

Meghan hoped Kate would reach out to her. That's not what happened

The two princes had been inseparable, but as Harry's relationship with Meghan blossomed into marriage, a rift between the royal couples became evident to all. In this extract from the new book, *Finding Freedom*, friends of the Sussexes reveal the real hurt behind the tales of 'duelling duchesses'

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No workplace is perfect. In the rarefied world of the monarchy, the pressure could be insane. Such were the internal politics between Buckingham Palace, Clarence House and Kensington Palace that even royal-watchers started snickering when it appeared the households were scheduling events and social media posts on the same day to outdo one another. "There has always been competitiveness between the households," admits a senior aide. "That will never change."

It could hardly have come as a surprise that leaks were happening. One courtier privately bragged to friends about their ability to place a story, positive or negative, in any publication with a click of their fingers, and another told a respected newspaper editor that he could "handle anything after putting up with one of Meghan's temper tantrums". Staff described the atmosphere inside the three households as "competitive", "miserable" and "full-on".

Responsibility for the problem didn't rest completely with the household staff — some of it came from the princes themselves. The rift had begun when the Duke of Cambridge questioned the pace at which his brother's relationship with Meghan was moving.

"A happy and content Harry is rare, so to see him practically skipping around was a delight," a source still in regular contact with the brothers said. "But at the same time William has always felt he needs to look out for Harry, not as a future monarch but as an older brother. Their whole adult lives he's felt he should keep an eye on Harry and make sure he's not in trouble and on a good path."

Back when Meghan and Harry were dating, William, having met Meghan only a handful of times, wanted to make sure the American actress had the right intentions. “After all, these are two brothers that have spent their whole lives with people trying to take advantage of them,” the source said. “They’ve both developed a radar to detect that type of person, but as William didn’t know a whole lot about Meghan, he wanted to make sure Harry wasn’t blindsided by lust.”

Some members of staff were whispering words of alarm into the Duke of Cambridge’s ear. Meghan was totally foreign to this group of advisers, who could sometimes be even more conservative than the institution they guarded.

This was the backdrop when William sat down with his brother to discuss his relationship with Meghan.

“Don’t feel you need to rush this,” William told Harry, according to sources. “Take as much time as you need to get to know this girl.”

In those last two words, “this girl”, Harry heard the tone of snobbishness that was anathema to his approach to the world. During his 10-year career in the military, outside the royal bubble, he had learnt not to make snap judgments about people based on their accent, education, ethnicity, class or profession.

Also, to remove Meghan from the equation, Harry was tired of the dynamic that had become established between him and his older brother. There had come a point when Harry no longer felt as though he needed looking after. There was a thin line between caring and condescending. Just because he went about his life differently from his brother didn’t make it wrong.

William may have felt he was acting out of concern, but Harry was offended that his older brother still treated him as if he were immature. “Harry was pissed off,” another source said. “Pissed off that his brother would ask such a thing. Some felt it was an overreaction. But then, this sums them up as people — William, the calm and rational one, and Harry, who can’t help but take things far too personally.”

“Harry has a heart of gold, but he’s incredibly sensitive,” a longtime family friend said.

Though another friend added: “Harry could see through William’s words. He was being a snob.”

Harry was taken aback, even angry, despite the fact that William was simply looking out for his brother. He didn’t really know Meghan yet. William was concerned that Harry had isolated himself from many of their old friends. “But perhaps he just didn’t want to accept that Harry had grown up and become his own man,” said a source.

At least two other family members also voiced concerns to each other over the pace at which Harry's relationship had moved. Meghan had often been the topic of conversation and gossip among them. When she arrived in the prince's life, one senior royal referred to the American actress as "Harry's showgirl". Another told an aide, "She comes with a lot of baggage". And a high-ranking courtier was overheard telling a colleague, "There's just something about her I don't trust."

Harry was "aware of the talk", a close friend of his said. "He's extremely protective of Meghan. He understands that a lot of people are against them, and he will do everything he can to keep her safe and away from getting hurt — even if that means distancing himself from those people."

Harry didn't care what his family thought or said. "Nothing was going to get in the way of his happiness," a source close to Harry and Meghan said. "He knew Meghan was right for him. Their love was real, and their feelings for each other were genuine. Everything else was noise."

In the months after William talked to Harry about the relationship, the two hardly spoke. The brothers went from always making time for each other to spending barely any time together. Harry had always loved popping across the grounds of the palace to see George and Charlotte, bringing them gifts that included an electric SUV for his nephew and a tricycle for his niece. But those visits had come to a virtual halt by the summer of 2017. In fact, Harry had spent less time with Prince Louis than the others because of the growing tension between him and his brother after Louis's birth on April 23, 2018. The distance came from both directions. Harry spent less time going over to see the children, but the invitations from William and Kate were the first to dry up.

Though it was not necessarily her responsibility, Kate did little to bridge the divide. She was fiercely loyal to her husband and his family.

Once Harry and Meghan were married, the gap between the brothers only widened. William and Kate's feelings seemed obvious to the Sussexes that summer and beyond. Among all the friends and family Harry and Meghan hosted at their house in Oxfordshire between May 2018 and March 2019, the Cambridges failed to visit. "The invite was there," a source said.

It was a far cry from how Harry had envisioned his future. The younger prince once told a friend that he had an image of getting married and spending time with William and Kate, the two couples together, their children best friends.

The friction between the brothers was one of several reasons Harry wanted to base his family in Windsor. "He wanted to get away from the goldfish bowl that was Kensington Palace," a source said. "Everywhere you turn, you're surrounded by staff and family. He was at a point in his life where he was working with his brother, doing the foundation with his brother and living by his brother. It was too much."

