

KATE!

ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER ANDERSEN

The King: The Life of Charles III

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William, Kate, Harry, and Meghan*

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The Serpent's Tooth
Father
The Book of People
The Name Game

KATE!

THE COURAGE, GRACE,
AND POWER OF THE WOMAN
WHO WILL BE QUEEN

CHRISTOPHER ANDERSEN



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**For my Andersens, my Browsers,
and my Andersen Browsers**

It's a roller coaster.
—Kate, on her cancer journey

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*Be who God meant you to be,
and you will set the world on fire.*

—the Bishop of London to William and Kate in his wedding sermon

*Kate is the biggest star of them all.
She's an incredible woman and no one else compares.
She is the future of the monarchy.*

—Dickie Arbiter, longtime spokesperson for Queen Elizabeth II

*You find out that both your wife and your father have cancer. It
was awful, absolutely awful. It's the lowest I've ever seen him.*

—Jason Knauf, former aide to William and Kate



1

How Do We Tell Them?

What Do We Say?



KENSINGTON PALACE

A statement from Kensington Palace

Published 17 January 2024

Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was admitted to hospital yesterday for planned abdominal surgery. The surgery was successful and it is expected that she will remain in hospital for ten to fourteen days, before returning home to continue her recovery. Based on the current medical advice, she is unlikely to return to public duties until after Easter.

The Princess of Wales appreciates the interest this statement will generate. She hopes that the public will understand her desire to maintain as much normality for her children as possible; and her wish that her personal medical information remains private.

Kensington Palace will, therefore, only provide updates on Her Royal Highness' progress when there is significant new information to share.

The Princess of Wales wishes to apologize to all those concerned for the fact that she has to postpone her upcoming engagements. She looks forward to reinstating as many as possible, as soon as possible.

ELEVEN DAYS LATER

"May I come in?" Kate looked up from her bed at the prestigious London Clinic to see the familiar face of her father-in-law, followed by white-coated medical personnel as he ambled into her hospital room wearing his favorite Turnbull & Asser robe, blue-striped pajamas, and the black velvet Crockett & Jones slippers with the Lion Rampant design he brought with him from Windsor. The seventy-five-year-old monarch had just undergone treatment for an enlarged prostate—the kind of minor surgical intervention commonly experienced by many men his age. That he came to see her and not vice versa is significant; after all, both were ostensibly having surgical procedures of a similarly routine sort—he for his prostate, Kate to treat the abdominal pain she had been experiencing for weeks. Under normal circumstances, protocol would dictate that the Princess of Wales make the trek to the elevator and down the hall to visit His Majesty. But these were not normal circumstances. Kate could tell instantly from the King's kindly but baleful basset hound expression—the look he so often employed to convey concern and sympathy—that he knew what the outside world didn't.

From the moment she arrived at the London Clinic, the Princess was secure in the knowledge that here she would get the very best care the medical world had to offer. Officially opened in 1932 by the Duke and Duchess of York, who would later become King George VI and Queen

Elizabeth (later the Queen Mother), over the years the London Clinic would count among its many famous patients Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Princess Margaret, Prince Philip, Elizabeth Taylor, and several British prime ministers.

The London Clinic's vaunted reputation aside, the procedure on the Princess of Wales was not, in fact, being conducted by one of its doctors—or even indeed by any British physician. The same team of Italian surgeons who had performed abdominal surgery on Pope Francis I the previous July had been secretly flown in from Rome's equally renowned Gemelli Hospital to operate on Kate. When she emerged from the anesthesia, Kate was told that the operation had been a complete success. Prince William was all smiles when he visited his wife the next morning, understandably relieved to learn that the procedure had gone, as a senior member of the hospital staff put it, “swimmingly.” Seventy-two hours later, however, the news—and the mood—changed quickly. Sitting in a high-backed chair that had been positioned next to her room's floor-to-ceiling windows, Kate was taken aback when three of her physicians suddenly appeared looking pale and grim faced. Laboratory test results had just come back indicating that all was not as it seemed: cancerous cells had been detected, and an immediate course of what they would call “preventive therapy” would have to be undertaken immediately.

Cancer. Just hearing the word sent Kate into an emotional tailspin. “It was as if the bottom of my world suddenly fell out,” she told a friend. “It felt like I had literally been kicked in the stomach.” Indeed, for a moment others in the room thought the Princess might collapse. Were they certain it was cancer? she asked. Could the lab have made a mistake? Precisely what kind of cancer Kate had been diagnosed with was never made public, but there were several possibilities: ovarian, uterine, or colon cancer, hypothesized Giampaolo Tortora, director of the cancer center at the Gemelli Hospital. It was well known that, during her pregnancies, Kate had suffered from hyperemesis gravidarum (HG)—morning sickness so severe it required her to be hospitalized—and that later gallbladder issues were not uncommon among HG patients. Studies also showed that women like

Kate who suffered from HG were at greater risk for several cancers, most notably bladder cancer.

