

My favorite urban legend about Freddie claims he got caught in flagrante delicto with the daughter of a Russian political leader, a week before she was to be married off as part of a covert alliance. But the very best part is that it isn't an urban legend at all. Every word of it is true. Two hours after being threatened with a rapier hanging on a nearby wall, Freddie was doing shots with Petr and Petra while discussing the pros and cons of yachting as a sport.

This is Freddie's superpower. Even when he's infuriating, or obnoxious, or just plain wrong, he is also charming and cheery and naughtily funny, and that side always wins the day. He's twenty months younger than Nick, but bolder and brasher and ballsier, from his sense of humor to his build: Nick is leanly muscular, strong but streamlined, while Freddie's sturdier pecs have their own twelve-month calendar. Where the public is protective of Nick, it lusts for Freddie; it is Nick's communal parent, but Freddie's collective mistress, and I have never met a more gleeful rogue. His deepest commitment is to being a scamp, dropping his pants as often for pranks as he does for sex—the latter being an arena in which Freddie zealously made up for being the kid brother, starting earlier than anyone wants to acknowledge, romancing as many beautiful women as the world could offer. But for all that, he's also got Nick's big heart, even if he's occasionally lacking in his brother's better sense in how to use it—or better sense, period.

I had anxiety dreams about meeting Freddie, which was uncharacteristic. But with their mother all but invisible and Richard so cold and removed, Freddie and Nick had been the one person each couldn't live without—a sibling bond I keenly understood, and so I knew I needed both to mind that, and meld with it. But beyond that, Freddie represented the first of the Lyons dominos to fall, pushing us closer to the day we'd expose our relationship to the family and to the harsh light of day.

In short, a lot was riding on the introduction. I'd rather not have done it in my underwear.

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"Hang on. Isn't that Prince Nicky? With those three blondes?"

The bass beat so loudly through Club Theme's speakers that my drink wobbled on the bar. I was deep into my third Raspberry Beret, and simply blinking—much less pretending I didn't already know exactly where Nick was, and who he was with—demanded as much focus as forming a sentence. The London nightclub was run by an old Eton chum of Freddie's called Tony, and, true to its name, it opened only for very specific and thorough gimmick nights, then closed like a West End theater while it mounted the next. This month, Club Theme was devoted to Prince: a playlist of the pop legend's music, an endless loop of his videos projected onto a giant screen lining the dance floor, and specialty cocktails based on his song titles. Cilla, for example, was sipping a Purple Rain while looking very chummy with Tony himself, and the last time I was anywhere near Nick, he'd been doing shots out of an array of test tubes called the Let's Go Crazy. I'd only looked long enough to notice he was wearing my favorite of his shirts—cornflower blue, like his eyes, soft and inviting.

"He's taller than I thought he'd be," the guy mused.

"Right," I said, leaning in and getting a nose full of his aftershave. It smelled like artificial bananas. "But what were you saying before? You *don't* believe in evolution?"

"You *don't* even notice the wooden leg," he added. "Blimey, the tail he must get."

I couldn't feign interest any longer, so I knocked back my half-empty cocktail before picking up the new one and walking back to the VIP area. In my periphery I noticed Nick glancing in my direction, and resisted the mischievous urge to toast him as I settled into a swanky chrome-and-leather chair (although I might have flipped my hair a little, for his benefit). It had been almost a year and a half since we lit the fuse at Windsor, and although we were still every bit as explosive behind closed

doors, pretending we weren't had become my new normal. Outing oneself as a royal girlfriend was a lot more complicated than firing off a social-media alert, and so we'd chosen to stay undercover, including shacking up for the idyllic remainder of my Oxford stay unbeknownst to anyone but his PPOs—who, with the exception of a covert thumbs-up from Popeye, didn't bat an eye—and our closest friends. Although they would have figured it out even if we hadn't told them. I, in fact, *didn't* tell Cilla. She guessed it the second I got home from Windsor, still flushed. But for mind reading, she had nothing on Lacey, who knew just from the way I said hello on the phone.

"You slept with Prince Nicholas Alexander Arthur Edward!" she squealed. "Was it awesome? Please tell me princes do it better."

"Is that really his full name?"

She gasped sarcastically. "Rebecca Porter, do you mean to tell me you had sex with a man whose name you don't even know?"

Lacey wanted to scream the news from the rooftops—"We're going to be royalty! Should we do *Elle*, or hold out for *Vogue*?" she crowed, only half teasing—and I knew it was killing her to keep this secret, but I was barely ready for *my* people to know, much less *People*. But after Nick and I exorcised all that lust at Windsor, we confirmed an infinite reserve of yearning underneath. This was no one-and-done. So when I went home for Christmas that year, I sat down my mother and father and explained to them that I'd stumbled into a relationship with someone whose rather famous grandmother might never allow him to own a Coucherator. Dad was unfazed, saying he was just pleased I'd met a guy who didn't cheer for the Yankees. But Mom was atwitter, immediately reorganizing, cleansing, and replenishing her closet in case she was called upon for a royal audience.

"I should call my friend Mabel's genealogist," she had said. "For all we know, there's a lord or two in our bloodline. I've always felt such a kinship to the mother country, you know? In an ancestral way."

"Your family is from Kentucky!" I protested.