

True love isn't always diplomatic.

RED,  
WHITE &  
ROYAL  
BLUE



a novel

CASEY McQUISTON

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WHITE &  
ROYAL  
BLUE



ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN  NEW YORK

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for the weirdos & the dreamers

# ONE

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