William's reaction to the stunning news was understandably one of complete disbelief. "That's impossible!" the Prince of Wales replied when Kate called Adelaide Cottage to tell him the devastating news. "They told you the surgery was a complete success, that everything was fine." But what had not been visible to the doctors was evident to the pathologists who, given the singular importance of their patient, consulted the clinic's chief pathologist before delivering their double- and triple-checked findings. The Prince of Wales had cleared his calendar for two full weeks so he could be with George, Charlotte, and Louis while their mother recovered at the hospital. Now he rushed to his wife's bedside and embraced her tearfully.

"We'll get through this," they reassured each other, but what about the children? Kate did not want to frighten them, and if news got out that their mother had been diagnosed with cancer the swirl of press around their school and the inevitable questions from their classmates would almost certainly leave them afraid and confused. They needed to be told by Mummy and "Pops"—their nickname for William, along with "Papa"—in the way a child might understand, and be given the time to process it all in the comforting surroundings of home. They would wait until the children were home for Easter break in late March to make a public announcement, but until then, William and Kate both agreed that her cancer diagnosis would be top secret. From the beginning, it was clear this would be a daunting task: it was later discovered that, while she was still at the clinic, several hospital staff members were caught trying to access the princess's private medical records.

At this moment, however, Kate was in her hospital bed gazing directly into the rapidly welling-up eyes of the King. William had shared the news of Kate's cancer with his father, and the King was there to lend his cherished daughter-in-law moral support. King Charles did not mention that he had just been dealt a gut punch of his own. The King's supposedly routine prostate procedure revealed something that took the entire medical

team by surprise: it appeared that malignant cells were present in Charles's abdomen as well.

Before entering the hospital, His Majesty had hoped to raise awareness of men's health issues by issuing a statement describing his planned prostate surgery. It was a bold move, ripping away the veil of secrecy that traditionally surrounds the health issues of senior royals—a practice so deeply ingrained that, when Charles's grandfather King George VI was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer, the news was kept from the patient himself. Charles's own desire for newfound transparency aside, he wanted to make sure his doctors' suspicions were proven accurate by lab tests before springing the news on his unsuspecting subjects—or on the beautiful young mother of three who faced a daunting health crisis of her own. To be told one has cancer when they are three-quarters of a century old is one thing. But the King found it difficult to believe that the vibrant woman who had only recently celebrated her forty-second birthday must now be confronted with her own mortality. He did not speak the word “cancer,” instead telling her she looked wonderful and that he was pleased she was on the road to complete recovery.

On January 29, Kate's trusted longtime personal assistant, Natasha Archer, drove up to the London Clinic's back entrance on Harley Street in her Range Rover and left for Adelaide Cottage with the princess hunkering out of sight in the back seat—all unbeknownst to the press. An hour later, a dapper and smiling King Charles and Queen Camilla—he bundled up in a blue double-breasted overcoat and she in a blue wool dress and boots—left via the hospital's main entrance on Devonshire Place and made their way to a waiting midnight blue Audi Q8 e-tron electric car. More than twenty photographers clicked and flashed away as the King waved to the waiting crowd of well-wishers—all in stark contrast to Kate's uncharacteristically cloak-and-dagger exit. The reason for all the stealth: while the King still looked robust and ruddy faced after only three days in the hospital, Kate had been there for two full weeks and the strain of it was etched on her face. Archer, who started working for the royal family in 2007 and three years later became Kate's personal assistant and unof-

ficial stylist, got to work as soon as they arrived at Adelaide Cottage to restore the princess's healthful glow. When the kids rushed in from school screaming "Mummy's home! Mummy's home!," it quickly became clear to both Kate and William that they need not have fretted—Mummy hadn't changed a bit. She swept them up in her arms, just as she always did. They suspected nothing.

Ever since checking into the London Clinic, Kate had been eager to return to Adelaide Cottage—and with good reason. The property was conceived in 1831 as a sanctuary for William IV's wife, Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen, who married King William one week after meeting him, fully aware that he had ten illegitimate children with a popular actress of the time, Dorothea Jordan. Instead of producing a legitimate heir, Queen Adelaide suffered several miscarriages, multiple stillbirths, and the deaths of two infant children—with a degree of dignity and fortitude that made her one of England's best-loved queen consorts.

