected congressman in modern history without earning it, but nobody needs to know how hard he's kicking underwater. His sex-symbol stock would plummet.

"Hey," says a voice at the door, and he looks up from his laptop to see June edging into his room, two iPhones and a stack of magazines tucked under one arm, and a plate in her hand. She closes the door behind her with her foot.

"What'd you steal today?" Alex asks, pushing the pile of papers on his bed out of her way.

"Assorted donuts," June says as she climbs up. She's wearing a pencil skirt with pointy pink flats, and he can already see next week's fashion columns: a picture of her outfit today, a lead-in for some sponcon about flats for the professional gal on the go.

He wonders what she's been up to all day. She mentioned a column for *WaPo*, or was it a photoshoot for her blog? Or both? He can never keep up.

She's dumped her stack of magazines out on the bedspread and is already busying herself with them.

"Doing your part to keep the great American gossip industry alive?"

"That's what my journalism degree's for," June says.

"Anything good this week?" Alex asks, reaching for a donut.

“Let’s see,” June says. “*In Touch* says I’m ... dating a French model?”

“Are you?”

“I wish.” She flips a few pages. “Ooh, and they’re saying you got your asshole bleached.”

“That one is true,” Alex says through a mouthful of chocolate with sprinkles.

“Thought so,” June says without looking up. After riffling through most of the magazine, she shuffles it to the bottom of the stack and moves on to *People*. She flips through absently—*People* only ever writes what their publicists tell it to write. Boring. “Not much on us this week ... oh, I’m a crossword puzzle clue.”

Following their tabloid coverage is something of an idle hobby of hers, one that in turns amuses and annoys their mother, and Alex is narcissistic enough to let June read him the highlights. They’re usually either complete fabrications or lines fed from their press team, but sometimes it’s just funny. Given the choice, he’d rather read one of the hundreds of glowing pieces of fan fiction about him on the internet, the up-to-eleven version of himself with devastating charm and unbelievable physical stamina, but June flat-out refuses to read those aloud to him, no matter how much he tries to bribe her.

“Do *Us Weekly*,” Alex says.

“Hmm...” June digs it out of the stack. “Oh, look, we made the cover this week.”

She flashes the glossy cover at him, which has a photo of the two of them inlaid in one corner, June’s hair pinned on top of her head and Alex looking slightly over-served but still handsome, all jawline and dark curls. Below it in bold yellow letters, the headline reads: FIRST SIBLINGS’ WILD NYC NIGHT.

“Oh yeah, that was a wild night,” Alex says, reclining back against the tall leather headboard and pushing his glasses up his nose. “Two whole keynote speakers. Nothing sexier than shrimp cocktails and an hour and a half of speeches on carbon emissions.”

“It says here you had some kind of tryst with a ‘mystery brunette,’” June reads. “‘Though the First Daughter was whisked off by limousine to a star-studded party shortly after the gala, twenty-one-year-old heartthrob Alex was snapped sneaking into the W Hotel to meet a mystery brunette in the presidential suite and leaving around four a.m. Sources inside the hotel reported hearing amorous noises from the room all night, and rumors are swirling the brunette was none other than ... *Nora Holleran*, the twenty-

two-year-old granddaughter of Vice President Mike Holleran and third member of the White House Trio. Could it be the two are rekindling their romance?”

“Yes!” Alex crows, and June groans. “That’s less than a month! You owe me fifty dollars, baby.”

“Hold on. *Was* it Nora?”

Alex thinks back to the week before, showing up at Nora’s room with a bottle of champagne. Their thing on the campaign trail a million years ago was brief, mostly to get the inevitable over with. They were seventeen and eighteen and doomed from the start, both convinced they were the smartest person in any room. Alex has since conceded Nora is 100 percent smarter than him and definitely too smart to have ever dated him.

It’s not his fault the press won’t let it go, though; that they *love* the idea of them together as if they’re modern-day Kennedys. So, if he and Nora occasionally get drunk in hotel rooms together watching *The West Wing* and making loud moaning noises at the wall for the benefit of nosy tabloids, he can’t be blamed, really. They’re simply turning an undesirable situation into their own personal entertainment.

Scamming his sister is also a perk.

“Maybe,” he says, dragging out the vowels.

June swats him with the magazine like he’s an especially obnoxious cockroach. “That’s cheating, you dick!”

“Bet’s a bet,” Alex tells her. “We said if there was a new rumor in a month, you’d owe me fifty bucks. I take Venmo.”

“I’m not paying,” June huffs. “I’m gonna kill her when we see her tomorrow. What are you wearing, by the way?”

“For what?”

“The wedding.”

“Whose wedding?”

“Uh, the *royal wedding*,” June says. “Of England. It’s literally on every cover I just showed you.”

She holds *Us Weekly* up again, and this time Alex notices the main story in giant letters: PRINCE PHILIP SAYS I DO! Along with a photograph of an extremely nondescript British heir and his equally nondescript blond fiancée smiling blandly.

He drops his donut in a show of devastation. “That’s *this* weekend?”

“Alex, we leave in the morning,” June tells him. “We’ve got two appearances before we even go to the ceremony. I can’t believe Zahra hasn’t climbed up your ass about this already.”

“Shit,” he groans. “I know I had that written down. I got sidetracked.”

“What, by conspiring with my best friend against me in the tabloids for fifty dollars?”

“No, with my research paper, smart-ass,” Alex says, gesturing dramatically at his piles of notes. “I’ve been working on it for Roman Political Thought all week. And I thought we agreed Nora is *our* best friend.”

“That can’t possibly be a real class you’re taking,” June says. “Is it possible you willfully forgot about the biggest international event of the year because you don’t want to see your archnemesis?”

“June, I’m the son of the President of the United States. Prince Henry is a figurehead of the British Empire. You can’t just call him my ‘archnemesis,’” Alex says. He returns to his donut, chewing thoughtfully, and adds, “‘Archnemesis’ implies he’s actually a rival to me on any level and not, you know, a stuck-up product of inbreeding who probably jerks off to photos of himself.”

“Woof.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Well, you don’t have to like him, you just have to put on a happy face and not cause an international incident at his brother’s wedding.”

“Bug, when do I ever not put on a happy face?” Alex says. He pulls a painfully fake grin, and June looks satisfyingly repulsed.