High-ranking aides across all three royal households were so alarmed by the press coverage and speculation on social media about a rift between the brothers and their wives that they began openly discussing the impact it could have on the monarchy if things weren't righted.

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex will move to Frogmore Cottage on the Windsor estate early next year as they prepare for the arrival of their first child," the palace announced in November 2018 of their new home, a stone's throw from Windsor Castle and just yards from Frogmore House, where they had held their wedding reception and engagement photoshoot. "Windsor is a very special place for their royal highnesses and they are grateful that their official residence will be on the estate."

Frogmore was perfect for Harry and Meghan, given its connection to Windsor — but it wasn't next door to William and Kate and their children. That was enough to set off the narrative of "Duelling duchesses" that took flight two days later.

Refusing to address incorrect rumours only reinforced them. Traditionally, the palace has had no comment when it comes to rumours, but the Sussexes felt it wasn't afraid to bend the rules if it was to correct a story about higher-ranking family members. (Case in point: a spokesman went on the record in July 2019 to deny claims by a cosmetic clinic that Kate had had "baby Botox".) Harry and Meghan were frustrated by this approach.

Meghan would agree with the assessment that the duchesses were not the best of friends. Their relationship hadn't progressed much since she was Harry's girlfriend. Although Meghan might have understood Kate's wariness to strike up a meaningful friendship, they were still no closer by the time she was a fellow senior working member of the royal family and the wife of William's brother. Flowers for her birthday were nice, but Meghan would far rather have had Kate check in on her during the most difficult times with the press.

But they were not at war with each other either. There were awkward moments, such as the day the women happened to cross paths at Kensington Palace (in early 2017, when Harry and Meghan were still only dating), and although both were heading out to go shopping — in the same street — Kate went in her own Range Rover. The truth was that Meghan and Kate just didn't know each other that well. Although some aides claimed at the time that they "talked and texted regularly", by the time of Harry and Meghan's wedding the sisters-in-law had spent only a handful of occasions together.

At the outset of her romance with Harry, Meghan had fully expected Kate to reach out and give her the lie of the land on everything an outsider to the Firm needed to know. But that was not how things turned out. Meghan was disappointed that she and Kate hadn't bonded over the position they shared, but she wasn't losing sleep over it. According to a source, Kate felt they didn't have much in common "other than the fact that they lived at Kensington Palace".

The press continued to save its harshest criticism for Meghan. One story had a “furious” Kate intervening after Meghan “bollocked” a member of her staff. The Kensington Palace staff member was rumoured to be the deputy communications secretary, Katrina McKeever, who had left the palace after five years to explore new opportunities. Even Kensington Palace didn’t understand the bizarre story. McKeever left on a good note with the Sussexes, who sent her a handwritten letter and huge floral arrangement when she left.

She felt that women of colour like her were labelled demanding or aggressive. It was open season on Meghan, with many looking for anything and everything to criticise. “Duchess Different,” a close friend of Meghan’s said. “That’s what people have a problem with. She’s the easiest person in the world to work with. Certain people just don’t like the fact she stands out.”

“This is a script that wrote itself as soon as you knew that an American actress was coming into the royal family,” another aide added.

Meghan felt as though some of the commentary and tabloid stories were more than a culture clash; they were sexist and prejudiced. If a man got up before dawn to work, he was applauded for his work ethic. If a woman did it, she was deemed difficult or “a bitch”. The double standard was exacerbated when it came to successful women of colour, often labelled demanding or aggressive.

Racism takes a different form in the UK from in America, but there is no mistaking its existence and how ingrained it is. A major theme of racism in the UK centres on the question of who is authentically “British”. It can come through in subtle acts of bias, micro-aggressions such as the palace staffer who told the biracial co-author of these words, “I never expected you to speak the way you do”, or the newspaper headline “Memo to Meghan: we Brits prefer true royalty to fashion royalty”. While the columnist was criticising Meghan for her Vogue editorials, there was another way to read it, which is that to be British meant to be born and bred in the UK — and be white.

Bridesmaid fitting was stressful but no one cried

There were reports that, before the wedding, Meghan had left Kate in tears following a bridesmaid fitting for Princess Charlotte. “Kate had only just given birth to Prince Louis and was feeling quite emotional,” a source said. There were reports that claimed Meghan’s “strict demands” caused Kate to cry.

A source, who was at the mid-May wedding fitting and has never discussed before what really happened, said stories about tears have been “puzzling” to those who were present. “Some of the children weren’t co-operating, and there was a lot going on. Everyone tried to help where they could, but it’s never easy with kids at fittings. There were no tears from anyone. And in the end, the fitting was fine. Kate and Meghan were both a little stressed but professionals in the room, and there were other people there.”

Those close to Meghan questioned whether someone from the palace or a former employee could have been behind the story, and wondered aloud why aides refused to set the record straight there and then. “There are people, whether they work with the family or are members of the family, that know that a lot of this stuff isn’t true, and aren’t allowed to say anything, like that ridiculous story about Meg and Catherine and the bridesmaids’ dresses,” a trusted confidant said. “That story was ridiculous and so false.”

At the time, though, a Kensington Palace aide said only that the women, who were both hurt by the accusations, were “very different people”.

Several aides across the royal households now confirm that there was no fitting that left the Duchess of Cambridge in tears.

Chapel scent was approved by palace

The press continued to save its harshest criticism for Meghan. One story had her demanding spray-bottle air fresheners to spritz around “musty” St George’s Chapel (the Queen’s regular place of worship, which contains the Royal Vault) for her wedding day, horrifying Buckingham Palace officials. The truth was that the discreet Baies scented air diffusers for the chapel provided by Diptyque — much like the candles that Kate chose to scent Westminster Abbey for her 2011 nuptials — had been approved by all parties involved.