Adelaide Cottage—just a fifteen-minute stroll south of Windsor Castle—was designed in the romantic, or "picturesque," style that was embraced by British architects in the mid-nineteenth century. With its pink stucco walls, peaked rooflines, and white gingerbread trim, Adelaide Lodge, as it was originally called, had a fairy-tale quality that William IV's successor, Queen Victoria, found irresistible. Throughout her sixty-three-year reign—second only in length to that of Charles's mother, Elizabeth II—Queen Victoria treated the cottage almost as if it were a child's playhouse, visiting it for breakfast or tea whenever the pressures of ruling what was then the world's greatest empire were simply too much. Victoria was so fond of the cottage that she had a special carriageway built leading there straight from Windsor Castle. When Dash, the King Charles spaniel Victoria would dress up in a scarlet jacket and blue trousers (she later described the dog as "my closest childhood companion"), died in 1840, she had him buried at Adelaide Cottage. More than 184 years later, George, Charlotte, and Louis would scamper through the cottage gardens past Dash's marble headstone with an inscription written by Victoria herself:

Here lies

DASH

The favourite spaniel of Her Majesty Queen Victoria

In his 10th year

His attachment was without selfishness

His playfulness without malice

His fidelity without deceit

READER

If you would be beloved and die regretted

Profit by the example of

DASH

After Victoria's death, Adelaide Cottage was used as a guesthouse for those lucky enough to be invited to Windsor Castle, and in the twentieth century it became a grace-and-favor property—one of the more than one hundred homes (the oldest being 10 Downing Street, official residence of the Prime Minister) bestowed rent-free on friends, family, and individuals out of gratitude for their service.

By the time William and Kate began casting about for a suitable home on the outskirts of central London, Adelaide Cottage had undergone several restorations, the most recent and extensive in 2015. Three years later, Queen Elizabeth offered Adelaide Cottage to brother Harry and his new wife Meghan as a wedding present. Instead, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex chose to undertake a major renovation of nearby Frogmore Cottage. That project would wind up costing more than \$3 million—a sum that ignited a public outcry and forced the Sussexes to cover the cost themselves. Conversely, William and Kate were looking for a property that required no renovations at taxpayer expense. From the Waleses' standpoint, Adelaide Cottage was ideal: not only was it situated close to William's granny—the Queen—but it also was a short ride from Lambrook, the school all three children would be attending. Moreover, it offered another advantage: there are entrances to the Windsor Home Park, allowing the Waleses at least a fighting chance of eluding the paparazzi as they came and went.

With only four bedrooms—one for each of the children and one for their parents—the house itself is still modest by royal standards. But hints of grandeur remain nonetheless. There are two public reception areas: an opulently decorated formal living room with a marble Greco-Roman fireplace as its centerpiece, and a Grand Lounge featuring twenty-two-foot-high ceilings; Renaissance era tapestries; and an even more impressive monumental stone fireplace. While William and Kate decorated all the bedrooms to suit more modern tastes, the master bedroom—where the couple sleeps with the family dog at their feet—has always had a decidedly nautical theme: the high ceiling was covered with gilded dolphins and walls draped with rope ornaments from the *Royal George*, the famous yacht launched by George III in 1817. Intended for entertaining, the green-and-white formal Georgian dining room with barrel-vaulted ceiling contrasted sharply with the exposed beams, farmhouse sink, and wooden countertops in Kate's small country kitchen—the beating heart of the Wales household. Not that anyone was likely to forget that, for all its homey warmth, Adelaide Cottage was every inch a royal residence. Over the main entrance was a plaque carved with the intertwined letters *AR*, for Adelaide Regina.

Kate had only been home a matter of days when a phone call from William upended her world once again. “What? How is that possible?” Kate gasped. “No, it cannot be!” But it was: William's father had just called him with the news that test results confirmed the monarch was also suffering from cancer. The King was beginning treatments at home immediately; and although he would tell his immediate family what kind of cancer he was battling, he was less than forthcoming about the prognosis. The fact that Charles had not been diagnosed with prostate cancer—one of the more treatable cancers if caught early enough—was worrisome in and of itself. Queen Camilla, who had been at Charles's side when he was admitted to the hospital and visited him every day, fought back tears when doctors first told her of their suspicions.

For the moment, King Charles also wanted to delay going public just a few days more while he informed Prince Harry, Princess Anne, Prince Andrew, and Prince Edward. Coming in the midst of Harry and Meghan's

highly public feud with the rest of the royal family, the King's seemingly out-of-the-blue call took Harry by surprise. Ever since Megxit, the Sussexes' noisy departure from royal life, Harry had focused on building a new life for himself; his wife; and their young children, Archie and Lilibet, in California. He and his father had not spoken in nearly three years. Stunned by the news, Harry told the King he would be on the first plane to London. When later asked about Charles's medical outlook by a television reporter, Harry did not offer the customary words of reassurance. "That stays," he said, "between me and him."