“Ugh. Anyway, you know what you’re wearing, right?”

“Yeah, I picked it out and had Zahra approve it last month. I’m not an animal.”

“I’m still not sure about my dress,” June says. She leans over and steals his laptop away from him, ignoring his noise of protest. “Do you think the maroon or the one with the lace?”

“Lace, obviously. It’s England. And why are you trying to make me fail this class?” he says, reaching for his laptop only to have his hand swatted away. “Go curate your Instagram or something. You’re the worst.”

“Shut up, I’m trying to pick something to watch. Ew, you have *Garden State* on your watch list? Wow, how’s film school in 2005 going?”

“I hate you.”

“Hmm, I know.”

Outside his window, the wind stirs up over the lawn, rustling the linden trees down in the garden. The record on the turntable in the corner has spun out into fuzzy silence. He rolls off the bed and flips it, resetting the needle, and the second side picks up on “London Luck, & Love.”

If he’s honest, private aviation doesn’t really get old, not even three years into his mother’s term.

He doesn’t get to travel this way a lot, but when he does, it’s hard not to let it go to his head. He was born in the hill country of Texas to the daughter of a single mother and the son of Mexican immigrants, all of them dirt poor—luxury travel is still a luxury.

Fifteen years ago, when his mother first ran for the House, the Austin newspaper gave her a nickname: the Lometa Longshot. She’d escaped her tiny hometown in the shadow of Fort Hood, pulled night shifts at diners to put herself through law school, and was arguing discrimination cases before the Supreme Court by thirty. She was the last thing anybody expected to rise up out of Texas in the midst of the Iraq War: a strawberry-blond, whip-smart Democrat with high heels, an unapologetic drawl, and a little biracial family.

So, it’s still surreal that Alex is cruising somewhere over the Atlantic, snacking on pistachios in a high-backed leather chair with his feet up. Nora is bent over the *New York Times* crossword opposite him, brown curls falling across her forehead. Beside her, the hulking Secret Service agent Cassius—Cash for short—holds his own copy in one giant hand, racing to finish it first. The cursor on Alex’s Roman Political Thought paper blinks expectantly at him from his laptop, but something in him can’t quite focus on school while they’re flying transatlantic.

Amy, his mother’s favorite Secret Service agent, a former Navy SEAL who is rumored around DC to have killed several men, sits across the aisle. She’s got a bulletproof titanium case of crafting supplies open on the couch next to her and is serenely embroidering flowers onto a napkin. Alex has seen her stab someone in the kneecap with a very similar embroidery needle.

Which leaves June, next to him, leaning on one elbow with her nose buried in the issue of *People* she’s inexplicably brought with them. She always chooses the most bizarre reading material for flights. Last time, it

was a battered old Cantonese phrase book. Before that, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

“What are you reading in there now?” Alex asks her.

She flips the magazine around so he can see the double-page spread titled: ROYAL WEDDING MADNESS! Alex groans. This is definitely worse than Willa Cather.

“What?” she says. “I want to be prepared for my first-ever royal wedding.”

“You went to prom, didn’t you?” Alex says. “Just picture that, only in hell, and you have to be really nice about it.”

“Can you believe they spent \$75,000 just on the cake?”

“That’s depressing.”

“*And* apparently Prince Henry is going sans date to the wedding and everyone is freaking out about it. It says he was,” she affects a comical English accent, “‘rumored to be dating a Belgian heiress last month, but now followers of the prince’s dating life aren’t sure what to think.’”

Alex snorts. It’s insane to him that there are legions of people who follow the intensely dull dating lives of the royal siblings. He understands why people care where he puts his own tongue—at least *he* has personality.

“Maybe the female population of Europe finally realized he’s as compelling as a wet ball of yarn,” Alex suggests.

Nora puts down her crossword puzzle, having finished it first. Cassius glances over and swears. “You gonna ask him to dance, then?”

Alex rolls his eyes, suddenly imagining twirling around a ballroom while Henry drones sweet nothings about croquet and fox hunting in his ear. The thought makes him want to gag.

“In his dreams.”

“Aw,” Nora says, “you’re blushing.”

“Listen,” Alex tells her, “royal weddings are trash, the princes who have royal weddings are trash, the imperialism that allows princes to exist at all is trash. It’s trash turtles all the way down.”

“Is this your TED Talk?” June asks. “You do realize America is a genocidal empire too, right?”

“Yes, *June*, but at least we have the decency not to keep a monarchy around,” Alex says, throwing a pistachio at her.

There are a few things about Alex and June that new White House hires are briefed on before they start. June’s peanut allergy. Alex’s frequent

middle-of-the-night requests for coffee. June's college boyfriend, who broke up with her when he moved to California but is still the only person whose letters come to her directly. Alex's long-standing grudge against the youngest prince.

It's not a grudge, really. It's not even a rivalry. It's a prickling, unsettling annoyance. It makes his palms sweat.

The tabloids—the world—decided to cast Alex as the American equivalent of Prince Henry from day one, since the White House Trio is the closest thing America has to royalty. It has never seemed fair. Alex's image is all charisma and genius and smirking wit, thoughtful interviews and the cover of *GQ* at eighteen; Henry's is placid smiles and gentle chivalry and generic charity appearances, a perfectly blank Prince Charming canvas. Henry's role, Alex thinks, is much easier to play.

Maybe it is technically a rivalry. Whatever.

"All right, MIT," he says, "what are the numbers on this one?"

Nora grins. "Hmm." She pretends to think hard about it. "Risk assessment: FSOTUS failing to check himself before he wrecks himself will result in greater than five hundred civilian casualties. Ninety-eight percent probability of Prince Henry looking like a total dreamboat. Seventy-eight percent probability of Alex getting himself banned from the United Kingdom forever."

"Those are better odds than I expected," June observes.

Alex laughs, and the plane soars on.

London is an absolute spectacle, crowds cramming the streets outside Buckingham Palace and all through the city, draped in Union Jacks and waving tiny flags over their heads. There are commemorative royal wedding souvenirs everywhere; Prince Philip and his bride's face plastered on everything from chocolate bars to underwear. Alex almost can't believe this many people care so passionately about something so comprehensively dull. He's sure there won't be this kind of turnout in front of the White House when he or June get married one day, nor would he even want it.

