

Meghan sent one last text to her father Thomas Markle on the night before she married Harry

A row over staged photos, a health scare and unanswered messages: why Thomas Markle missed his own daughter's wedding. The second of three days of exclusive extracts from Finding Freedom: Harry and Meghan and the Making of a Modern Royal Family

Omid Scobie and Carolyn Durand | Sunday July 26 2020, 12.01am BST, The Sunday Times

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/meghan-sent-one-last-text-to-her-father-thomas-markle-on-the-night-before-she-married-harry-cc8ctfd6t>

Access July 29, 2020

As Harry and Meghan were revelling in their engagement in November 2017, a newspaper published an article about her father, Thomas Markle, that it had been piecing together for months. The story showed pictures of his home atop a 120ft bluff in Rosarito Beach, a quiet Mexican resort town that overlooked the Pacific Ocean, and had details of his life, such as the red Ford Escape or silver Volvo he drove to his local Walmart to stock up on groceries or to the storage unit where he had bragged to the owner about his daughter who was on television. But there were no quotes, as any time a reporter approached him, he responded with the line prepared for him by palace officials: "I can't speak out of respect for my family."

Once the article came out with his home's location, Thomas Markle had to deal with constant intrusions from reporters and photographers. Over the course of several phone calls, Harry and Meghan told him he should do his best to ignore all press. But, ultimately, he didn't listen. With some encouragement from his other daughter, Samantha — Meghan's half-sister, 17 years older than her, who managed to get a cut of the deal in the process — Thomas took up an idea from a photographer, Jeff Rayner. Rayner's idea was for Thomas to pose for some pictures: reading a book about British history at a coffee shop, visiting an internet café to read the latest news stories about his daughter and future son-in-law and other setups.

The photos ran in outlets around the world but did little to help his public image. In fact, the person they seemed to help was Rayner, who banked at least \$130,000 for his photo agency from their sales. Thomas took 30%.

Just one week before Thomas was due to attend Harry and Meghan's wedding at Windsor Castle in May 2018, the palace got word that a Sunday tabloid intended to run information that

would expose the “candid” frames as fakes. At Harry’s instruction, the palace communications team, in consultation with the legal team, began working on a strategy to stop the publication of the embarrassing story.

First, though, Meghan needed to hear straight from her dad what had happened. According to a trusted confidant who was with Meghan as events unfolded, she told her father, “Dad, we need to know if this is true or not, because my team is going to try to stop this story running — if you are telling me it’s fake.

“If they do that, they’re going out of their way to protect you, Dad,” Meghan said over the phone. “You’re telling me you’re being victimised, right?”

He lied to Meghan. “Of course,” he promised, failing to admit he had participated in the staging of the photos.

“Every single time she was calling him, she was like, ‘Dad, I love you. I just want you to know I love you. Everything is fine. Just get here. We’ll have the wedding. We’ll celebrate. Don’t worry about any of this stuff. Let’s just put it behind us,’” the source said. “You want to believe the best, right?”

The source continued: “I’ve heard her say, ‘My dad never sought this out. I really believe that he’s the victim, and now I feel sad because I believe he’s been fully corrupted.’”

Before Meghan got off the phone to her father, she reminded him that a car would be arriving outside his door the next day to drive him to Los Angeles. From there, he was to make the transatlantic trip to London, where all the arrangements had been handled. He would be accompanied door to door, with chauffeured cars, personal security and a guide to answer any question. He wouldn’t have to worry about a thing.

Meanwhile, the communications staff at Kensington Palace did all they could to keep Thomas’s ill-conceived plan from exploding, collaborating with him to issue a report with the Independent Press Standards Organisation and a notice to UK newspaper editors about the situation. But to no avail: the morning after Meghan phoned her father, the headlines read: “Meghan’s dad staged photos with the paparazzi”. Screenshots from closed-circuit cameras made it clear he had staged each and every one.

Meghan was devastated by her father’s deception, but she was also concerned for his welfare. Thomas hadn’t demonstrated the best judgment, to be sure. But the wedding was only a week away. She was desperate to get him to London, where he would be protected from the press by palace escorts and protection officers.

She called her father right away, but he didn't answer. She called again. And again, and again. She left some version of the same message each time: "Dad, I still love you. Nothing has changed. We're going to get you safely to London. I'm sending a car to come and get you."

Despite Meghan's barrage of voicemails and texts, her father not only refused to get in the waiting car to the airport; he didn't respond to a single message from his daughter.

"My God, my phone," Meghan told a friend, explaining that she'd called her father at least 20 times.

"I'm assuming he's getting my messages," she added, worried.

Rather than knowing anything for certain, she and Harry were updated on her father's plans (whether or not he was going to attend her wedding) through the tabloids and gossip websites. He contacted the American entertainment website TMZ to plead his case, explaining he was trying to "recast" his image after being "ambushed" by photographers. But to spare his daughter and the royal family any further embarrassment, he would no longer attend the wedding.