On February 5, 2024, just one week after King Charles had waved to photographers as he left the London Clinic, Buckingham Palace issued a cautiously worded statement:

During The King's recent hospital procedure for benign prostate enlargement, a separate issue of concern was noted. Subsequent diagnostic tests have identified a form of cancer.

His Majesty has today commenced a schedule of regular treatments, during which time he has been advised by doctors to postpone public-facing duties. Throughout this period, His Majesty will continue to undertake State business and official paperwork as usual.

The King is grateful to his medical team for their swift intervention, which was made possible thanks to his recent hospital procedure. He remains wholly positive about his treatment and looks forward to returning to full public duty as soon as possible.

His Majesty has chosen to share his diagnosis to prevent speculation and in the hope it may assist public understanding for all those around the world who are affected by cancer.

The maelstrom of tabloid headlines that ensued was decidedly less matter-of-fact. "King's Cancer Shock" screamed the front page of the *Mirror*, while the *Sun* blared "King: I Have Cancer" and the more buttoned-down *Times* opted for the simpler but no less attention-grabbing "The King Has Cancer." Despite the Palace's efforts to downplay the King's

condition, there was no escaping the fact that it constituted a particularly cruel twist of fate. After waiting far longer than any other heir in British history to finally ascend to the throne—he was nearly seventy-four years old when he succeeded Elizabeth II, compared to Queen Victoria’s son Edward VII becoming monarch at fifty-nine—Charles had only been king for seventeen months and already faced the brutal fact that his own reign might be cut short.

Quickly, media attention turned to Harry’s arrival in London the day after the announcement and whether this visit with his father might signal a thaw in their relationship. There was conjecture that this moment might even lead to a truce with the once-beloved brother Harry had savaged in his memoir *Spare* one year earlier. But after just forty-five minutes with his father, Harry headed for Heathrow Airport and the eleven-hour, forty-minute flight home—without meeting William or any other member of the royal family. “Look, I love my family,” Harry later recalled. “The fact that I was able to get on a plane and go and see him and spend any time with, I’m grateful for that.” Asked by a journalist if his father’s illness could have a “reunifying effect” on the royal family, Harry answered, “Absolutely. Yeah, I’m sure. . . .”

What the King did not share with Harry was the terrible secret of Kate’s cancer diagnosis or the crushing weight of despair and responsibility that now rested on William’s shoulders. If the Prince of Wales was still angry over what he views as his brother’s betrayal, he was scarcely in the mood to make amends with Harry now that he alone was coping with the cancer diagnoses of both his father and his wife. When told that Harry wanted to meet with him, William’s reply, delivered in front of several Kensington Palace staff members, was succinct: “Tell Harry to bugger off.”

No one was more aware than Kate of the crushing burden now carried by her husband. William was always more emotionally fragile than Kate, given to bouts of depression and the occasional purple-veined rage. He had spoken openly about the psychological impact of his mother Diana’s death in a car crash when he was only fifteen years old—and the post-traumatic stress syndrome that he and Harry coped with to this day. Nor did Wil-

William's two years as an air ambulance helicopter pilot help matters. Spending twelve-hour days airlifting the victims of car crashes, falls, heart attacks, workplace accidents, and suicides to hospital emergency rooms had taken its toll. "When you're exposed to so much death, it impacts how you see the world," he later tried to explain. "You're exposed to such high levels of sadness, trauma, death that impacts your own life—and your family life. It's always there, and you're drawn into it. . . . You see the world as a much more depressed, darker, blacker place. . . . It leaves you with a very negative feeling where you think death is just around the corner everywhere I go. It's quite a burden to carry. I could feel it brewing up inside me, and I could feel it was going to be a problem."

William had always done such a superb job of concealing his innermost feelings from the public. Unlike his father, the king, whose fits of pique were legendary, William was all easygoing charm: handsome, fit, confident, engaging—everything a prince should be. Kate knew better. William had once spiraled into such a well of despair that she was deeply concerned that he, like his mother Diana might seriously consider taking his own life. William was sufficiently self-aware to do something about his own psychological issues. He sought counseling, continued to speak out about the growing epidemic of suicide—the leading killer of men under forty-five in the United Kingdom—and together with Kate and Harry launched the mental health charity Heads Together in 2016.

As worried as she was about William, Kate focused even more on hiding the truth of her diagnosis from their children, at least for now. To accomplish this, she knew William must bury his feelings, as he had done so effectively in the past, and create the illusion that all was well on the home front—that Kate was on the road to recovery from her surgery and his only added responsibility now was to fill in for the ailing king.