The ceremony itself seems to last forever, but it's at least sort of nice, in a way. It's not that Alex isn't into love or can't appreciate marriage. It's just that Martha is a perfectly respectable daughter of nobility, and Philip is a prince. It's as sexy as a business transaction. There's no passion, no drama. Alex's kind of love story is much more Shakespearean.

It feels like years before he's settled at a table between June and Nora inside a Buckingham Palace ballroom for the reception banquet, and he's irritated enough to be a little reckless. Nora passes him a flute of champagne, and he takes it gladly.

"Do either of y'all know what a viscount is?" June is saying, halfway through a cucumber sandwich. "I've met, like, five of them, and I keep smiling politely as if I know what it means when they say it. Alex, you took comparative international governmental relational things. Whatever. What are they?"

"I think it's that thing when a vampire creates an army of crazed sex waifs and starts his own ruling body," he says.

"That sounds right," Nora says. She's folding her napkin into a complicated shape on the table, her shiny black manicure glinting in the chandelier light.

"I wish I were a viscount," June says. "I could have my sex waifs deal with my emails."

"Are sex waifs good with professional correspondence?" Alex asks.

Nora's napkin has begun to resemble a bird. "I think it could be an interesting approach. Their emails would be all tragic and wanton." She tries on a breathless, husky voice. "'Oh, please, I beg you, take me—take me to lunch to discuss fabric samples, you beast!'"

"Could be weirdly effective," Alex notes.

"Something is wrong with both of you," June says gently.

Alex is opening his mouth to retort when a royal attendant materializes at their table like a dense and dour-looking ghost in a bad hairpiece.

"Miss Claremont-Diaz," says the man, who looks like his name is probably Reginald or Bartholomew or something. He bows, and miraculously his hairpiece doesn't fall off into June's plate. Alex shares an incredulous glance with her behind his back. "His Royal Highness Prince Henry wonders if you would do him the honor of accompanying him for a dance."

June's mouth freezes halfway open, caught on a soft vowel sound, and Nora breaks out into a shit-eating grin.

"Oh, she'd *love* to," Nora volunteers. "She's been hoping he'd ask all evening."

"I—" June starts and stops, her mouth smiling even as her eyes slice at Nora. "Of course. That would be lovely."

“Excellent,” Reginald-Bartholomew says, and he turns and gestures over his shoulder.

And there Henry is, in the flesh, as classically handsome as ever in his tailored three-piece suit, all tousled sandy hair and high cheekbones and a soft, friendly mouth. He holds himself with innately impeccable posture, as if he emerged fully formed and upright out of some beautiful Buckingham Palace posy garden one day.

His eyes lock on Alex’s, and something like annoyance or adrenaline spikes in Alex’s chest. He hasn’t had a conversation with Henry in probably a year. His face is still infuriatingly symmetrical.

Henry deigns to give him a perfunctory nod, as if he’s any other random guest, not the person he beat to a *Vogue* editorial debut in their teens. Alex blinks, seethes, and watches Henry angle his stupid chiseled jaw toward June.

“Hello, June,” Henry says, and he extends a gentlemanly hand to June, who is now blushing. Nora pretends to swoon. “Do you know how to waltz?”

“I’m ... sure I could pick it up,” she says, and she takes his hand cautiously, like she thinks he might be pranking her, which Alex thinks is way too generous to Henry’s sense of humor. Henry leads her off to the crowd of twirling nobles.

“So is that what’s happening now?” Alex says, glaring down at Nora’s napkin bird. “Has he decided to finally shut me up by wooing my sister?”

“Aw, little buddy,” Nora says. She reaches over and pats his hand. “It’s cute how you think everything is about you.”

“It should be, honestly.”

“That’s the spirit.”

He glances up into the crowd, where June is being rotated around the floor by Henry. She’s got a neutral, polite smile on her face, and he keeps looking over her shoulder, which is even more annoying. June is amazing. The least Henry could do is pay attention to her.

“Do you think he actually likes her, though?”

Nora shrugs. “Who knows? Royals are weird. Might be a courtesy, or—oh, there it is.”

A royal photographer has swooped in and is snapping a shot of them dancing, one Alex knows will be leaked to *Hello* next week. So, that’s it,

then? Using the First Daughter to start some idiotic dating rumor for attention? God forbid Philip gets to dominate the news cycle for one week.

“He’s kind of good at this,” Nora remarks.

Alex flags down a waiter and decides to spend the rest of the reception getting systematically drunk.

Alex has never told—will never tell—anyone, but he saw Henry for the first time when he was twelve years old. He only ever reflects upon it when he’s drunk.

He’s sure he saw his face in the news before then, but that was the first time he really *saw* him. June had just turned fifteen and used part of her birthday money to buy an issue of a blindingly colorful teen magazine. Her love of trashy tabloids started early. In the center of the magazine were miniature posters you could rip out and stick up in your locker. If you were careful and pried up the staples with your fingernails, you could get them out without tearing them. One of them, right in the middle, was a picture of a boy.

He had thick, tawny hair and big blue eyes, a warm smile, and a cricket bat over one shoulder. It must have been a candid, because there was a happy, sun-bright confidence to him that couldn’t be posed. On the bottom corner of the page in pink and blue letters: PRINCE HENRY.

Alex still doesn’t really know what kept drawing him back, only that he would sneak into June’s room and find the page and touch his fingertips to the boy’s hair, as if he could somehow feel its texture if he imagined it hard enough. The more his parents climbed the political ranks, the more he started to reckon with the fact that soon the world would know who he was. Then, sometimes, he’d think of the picture, and try to harness Prince Henry’s easy confidence.

(He also thought about prying up the staples with his fingers and taking the picture out and keeping it in his room, but he never did. His fingernails were too stubby; they weren’t made for it like June’s, like a girl’s.)

But then came the first time he met Henry—the first cool, detached words Henry said to him—and Alex guessed he had it all wrong, that the pretty, flung-open boy from the picture wasn’t real. The real Henry is beautiful, distant, boring, and closed. This person the tabloids keep comparing him to, whom he compares *himself* to, thinks he’s *better* than Alex and everyone like him. Alex can’t believe he ever wanted to be anything like that.

Alex keeps drinking, keeps alternating between thinking about it and forcing himself not to think about it, disappears into the crowd and dances with pretty European heiresses about it.