While in public the palace maintained a stoic silent facade, behind closed doors there were recriminations and anger. Having cut himself off from aides and his daughter, Thomas was feeding the press a seemingly never-ending stream of nonsensical statements. Palace courtiers were waiting minute by minute for the next bombshell to drop.

"It was very, very tough," an aide said about the palace's response to the Thomas Markle situation. "It's very easy to blame the palace, but, my God, I've not seen any situation quite like it — where you've got a woman marrying a prince, and the father of the beautiful young woman is 5,000 miles away and just not playing ball, and not only not playing ball, but he's up to silly games."

Thomas claimed a furious Harry called him and hissed, "If you had listened to me, this would never have happened." But no such conversation occurred. In another dramatic turn of events, just the day after saying he was not attending the wedding, Thomas told reporters that he couldn't imagine missing such a historic event.

A wounded Meghan directed Kensington Palace officials to release a statement she wrote herself about the incident, calling it "a deeply personal matter" and requesting her privacy as they sorted it out. While she in no way wanted her family drama to play out so publicly, she felt forced to take some sort of action.

Despite her father's behaviour, she was nonetheless crushed by the thought of him not being there for the wedding. "As much as she was hurt and humiliated, she wanted him to be there and was willing to move on," a close friend said. "Plus, she was worried about him: she honestly wasn't sure if he was actually OK. His behaviour was bizarre."

His bespoke suit and custom shoes were waiting at the Oliver Brown tailor in Chelsea, southwest London, and Harry had asked a military veteran to accompany Meghan's father. "The treatment that Meghan's mother, Doria, received when she arrived here is exactly what was planned for Thomas," a senior aide added, noting that he would have been put up in a hotel and given a protection officer and assistant during his stay.

With only four days left before her wedding, though, Meghan received more devastating news from her father — again through a celebrity gossip website. Laying the blame firmly at the feet of the prying press, Thomas claimed the stress had caused him to have a heart attack. His doctors advised him that he needed surgery just two days before his daughter took her vows, to clear a blockage, repair damage and implant several stents. Short of some sort of miraculous recovery, he said, he would be in no shape to fly across the Atlantic and thus would not be attending the royal wedding.

Troubled, Meghan tried to text Thomas: "I've been reaching out to you all weekend but you're not taking any of our calls or replying to any texts . . . Very concerned about your health and safety and have taken every measure to protect you but not sure what more we can do if you don't respond . . . Do you need help? Can we send the security team down again? I'm very sorry to hear you're in the hospital but need you to please get in touch . . . What hospital are you at?"

Ten minutes later she followed up with another. "Harry and I made a decision earlier today and are dispatching the same security guys you turned away this weekend to be a presence on the ground to make sure you're safe . . . they will be there at your disposal as soon as you need them. Please call as soon as you can . . . all of this is incredibly concerning but your health is most important," she wrote.

That evening Thomas sent a short response to say that he appreciated the offer of security but didn't feel in any danger. Instead, he wrote, he would recover at a motel. Meghan asked for details but he didn't reply.

Not a word about the subject had been spoken when Meghan brought Doria to meet the Queen and Prince Philip earlier in the day, but the situation still caused her to feel embarrassed about the public drama during their afternoon tea at Windsor Castle.

Meghan placed some of the blame on herself. Having spent the past year and a half in the glaring spotlight, she understood what the pressure from the media was like. "He's vulnerable," she told a friend. "He's been baited. A lot of the tabloid journalists have been coaxing him and paying him. I don't know if he really even had a chance."

Harry also blamed the media for the whole situation. “The pressure he was put under for six months before he finally cracked and started to participate,” a senior courtier said of Meghan’s father, “that’s what Harry’s angry about.”

One individual close to the couple summed it up this way: “There is a sort of aggressive intrusiveness and a reckless, irresponsible almost hostility to the media’s actions that’s deeply harmful. I don’t think the paparazzi are the same. I think that has changed. But the sort of ruthless malevolence of some sections of the media, and it is malevolent, is genuinely bad. What they’ve done to her father, drawn him out from his private life and forced him out into the open, and then waving cheques at him, it’s just absolutely terrible. He wanted to live privately. He would have continued to live privately. He would have been at the wedding if the media had left him alone as they were asked to. And there’s no public interest argument to excuse intruding into the private life of Thomas Markle.”

“If it wasn’t for Harry, Doria and her friends, Meghan herself says that she wouldn’t have mentally got through it,” a friend said. The night before the wedding, she sent her father one last text. He did not reply.

Sitting in a bath later that night, FaceTiming with a friend, the bride-to-be said she had left her dad a final message, adding: “I can’t sit up all night just pressing send.”