By late February, while William stepped in to perform investitures and accept the credentials of visiting diplomats—normally tasks performed by the monarch—no one noticed that Kate was quietly sneaking away to begin her twice-monthly treatments at London's Royal Marsden Hospital, founded in 1851 as the first hospital in the world dedicated to the study

and treatment of cancer. If Kate had been spotted there, the press intrusion would have been unbearable. Fortunately, at that moment Britain's usually unrelenting tabloid press was still unaware of her shocking diagnosis and was satisfied that Kate was simply at home recuperating from abdominal surgery.

With the coast relatively clear, Kate left Adelaide Cottage hunkered down in the back seat of a black Range Rover with her assistant at the wheel and made the fifty-minute drive to the Royal Marsden Hospital on Fulham Road in London's Chelsea district. To avoid being detected, the Princess of Wales was ushered into the hospital through a back entrance on Dovehouse Street—the same entrance used by Princess Diana when she wanted to make unpublicized visits to children she had befriended in the pediatric care unit. It was no small miracle that, as Kate arrived at the hospital to begin her chemotherapy, one of the city's distinctive red, tourist-crammed double-deckers passed just a few doors away—and no one seemed to notice.

She would make this journey every two or three weeks for the next six months, allowing time between each chemo session to recover. The use of the word “preventive” is misleading. The treatments, also known as adjuvant therapy, are designed to destroy any microscopic cancer cells left after surgery; the cancer isn't being prevented, since it's already there. While a patient might normally be seated in a room with others during the hour-long infusion sessions, Kate was hustled down a vacant corridor to a private room where an oncology nurse administered an IV infusion. Occasionally, the need for blood tests to monitor her progress meant she would be required to stay longer—instead of one hour, two, or in rare cases even three. By way of further thwarting nosy reporters, there was no evidence of the princess ever having been there—no dates and times of Kate's visits, no entries in the normal patient logs.

It was one thing to keep the press in the dark, but the children were another matter. After the first chemo session, Kate began to suffer side effects that persisted on and off for months: nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite leading to weight loss, even peripheral neuropathy—nerve damage that results in a tingling in the hands and feet. In Kate's case, all of these were mild

and fleeting. Nor did Kate require a “cold cap” to lower the temperature of the scalp—a means of combatting hair loss from the damaging effects of chemo. Kate’s iconic tresses, a major component of the trendsetting royal’s look and style, remained mercifully intact.

To more reliably deliver their cocktail of cancer-fighting drugs, doctors implanted a chemo port-a-cath in Kate’s upper chest. She felt pressure but little pain. She would soon come to regard this small device as a lifeline.

Still, side effects would persist, and one in particular left Kate reeling: fatigue. This was the hardest thing to conceal from the children, who were used to their energetic, athletic mother kicking a ball around with them on the lawn or tussling with them indoors. In truth, there were moments when she was simply so “wrung out,” as she told a friend, that she could barely stand up, much less play with the children.

Mummy was even absenting herself from their usual take-no-prisoners card games and marathon board games, instead retiring to her room for naps that wound up lasting for hours. Charlotte and Louis (“Lou Lou” to his doting siblings) grudgingly accepted the explanation their father offered them—that Mummy was still recuperating from her operation. Prince George, nicknamed “PG” by his sister and little brother, was older and innately more skeptical than either of his siblings—and that made him harder to convince. Kate was careful to put on more of an act around her eldest son, summoning all her strength to look like her old, upbeat, effervescent self. Once the children were off to school, she would collapse on the sofa.

Unsurprisingly, Kate leaned most heavily during this period on her mother. Carole Middleton was always there for her eldest child, and equally for Kate’s sister, Pippa, and brother, James—no more so than during times of illness. During Kate’s stay at the London Clinic, William, understandably preoccupied with filling in for his ailing father, was wary of luring the paparazzi to the hospital but visited every day anyway. Carole was a different story. Over the years, she had mastered the art of eluding the press, and was able to duck in and out of the clinic to visit her daughter as many as two or three times a day without being detected. Now Carole would get behind the wheel of her Audi 4X4 each morning and drive forty-three minutes

from Bucklebury Manor, the Middleton family residence in Berkshire, to Adelaide Cottage.

Notwithstanding the Waleses' insistence on no longer having any live-in servants, the children's longtime nanny, Maria Teresa Borrallo, had also been recruited to help out. When her services were required at Adelaide Cottage, Borrallo stayed at one of the nearby properties on the Windsor estate. From her early days as George's nanny, she was often photographed outfitted in a short-sleeved brown dress, white gloves, and bowler hat—the distinctive uniform worn by graduates of Norland College, the prestigious school for English nannies. Many of the qualifications Borrallo brought to the job—a mastery of the Korean martial art of tae kwon do, and defensive driving skills in the event of a paparazzi chase or, worse, a kidnapping attempt—were above and beyond anything that might have been required of royal nannies in the past.