He's pirouetting away from one when he catches sight of a lone figure hovering near the cake and the champagne fountain. It's Prince Henry yet again, glass in hand, watching Prince Philip and his bride spinning on the ballroom floor. He looks politely half-interested in that obnoxious way of his, like he has somewhere else to be. And Alex can't resist the urge to call his bluff.

He picks his way through the crowd, grabbing a glass of wine off a passing tray and downing half of it.

"When you have one of these," Alex says, sidling up to him, "you should do two champagne fountains instead of one. Really embarrassing to be at a wedding with only one champagne fountain."

"Alex," Henry says in that maddeningly posh accent. Up close, the waistcoat under his suit jacket is a lush gold and has about a million buttons on it. It's horrible. "I wondered if I'd have the pleasure."

"Looks like it's your lucky day," Alex says, smiling.

"Truly a momentous occasion," Henry agrees. His own smile is bright white and immaculate, made to be printed on money.

The most annoying thing of all is Alex *knows* Henry hates him too—he *must*, they're naturally mutual antagonists—but he refuses to outright act like it. Alex is intimately aware politics involves a lot of making nice with people you loathe, but he wishes that once, just once, Henry would act like an actual human and not some polished little windup toy sold in a palace gift shop.

He's too perfect. Alex wants to poke it.

"Do you ever get tired," Alex says, "of pretending you're above all this?"

Henry turns and stares at him. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"I mean, you're out here, getting the photographers to chase you, swanning around like you hate the attention, which you clearly don't since you're dancing with my sister, of all people," Alex says. "You act like you're too important to be anywhere, ever. Doesn't that get exhausting?"

"I'm ... a bit more complicated than that," Henry attempts.

"Ha."

"Oh," Henry says, narrowing his eyes. "You're drunk."

“I’m just saying,” Alex says, resting an overly friendly elbow on Henry’s shoulder, which isn’t as easy as he’d like it to be since Henry has about four infuriating inches of height on him. “You could try to act like you’re having fun. Occasionally.”

Henry laughs ruefully. “I believe perhaps you should consider switching to water, Alex.”

“Should I?” Alex says. He pushes aside the thought that maybe the wine is what gave him the nerve to stomp over to Henry in the first place and makes his eyes as coy and angelic as he knows how. “Am I offending you? Sorry I’m not obsessed with you like everyone else. I know that must be confusing for you.”

“Do you know what?” Henry says. “I think you are.”

Alex’s mouth drops open, while the corner of Henry’s turns smug and almost a little mean.

“Only a thought,” Henry says, tone polite. “Have you ever noticed I have never once approached you and have been *exhaustively* civil every time we’ve spoken? Yet here you are, seeking me out again.” He takes a sip of his champagne. “Simply an observation.”

“What? I’m not—” Alex stammers. “You’re the—”

“Have a lovely evening, Alex,” Henry says tersely, and turns to walk off.

It drives Alex *nuts* that Henry thinks he gets to have the last word, and without thinking, he reaches out and pulls Henry’s shoulder back.

And then Henry turns, suddenly, and almost does push Alex off him this time, and for a brief spark of a moment, Alex is impressed at the glint in his eyes, the abrupt burst of an actual personality.

The next thing he knows, he’s tripping over his own foot and stumbling backward into the table nearest him. He notices too late that the table is, to his horror, the one bearing the massive eight-tier wedding cake, and he grabs for Henry’s arm to catch himself, but all it does is throw both of them off-balance and send them crashing together into the cake stand.

He watches, as if in slow motion, as the cake leans, teeters, shudders, and finally tips. There’s absolutely nothing he can do to stop it. It comes crashing down onto the floor in an avalanche of white buttercream, some kind of sugary \$75,000 nightmare.

The room goes heart-stoppingly silent as momentum carries him and Henry through the fall and down, down onto the wreckage of the cake on

the ornate carpet, Henry's sleeve still clutched in Alex's fist. Henry's glass of champagne has spilled all over both of them and shattered, and out of the corner of his eye, Alex can see a cut across the top of Henry's cheekbone beginning to bleed.

For a second, all he can think as he stares up at the ceiling while covered in frosting and champagne is that at least Henry's dance with June won't be the biggest story to come out of the royal wedding.

His next thought is that his mother is going to murder him in cold blood.

Beside him, he hears Henry mutter slowly, "Oh my fucking Christ."

He registers dimly that it's the first time he's ever heard the prince swear, before the flash from someone's camera goes off.

TWO

With a resounding smack, Zahra slaps a stack of magazines down on the West Wing briefing room table.

“This is just what I saw on the way here this morning,” she says. “I don’t think I need to remind you I live two blocks away.”

Alex stares down at the headlines in front of him.

THE \$75,000 STUMBLE

BATTLE ROYAL: Prince Henry and FSOTUS Come to Blows at Royal Wedding

CAKEGATE: Alex Claremont-Diaz Sparks Second English-American War

Each one is accompanied by a photo of himself and Henry flat on their backs in a pile of cake, Henry’s ridiculous suit all askew and covered in smashed buttercream flowers, his wrist pinned in Alex’s hand, a thin slice of red across Henry’s cheek.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t be in the Situation Room for this meeting?” Alex attempts.

Neither Zahra nor his mother, sitting across the table, seems to find it funny. The president gives him a withering look over the top of her reading glasses, and he clamps his mouth shut.

It’s not exactly that he’s afraid of Zahra, his mom’s deputy chief of staff and right-hand woman. She has a spiky exterior, but Alex swears there’s something soft in there somewhere. He’s more afraid of what his mother might do. They grew up made to talk about their feelings a lot, and then his mother became president, and life became less about feelings and more about international relations. He’s not sure which option spells a worse fate.

“‘Sources inside the royal reception report the two were seen arguing minutes before the ... *cake-tastrophe*,’” Ellen reads out loud with utter disdain from her own copy of *The Sun*. Alex doesn’t even try to guess how she got her hands on today’s edition of a British tabloid. President Mom works in mysterious ways. “‘But royal family insiders claim the First Son’s feud with Henry has raged for years. A source tells *The Sun* that Henry and the First Son have been at odds ever since their first meeting at the Rio Olympics, and the animosity has only grown—these days, they can’t even

be in the same room with each other. It seems it was only a matter of time before Alex took the American approach: a violent altercation.”