Still, there was no way of protecting against conspiracy theories that spread like wildfire across the social media landscape. The day after Kate checked out of the London Clinic, Kensington Palace was forced to dismiss as “total nonsense” a report on Spanish television that Kate had been in a coma immediately following surgery and taken two weeks to regain consciousness. “It’s fundamentally, totally made up,” said a Palace spokesman, “and I’ll use polite English here: It’s absolutely not the case.”

As much as William wanted to be at Kate's side as she battled cancer, they both knew his absence from the public eye would only fuel more rumors. So, alternating with his aunt Princess Anne and his uncle Prince Edward, he continued as a stand-in for the King. Sadly, William's earnest attempt at drawing attention away from his seriously ill wife had little effect. By the time he walked the red carpet solo at the BAFTAs (British Academy of Film and Television Awards)—an event William and Kate always attended together—on February 18, 2024, the internet was awash in wild conspiracy theories. The frenzy grew even more intense ten days later, when at the last minute William backed out of a Windsor Castle memorial service for his godfather King Constantine of Greece “for personal reasons.” Among the flurry of memes, jokes, and baseless theories populating social media:

that Kate was recovering from plastic surgery, that she was growing out her bangs, that she was hanging out with American actor Pete Davidson, that she was about to reveal her true identity on the reality show *The Masked Singer*, that she was in the throes of a complete nervous breakdown—or that she and William were getting a divorce. The princess-in-a-coma storyline suddenly made a comeback, along with the macabre suggestion that Kate had in fact died and that the Palace, fearing repercussions, was searching for a body double to replace her.

Incredibly, British intelligence was alarmed to discover that the Russians were in part to blame. Social media accounts linked to a prominent Russian disinformation campaign called *Doppelgänger* capitalized on “Kategate,” as the phenomenon came to be known, exploiting the increased traffic to spread Russian propaganda aimed principally at Ukraine. (“It’s about destabilization,” security expert Martin Innes later explained. “It’s about undermining trust in institutions: government, monarchy, media—everything.”) To make matters worse, the bizarre stories about the princess were supercharged by artificial intelligence—specifically, by bots posting, retweeting, and sharing misinformation on the internet. “It feeds off itself,” observed Paddy Harverson, Kate and William’s former official spokesperson. “It’s a sort of permanent doom loop. And it’s the worst I’ve ever seen.”

On the first sunny Monday in March, Carole Middleton picked Kate up at Adelaide Cottage and drove the princess to Royal Marsden Hospital for her chemotherapy session. When a photo of the two women—Carole Middleton behind the wheel wearing a black coat and a grim expression, and Kate looking equally serious behind oversized sunglasses—appeared on TMZ in the United States, media outlets did not hesitate to point out that this was the first time Kate had been seen in seventy days.

It was a single grainy image, but enough to finally convince Kensington Palace that something had to be done to reassure the public without disclosing anything about Kate’s cancer battle—at least not until the children were out of school for Easter break and removed from the line of fire. “We were very clear from the outset,” read a new official statement, “that the Princess of Wales was out until after Easter and Kensington Palace would

only be providing updates when something was significant.” They added that Kate was “making good progress.”

For the moment, at least, the explanation seemed to have satisfied the majority of Britons: in a YouGov Poll, more than half the respondents felt they were getting the “right” amount of information about Kate’s condition. Still, it would take only one misstep to send conspiracy theorists back to their keyboards. Kate had always marked Mother’s Day by releasing a photo of her with the children, and she realized the gossipmongers would have a field day if she failed to release a heartwarming image this year. On the previous UK Mother’s Day, in 2023, the princess and all three offspring were photographed sitting in a tree. This time, Kate posed for her husband sitting on a wicker chair in jeans and a black sweater, her broadly smiling brood gathered around her. “Thank you for your kind wishes and continued support,” the princess wrote in her Instagram post. It was meant to be an informal family shot, but in the end it only succeeded in igniting a new firestorm of controversy.

Within hours of the photo’s release, the Associated Press yanked it from distribution, claiming that the image had been manipulated. The giveaway: “The odd alignment of Princess Charlotte’s left hand with the sleeve of her sweater.”

Soon, experts detected no fewer than sixteen tweaks to the image. Kate rushed to clean up this unexpected mess. “Like many amateur photographers,” she explained on social media, “I do occasionally experiment with editing. I wanted to express my apologies for any confusion the family photo we shared yesterday caused.”

With Kate still out of sight and the one official photo of her exposed as something less than wholly authentic, the rumor getting the most traction centered on the state of the royal marriage. To make matters worse, Kate is not wearing her famous sapphire-and-diamond engagement ring—the one that had belonged to her late mother-in-law, Princess Diana—in the controversial photo. Inevitably, much of the chatter revived nagging but baseless gossip that the Prince of Wales was engaged in a steamy affair with the royal couple’s longtime friend and married mother of three Rose Hanbury,

Marchioness of Cholmondeley (pronounced “Chumley”). Hanbury, who went down this same road when rumors about a possible affair burbled to the surface in 2019, was stunned when on March 12, 2024, American television personality Stephen Colbert breathed oxygen into the rumor during his late-night monologue on CBS. “The kingdom has been all aflutter by the seeming disappearance of Kate Middleton,” Colbert quipped. “Well, now internet sleuths are guessing that Kate’s absence may be related to her husband, the future king of England, William, having an affair. So I think we all know who the alleged other woman is. Say it with me: the Marchioness of Cholmondeley—what a beautiful name!” Riffing on Hanbury’s title, Colbert then went on to call her “the Marching Band of Chicanery” and “the Marcus Mumford of Chumbawamba.”

Hanbury, whose own 106-room Houghton Hall estate is located just four miles down the road from William and Kate’s country retreat, Anmer Hall, ordered her lawyers to write a letter to CBS threatening legal action. An on-air apology of sorts would be forthcoming, but only after news of Kate’s true condition was finally made public. Understandably, Kate always felt personally humiliated by whispered rumors of adultery. Having them broadcast on a nationally televised show in the United States only magnified the growing sense of helplessness. She could not, after all, dignify the rumors by addressing them directly. As Easter break approached, Kate could only hope that George, Charlotte, and Louis had been sufficiently shielded from the weird social media chatter—and that somehow, miraculously, they were oblivious to all the hyperventilating about Mummy. What they soon would be facing was all too real. Easter break had arrived.

Telling the children—that would be the hardest thing of all. Harder than enduring the aftermath of an hours-long operation, harder than suffering the stabbing pains in her abdomen that had landed her on the operating table at the London Clinic in the first place, harder even than desperately trying to conceal the truth from a world that so easily feasted on conspiracy theories. Usually, this ritual of picking up the children was a high point of the day: a leisurely fourteen-minute drive from Adelaide Cottage in Windsor Park, down the narrow stretch of A322 that leads past

the endless expanse of green lawns and ancient trees to Winkfield Row and Lambrook School.

There was even more reason to be upbeat today: the children were understandably excited by the prospect of two whole weeks without school. But this was also the moment when the family would have to pull together to confront some hard truths. As William drove their Portofino blue Range Rover SUV with his wife sitting ramrod straight at his side, they stared ahead in stony silence, dreading the task ahead.

For this one fleeting moment at least, the Prince and Princess of Wales were determined not to dampen the children's unfettered joy at having been sprung from school. With their ever-present royal protection detail of four Glock-armed officers right behind them, William and Kate pulled onto Lambrook's circular drive—for security reasons, they are the only parents allowed to drive right up to the front door rather than wait near the front gate—and bounded out of their car, arms outstretched, to greet the little princes and princess. With headmaster Jonathan Perry's wife, Jenny, rushing to keep up with them like a protective mother hen, the trio, all dressed in their identical navy blue school uniforms emblazoned with the interlocking letters *L* and *S* (for Lambrook School), scrambled to the waiting SUV, clambered into the back seat, and buckled up.

The chatter on the drive home would be familiar to any parent of school-age children—a patience-trying eruption of “Did *so!*” and “Did *NOT!*” rising exponentially until either Mummy or Pops spins around to lay down the law. For the most part, Louis remained silent while George and Charlotte bickered over whose turn it was to clean out the guinea pig cage—a messy task that often fell to Pops. “I have to spend my life cleaning out the guinea pig cage,” the future king once complained to a group of farmers, “because the children keep forgetting to do it!”

How do we tell them? What do we say? We don't want to frighten them. . . . Like so many moments in royal life, this one had to be expertly choreographed. Kate and William sat the children down at the long farmhouse-style table in the kitchen for their daily after-school snack. Usually, they were offered something healthy—yogurt, carrots, or perhaps an

apple. Instead, Mummy today served up their all-time favorite treat: chocolate brownies from Gail's Bakery in London.

While the children began to devour their brownies, Mummy gently talked about how much better she'd felt since coming home from the hospital in January, and how she looked forward to having fun with them over the next two weeks. Kate also explained why she sometimes still needed to rest—that when she was in the hospital, doctors found just a few of these tiny cancer cells, and to make sure they wouldn't come back, Mummy was taking some special medicine. It's the medicine, she told them, that sometimes made her tired.