“I really don’t think you can call tripping over a table a ‘violent’—”

“Alexander,” Ellen says, her tone eerily calm. “Shut up.”

He does.

“‘One can’t help but wonder,’” Ellen reads on, “‘if the bitterness between these two powerful sons has contributed to what many have called an icy and distant relationship between President Ellen Claremont’s administration and the monarchy in recent years.’”

She tosses the magazine aside, folding her arms on the table.

“Please, tell me another joke,” Ellen says. “I want so badly for you to explain to me how this is funny.”

Alex opens his mouth and closes it a couple of times.

“He started it,” he says finally. “I barely touched him—he’s the one who pushed me, and I only grabbed him to try and catch my balance, and—”

“Sugar, I cannot express to you how much the press does not give a fuck about who started what,” Ellen says. “As your mother, I can appreciate that maybe this isn’t your fault, but as the president, all I want is to have the CIA fake your death and ride the dead-kid sympathy into a second term.”

Alex clenches his jaw. He’s used to doing things that piss his mother’s staff off—in his teens, he had a penchant for confronting his mother’s colleagues with their voting discrepancies at friendly DC fund-raisers—and he’s been in the tabloids for things more embarrassing than this. But never in quite such a cataclysmically, internationally terrible way.

“I don’t have time to deal with this right now, so here’s what we’re gonna do,” Ellen says, pulling a folder out of her padfolio. It’s filled with some official-looking documents punctuated with different colors of sticky tabs, and the first one says: AGREEMENT OF TERMS.

“Um,” Alex says.

“You,” she says, “are going to make nice with Henry. You’re leaving Saturday and spending Sunday in England.”

Alex blinks. “Is it too late to take the faking-my-death option?”

“Zahra can brief you on the rest,” Ellen goes on, ignoring him. “I have about five hundred meetings right now.” She gets up and heads for the door, stopping to kiss her hand and press it to the top of his head. “You’re a dumbass. Love you.”

Then she's gone, heels clicking behind her down the hallway, and Zahra settles into her vacated chair with a look on her face like she'd prefer arranging his death for real. She's not technically the most powerful or important player in his mother's White House, but she's been working by Ellen's side since Alex was five and Zahra was fresh out of Howard. She's the only one trusted to wrangle the First Family.

"All right, here's the deal," she says. "I was up all night conferencing with a bunch of uptight royal handlers and PR pricks and the prince's fucking *equerry* to make this happen, so you are going to follow this plan to the letter and not fuck it up, got it?"

Alex still privately thinks this whole thing is completely ridiculous, but he nods. Zahra looks deeply unconvinced but presses on.

"First, the White House and the monarchy are going to release a joint statement saying what happened at the royal wedding was a complete accident and a misunderstanding—"

"Which it was."

"—and that, despite rarely having time to see each other, you and Prince Henry have been close personal friends for the past several years."

"We're *what*?"

"Look," Zahra says, taking a drag from her massive stainless steel thermos of coffee. "Both sides need to come out of this looking good, and the only way to do that is to make it look like your little slap-fight at the wedding was some homoerotic frat bro mishap, okay? So, you can hate the heir to the throne all you want, write mean poems about him in your diary, but the minute you see a camera, you act like the sun shines out of his dick, and you make it convincing."

"Have you met Henry?" Alex says. "How am I supposed to do that? He has the personality of a cabbage."

"Are you really not understanding how much I don't care at all how you feel about this?" Zahra says. "This is what's happening so your stupid ass doesn't distract the entire country from your mother's reelection campaign. Do you want her to have to get up on the debate stage next year and explain to the world why her son is trying to destabilize America's European relationships?"

Well, no, he doesn't. And he knows, in the back of his mind, that he's a better strategist than he's been about this, and that without this stupid grudge, he probably could have come up with this plan on his own.

“So Henry’s your new best friend,” Zahra continues. “You will smile and nod and not piss off anyone while you and Henry spend the weekend doing charity appearances and talking to the press about how much you love each other’s company. If somebody asks about him, I want to hear you gush like he’s your fucking prom date.”

She slides him a page of bulleted lists and tables of data so elaborately organized he could have made it himself. It’s labeled: HRH PRINCE HENRY FACT SHEET.

“You’re going to memorize this so if anybody tries to catch you in a lie, you know what to say,” she says. Under HOBBIES, it lists polo and competitive yachting. Alex is going to set himself on fire.

“Does he get one of these for me?” Alex asks helplessly.

“Yep. And for the record, making it was one of the most depressing moments of my career.” She slides another page over to him, this one detailing requirements for the weekend.

“Why do I have to go over there? He’s the one who pushed me into the stupid cake—shouldn’t he have to come here and go on *SNL* with me or something?”

“Because it was the *royal wedding* you ruined, and *they’re* the ones out seventy-five grand,” Zahra says. “Besides, we’re arranging his presence at a state dinner in a few months. He’s not any more excited about this than you are.”

Alex pinches the bridge of his nose where a stress headache is already percolating. “I have class.”

“You’ll be back by Sunday night, DC time,” Zahra tells him. “You won’t miss anything.”

“So there’s really no way I’m getting out of this?”

“Nope.”

Alex presses his lips together. He needs a list.

When he was a kid, he used to hide pages and pages of loose leaf paper covered in messy, loopy handwriting under the worn denim cushion of the window seat in the house in Austin. Rambling treatises on the role of government in America with all the *Gs* written backward, paragraphs

translated from English to Spanish, tables of his elementary school classmates' strengths and weaknesses. And lists. Lots of lists. The lists help.

So: Reasons this is a good idea.

One. His mother needs good press.

Two. Having a shitty record on foreign relations definitely won't help his career.

Three. Free trip to Europe.

"Okay," he says, taking the file. "I'll do it. But I won't have any fun."

"God, I hope not."

The White House Trio is, officially, the nickname for Alex, June, and Nora coined by *People* shortly before the inauguration. In actuality, it was carefully tested with focus groups by the White House press team and fed directly to *People*. Politics—calculating, even in hashtags.

Before the Claremonts, the Kennedys and Clintons shielded the First Offspring from the press, giving them the privacy to go through awkward phases and organic childhood experiences and everything else. Sasha and Malia were hounded and picked apart by the press before they were out of high school. The White House Trio got ahead of the narrative before anyone could do the same.

It was a bold new plan: three attractive, bright, charismatic, marketable millennials—Alex and Nora are, technically, just past the Gen Z threshold, but the press doesn't find that nearly as catchy. Catchiness sells, coolness sells. Obama was cool. The whole First Family could be cool too; celebrities in their own right. *It's not ideal*, his mother always says, *but it works*.

They're the White House Trio, but here, in the music room on the third floor of the Residence, they're just Alex and June and Nora, naturally glued together since they were teenagers stunting their growth with espresso in the primaries. Alex pushes them. June steadies them. Nora keeps them honest.

They settle into their usual places: June, perched on her heels at the record collection, foraging for some Patsy Cline; Nora, cross-legged on the floor, uncorking a bottle of red wine; Alex, sitting upside down with his feet on the back of the couch, trying to figure out what he's going to do next.

He flips the HRH PRINCE HENRY FACT SHEET over and squints at it. He can feel the blood rushing to his head.

June and Nora are ignoring him, caught in a bubble of intimacy he can never quite penetrate. Their relationship is something enormous and incomprehensible to most people, including Alex on occasion. He knows them both down to their split ends and nasty habits, but there's a strange girl bond between them he can't, and knows he isn't supposed to, translate.

"I thought you were liking the *Post* gig?" Nora says. With a dull pop, she pulls the cork out of the wine and takes a swig directly from the bottle.

"I was," June says. "I mean, I *am*. But, it's not much of a gig. It's, like, one op-ed a month, and half my pitches get shot down for being too close to Mom's platform, and even then, the press team has to read anything political before I turn it in. So it's like, email in these fluff pieces, and know that on the other side of the screen people are doing the most important journalism of their careers, and be okay with that."

"So ... you don't like it, then."

June sighs. She finds the record she's looking for, slides it out of the sleeve. "I don't know what else to *do*, is the thing."

"They wouldn't put you on a beat?" Nora asks her.

"You kidding? They wouldn't even let me in the building," June says. She puts the record on and sets the needle. "What would Reilly and Rebecca say?"

Nora tips her head and laughs. "My parents would say to do what they did: ditch journalism, get really into essential oils, buy a cabin in the Vermont wilderness, and own six hundred LL Bean vests that all smell like patchouli."

"You left out the investing in Apple in the nineties and getting stupid-rich part," June reminds her.

"Details."

June walks over and places her palm on the top of Nora's head, deep in her nest of curls, and leans down to kiss the back of her own fingers. "I'll figure something out."

Nora hands over the bottle, and June takes a pull. Alex heaves a dramatic sigh.

"I can't believe I have to learn this garbage," Alex says. "I *just* finished midterms."

"Look, you're the one who has to fight everything that moves," June says, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, a move she'd only do in front of the two of them. "Including the British monarchy. So, I don't really

feel bad for you. Anyway, he was totally fine when I danced with him. I don't get why you hate him so much."

"I think it's amazing," Nora says. "Sworn enemies forced to make peace to settle tensions between their countries? There's something totally Shakespearean about it."

"Shakespearean in that hopefully I'll get stabbed to death," Alex says. "This sheet says his favorite food is mutton pie. I literally cannot think of a more boring food. He's like a cardboard cutout of a person."

The sheet is filled with things Alex already knew, either from the royal siblings dominating the news cycle or hate-reading Henry's Wikipedia page. He knows about Henry's parentage, about his older siblings Philip and Beatrice, that he studied English literature at Oxford and plays classical piano. The rest is so trivial he can't imagine it'll come up in an interview, but there's no way he'll risk Henry being more prepared.

"Idea," Nora says. "Let's make it a drinking game."

"Ooh, yes," June agrees. "Drink every time Alex gets one right?"

"Drink every time the answer makes you want to puke?" Alex suggests.

"One drink for a correct answer, two drinks for a Prince Henry fact that is legitimately, objectively awful," Nora says. June has already dug two glasses out of the cabinet, and she hands them to Nora, who fills both and keeps the bottle for herself. Alex slides down from the couch to sit on the floor with her.

"Okay," she goes on, taking the sheet out of Alex's hands. "Let's start easy. Parents. Go."

Alex picks up his own glass, already pulling up a mental image of Henry's parents, Catherine's shrewd blue eyes and Arthur's movie-star jaw.

"Mother: Princess Catherine, oldest daughter of Queen Mary, first princess to obtain a doctorate—English literature," he rattles off. "Father: Arthur Fox, beloved English film and stage actor best known for his turn as James Bond in the eighties, deceased 2015. Y'all drink."

They do, and Nora passes the list to June.

"Okay," June says, scanning the list, apparently looking for something more challenging. "Let's see. Dog's name?"

"*David*," Alex says. "He's a beagle. I remember because, like, *who does that?* Who names a dog *David*? He sounds like a tax attorney. Like a dog tax attorney. Drink."

“Best friend’s name, age, and occupation?” Nora asks. “Best friend other than *you*, of course.”

Alex casually gives her the finger. “Percy Okonjo. Goes by Pez or Pezza. Heir to Okonjo Industries, Nigerian company leading Africa in biomedical advancements. Twenty-two, lives in London, met Henry at Eton. Manages the Okonjo Foundation, a humanitarian nonprofit. Drink.”

“Favorite book?”

“Uh,” Alex says. “Um. Fuck. Uh. What’s the one—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Claremont-Diaz, that is incorrect,” June says. “Thank you for playing, but you lose.”

“Come on, what’s the answer?”

June peers down at the list. “This says ... *Great Expectations*?”

Both Nora and Alex groan.

“Do you see what I mean now?” Alex says. “This dude is reading Charles Dickens ... *for pleasure*.”

“I’ll give you this one,” Nora says. “Two drinks!”

“Well, I think—” June says as Nora glugs away. “Guys, it’s kinda nice! I mean, it’s pretentious, but the themes of *Great Expectations* are all like, love is more important than status, and doing what’s right beats money and power. Maybe he relates—” Alex makes a long, loud fart noise. “Y’all are such assholes! He seems really nice!”

“That’s because you are a nerd,” Alex says. “You want to protect those of your own species. It’s a natural instinct.”

“I am helping you with this out of the goodness of my heart,” June says. “I’m on *deadline* right now.”