Kate and William went on to say that they had hoped to keep everything in the family, but that was no longer possible. People wanted to know why Mummy had not been out and about with Pops, doing her usual job. When their parents asked if they had any questions, George, Charlotte, and Louis shook their heads. Much to their parents' relief, they did not appear traumatized—or even particularly surprised—by what they had been told.

Of course, all this would change once the world was made aware that Kate was being treated for cancer—something the Palace had explicitly said in the beginning was not the case—and the truth ricocheted around the world. Their children would not be able to escape the “Kate Has Cancer!” headlines, or the inevitable hysteria that followed. But the Prince and Princess of Wales did all they could to prepare them for the coming whirlwind.

Kate and William now agreed with their senior staff at Kensington Palace that the online frenzy and endless speculation had reached such a fever pitch that a public announcement was critical. Rather than have the Palace simply issue a statement similar to the King's announcement of his cancer diagnosis, Kate wanted to share the news in a personal video message. She insisted on writing the statement herself—“This must be in my words,” she told her staff—and, rather than have the Palace press record the video, she wanted the BBC to send out a production crew. And not just any crew, but the crew that had covered her father-in-law's coronation. The BBC agreed, as long as it was clear that it would not edit the video—no one wanted another scandal

like the one triggered by Kate's Mother's Day snapshot. The BBC also declined to have anything to do with the video's distribution. "We wanted to distance ourselves from any possible blowback," one crew member later said, "so we left everything up to the Princess."

Accordingly, Kate also chose the venue—a favorite bench in the middle of Windsor Castle's Moat Garden. On March 20, a sunny Wednesday, the Princess of Wales took her place against a backdrop of daffodils and cherry blossoms. She wore blue jeans and one of her most comforting and familiar articles of clothing—an \$821 black-and-white-striped Erdem Lotus sweater. There was another reason Kate plucked this particular sweater out of her closet. Her dress size (UK women's size 6, US women's size 2) and her twenty-four-inch waist had always prompted unfounded rumors that, like Princess Diana, she suffered from an eating disorder. Now that she had lost fifteen pounds during chemo, the broad horizontal stripes would make Kate look heavier than her 110 pounds.

With William watching from behind the cameras, Kate, her hands folded demurely in her lap with her iconic sapphire-and-diamond engagement ring fully visible, did a brief rehearsal using a teleprompter. Then she took a deep breath, looked directly into the camera, and delivered a flawless two-minute-and-fifteen-second performance:

"I wanted to take this opportunity to say thank you, personally, for all the wonderful messages of support and for your understanding whilst I have been recovering from surgery.

"It has been an incredibly tough couple of months for our entire family, but I've had a fantastic medical team who have taken great care of me, for which I am so grateful.

"In January, I underwent major abdominal surgery in London; and at the time, it was thought that my condition was noncancerous. The surgery was successful. However, tests after the operation found cancer had been present. My medical team therefore advised that I should undergo a course of preventative chemotherapy, and I am now in the early stages of that treatment.

“This of course came as a huge shock, and William and I have been doing everything we can to process and manage this privately for the sake of our young family.

“As you can imagine, this has taken time. It has taken me time to recover from major surgery in order to start my treatment. But, most importantly, it has taken us time to explain everything to George, Charlotte, and Louis in a way that is appropriate for them, and to reassure them that I am going to be okay.

“As I have said to them, I am well and getting stronger every day by focusing on the things that will help me heal in my mind, body, and spirits.

“Having William by my side is a great source of comfort and reassurance, too. As is the love, support, and kindness that has been shown by so many of you. It means so much to us both.

“We hope that you will understand that, as a family, we now need some time, space, and privacy while I complete my treatment. My work has always brought me a deep sense of joy and I look forward to being back when I am able, but for now I must focus on making a full recovery.”

It is at the very end that Kate looks down and pauses for a thoughtful moment. “At this time,” she concludes, “I am also thinking of all those whose lives have been affected by cancer. For everyone facing this disease, in whatever form, please do not lose faith or hope. You are not alone.”

Two days later, the video was released to the media, sending shock waves around the globe. The King, whose own treatment for an undisclosed type of cancer was proving more grueling than expected, wept when he and Queen Camilla screened Kate’s video in advance. His Majesty was the first to issue a statement saying he was “so proud of Catherine for her courage.” Noting that he remained “in the closest of contact” with his “beloved daughter-in-law,” King Charles promised that he and Camilla would continue to “offer our love and support to their whole family through this difficult time.”