“Hey, what do you think Zahra put on my fact sheet?”

“Hmm,” Nora says, sucking her teeth. “Favorite summer Olympic sport: rhythmic gymnastics—”

“I’m not ashamed of that.”

“Favorite brand of khakis: Gap.”

“Listen, they look best on my ass. The J. Crew ones wrinkle all weird. And they’re not *khakis*, they’re *chinos*. Khakis are for *white people*.”

“Allergies: dust, Tide laundry detergent, and shutting the fuck up.”

“Age of first filibuster: nine, at SeaWorld San Antonio, trying to force an orca wrangler into early retirement for, quote, ‘inhumane whale practices.’”

“I stood by it then, and I stand by it now.”

June throws her head back and laughs, loud and unguarded, and Nora rolls her eyes, and Alex is glad, at least, that he'll have this to come back to when the nightmare is over.

Alex expects Henry's handler to be some stout storybook Englishman with tails and a top hat, probably a walrus mustache, definitely scurrying to place a velvet footstool at Henry's carriage door.

The person who awaits him and his security team on the tarmac is very much not that. He's a tall thirty-something Indian man in an impeccably tailored suit, roguishly handsome with a neatly trimmed beard, a steaming cup of tea, and a shiny Union Jack on his lapel. Well, okay then.

"Agent Chen," the man says, extending his free hand to Amy. "Hope the flight was smooth."

Amy nods. "As smooth as the third transatlantic flight in a week can be."

The man half-smiles, commiserative. "The Land Rover is for you and your team for the duration."

Amy nods again, releasing his hand, and the man turns his attention to Alex.

"Mr. Claremont-Diaz," he says. "Welcome back to England. Shaan Srivastava, Prince Henry's equerry."

Alex takes his hand and shakes it, feeling a bit like he's in one of Henry's dad's Bond movies. Behind him, an attendant unloads his luggage and carries it off in the direction of a sleek Aston Martin.

"Nice to meet you, Shaan. Not exactly how we thought we'd be spending our weekend, is it?"

"I'm not as surprised at this turn of events as I'd like to be, sir," Shaan says coolly, with an inscrutable smile.

He pulls a small tablet from his jacket and pivots on his heel toward the waiting car. Alex stares at his back, speechless, before hastily refusing to be impressed by a grown man whose job is handling the prince's schedule, no matter how cool he is or how long and smooth his strides are. He shakes his head a little and jogs to catch up, sliding into the back seat as Shaan checks the mirrors.

"Right," Shaan says. "You'll be staying in the guest quarters at Kensington Palace. Tomorrow you'll do the *This Morning* interview at nine

—we’ve arranged for a photo call at the studio. Then it’s children with cancer all afternoon and off you go back to the land of the free.”

“Okay,” Alex says. He very politely does not add, *could be worse*.

“For now,” Shaan says, “you’re to come with me to chauffeur the prince from the stables. One of our photographers will be there to photograph the prince welcoming you to the country, so do try to look pleased to be here.”

Of course, there are *stables* the prince needs to be *chauffeured* from. He was briefly worried he’d been wrong about what the weekend would look like, but this feels a lot more like it.

“If you’ll check the seat pocket in front of you,” Shaan says as he reverses, “there are a few papers for you to sign. Your lawyers have already approved them.” He passes back an expensive-looking black fountain pen.

NONDISCLOSURE AGREEMENT, the top of the first page reads. Alex flips through to the last page—there are at least fifteen pages of text—and a low whistle escapes his lips.

“This is...” Alex says, “a thing you do often?”

“Standard protocol,” Shaan says. “The reputation of the royal family is too valuable to risk.”

This seems ... excessive, like the kind of paperwork you get from some perverted millionaire who wants to hunt you for sport. He wonders what the most mind-numbingly wholesome public figure on earth could possibly have to hide. He hopes it’s not people-hunting.

Alex is no stranger to NDAs, though, so he signs and initials. It’s not like he would have divulged all the boring details of this trip to anyone anyway, except maybe June and Nora.

They pull up to the stables after another fifteen minutes, his security close behind them. The royal stables are, of course, elaborate and well-kept

and about a million miles from the old ranches he's seen out in the Texas panhandle. Shaan leads him out to the edge of the paddock, and Amy and her team regroup ten paces behind.

Alex rests his elbows on the lacquered white fence boards, fighting back the sudden, absurd feeling he's underdressed for this. On any other day, his chinos and button-down would be fine for a casual photo op, but for the first time in a long time, he's feeling distinctly out of his element. Does his hair look awful from the plane?

It's not like Henry is going to look much better after polo practice. He'll probably be sweaty and disgusting.

As if on cue, Henry comes galloping around the bend on the back of a pristine white horse.

He is definitely not sweaty or disgusting. He is, instead, bathed dramatically in a sweeping and resplendent sunset, wearing a crisp black jacket and riding pants tucked into tall leather boots, looking every inch an actual fairy-tale prince. He unhooks his helmet and takes it off with one gloved hand, and his hair underneath is just attractively tousled enough to look like it's supposed to be that way.

"I'm going to throw up on you," Alex says as soon as Henry is close enough to hear him.

"Hello, Alex," Henry says. Alex really resents the extra few inches of height Henry has on him right now. "You look ... sober."

"Only for you, Your Royal Highness," he says with an elaborate mock-bow. He's pleased to hear a little bit of ice in Henry's voice, finally done pretending.

"You're too kind," Henry says. He swings one long leg over and dismounts from his horse gracefully, removing his glove and extending a hand to Alex. A well-dressed stable hand basically springs up out of the ground to whisk the horse away by the reins. Alex has probably never hated anything more.

"This is idiotic," Alex says, grasping Henry's hand. The skin is soft, probably exfoliated and moisturized daily by some royal manicurist. There's a royal photographer right on the other side of the fence, so he smiles winningly and says through his teeth, "Let's get it over with."

"I'd rather be waterboarded," Henry says, smiling back. The camera snaps nearby. His eyes are big and soft and blue, and he desperately needs to be punched in one of them. "Your country could probably arrange that."

Alex throws his head back and laughs handsomely, loud and false. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Hardly enough time,” Henry says. He releases Alex’s hand as Shaan returns.

“Your Highness,” Shaan greets Henry with a nod. Alex makes a concentrated effort not to roll his eyes. “The photographer should have what he needs, so if you’re ready, the car is waiting.”

Henry turns to him and smiles again, eyes unreadable. “Shall we?”

There’s something vaguely familiar about the Kensington Palace guest quarters, even though he’s never been here before.

Shaan had an attendant show him to his room, where his luggage awaited him on an ornately carved bed with spun gold bedding. Many of the rooms in the White House have a similar hauntedness, a sense of history that hangs like cobwebs no matter how pristine the rooms are kept. He’s used to sleeping alongside ghosts, but that’s not it.

It strikes further back in his memory, around the time his parents split up. They were the kind of married lawyer couple who could barely order Chinese takeout without legally binding documents, so Alex spent the summer before seventh grade shuttled back and forth from home to their dad’s new place outside of Los Angeles until they could strike a long-term arrangement.

It was a nice house in the valley, a clear blue swimming pool and a back wall of solid glass. He never slept well there. He’d sneak out of his thrown-together bedroom in the middle of the night, stealing Helados from his dad’s freezer and standing barefoot in the kitchen eating straight from the quart, washed blue in the pool light.

That’s how it feels here, somehow—wide awake at midnight in a strange place, duty-bound to make it work.

He wanders into the kitchen attached to his guest wing, where the ceilings are high and the countertops are shiny marble. He was allowed to submit a list to stock the kitchen, but apparently it was too hard to get Helados on short notice—all that’s in the freezer is UK-brand packaged ice cream cones.

“What’s it like?” Nora’s voice says, tinny over his phone’s speaker. On the screen, her hair is up, and she’s poking at one of her dozens of window plants.

“Weird,” Alex says, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Everything looks like a museum. I don’t think I’m allowed to show you, though.”

“Ooh,” Nora says, wiggling her eyebrows. “So secretive. So fancy.”

“Please,” Alex says. “If anything, it’s creepy. I had to sign such a massive NDA that I’m convinced I’m gonna drop through a trapdoor into a torture dungeon any minute.”

“I bet he has a secret lovechild,” Nora says. “Or he’s gay. Or he has a secret gay lovechild.”

“It’s probably in case I see his equerry putting his batteries back in,” Alex says. “Anyway, this is boring. What’s going on with you? Your life is so much better than mine right now.”

“Well,” Nora says, “Nate Silver won’t stop blowing up my phone for another column. Bought some new curtains. Narrowed down the list of grad school concentrations to statistics or data science.”

“Tell me those are both at GW,” Alex says, hopping up to sit on one of the immaculate countertops, feet dangling. “You can’t leave me in DC to go back to MIT.”

“Haven’t decided yet, but astonishingly, it will not be based on you,” Nora tells him. “Remember how we sometimes talk about things that are not about you?”

“Yeah, weirdly. So is the plan to dethrone Nate Silver as reigning data czar of DC?”

Nora laughs. “No, what I’m gonna do is silently compile and process enough data to know exactly what’s gonna happen for the next twenty-five years. Then I’m gonna buy a house on the top of a very tall hill at the edge of the city and become an eccentric recluse and sit on my veranda. Watch it all unfold through a pair of binoculars.”

Alex starts to laugh, but cuts off when he hears rustling down the hall. Quiet footsteps approaching. Princess Beatrice lives in a different section of the palace, and so does Henry. The PPOs and his own security sleep on this floor, though, so maybe—

“Hold on,” Alex says, covering the speaker.

A light flicks on in the hallway, and the person who comes padding into the kitchen is none other than Prince Henry.

He’s rumpled and half awake, shoulders slumping as he yawns. He’s standing in front of Alex wearing not a suit, but a heather-gray T-shirt and

plaid pajama bottoms. He has earbuds in, and his hair is a mess. His feet are bare.

He looks, alarmingly, human.

He freezes when his eyes fall on Alex perched on the countertop. Alex stares back at him. In his hand, Nora begins a muffled, “Is that—” before Alex disconnects the call.

Henry pulls out his earbuds, and his posture has ratcheted back up straight, but his face is still bleary and confused.

“Hello,” he says, hoarse. “Sorry. Er. I was just. Cornettos.”

He gestures vaguely toward the refrigerator, as if he’s said something of any meaning.

“What?”

He crosses to the freezer and extracts the box of ice cream cones, showing Alex the name *Cornetto* across the front. “I was out. Knew they’d stocked you up.”

“Do you raid the kitchens of all your guests?” Alex asks.

“Only when I can’t sleep,” Henry says. “Which is always. Didn’t think you’d be awake.” He looks at Alex, deferring, and Alex realizes he’s waiting for permission to open the box and take one. Alex thinks about telling him no, just for the thrill of denying a prince something, but he’s kind of intrigued. He usually can’t sleep either. He nods.

He waits for Henry to take a Cornetto and leave, but instead he looks back up at Alex.

“Have you practiced what you’ll say tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Alex says, bristling immediately. This is why nothing about Henry has ever intrigued him before. “You’re not the only professional here.”

“I didn’t mean—” Henry falters. “I only meant, do you think we should, er, rehearse?”

“Do you need to?”

“I thought it might help.” Of course, he thinks that. Everything Henry’s ever done publicly has probably been privately rehearsed in stuffy royal quarters like this one.

Alex hops down off the counter, swiping his phone unlocked. “Watch this.”

He lines up a shot: the box of Cornettos on the counter, Henry’s hand braced on the marble next to it, his heavy signet ring visible along with a

swath of pajamas. He opens up Instagram, slaps a filter on it.

““Nothing cures jet lag,”” Alex narrates in a monotone as he taps out a caption, ““like midnight ice cream with @PrinceHenry.’ Geotag Kensington Palace, and posted.” He holds the phone for Henry to see as likes and comments immediately pour in. “There are a lot of things worth overthinking, believe me. But this isn’t one of them.”

Henry frowns at him over his ice cream.

“I suppose,” he says, looking doubtful.

“Are you done?” Alex asks. “I was on a call.”

Henry blinks, then folds his arms over his chest, back on the defensive.

“Of course. I won’t keep you.”

As he leaves the kitchen, he pauses in the doorframe, considering.

“I didn’t know you wore glasses,” he says finally.

He leaves Alex standing there alone in the kitchen, the box of Cornettos sweating on the counter.

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