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missy takes manhattan

After a very public break-up and a retreat from the young royal set, Lady Melissa Percy is back, with the perfect husband-to-be and a baby on the way. Danielle Lawler visits the duke's daughter at her Park Avenue palace

Photographed by Christopher Sturman
Styled by Frederica Lovell-Pank

ROYAL CONNECTIONS
Above, Missy (right) with Chelsy Davy at Princess Eugenie's wedding at Windsor, 2018. Opposite, on the terrace of her New York house

The west London social scene definitely lost some of its sparkle when that effervescent golden girl, Lady Melissa Percy, went missing in action.

Her family is one of England's oldest, its history entwined with royalty. So it was only natural that the Duke of Northumberland's second daughter would become a regular at the most exclusive parties in London. Part of the young royal set, Missy, as she's universally known, was papped at nightclubs with Princes William and Harry – she even married one of their best friends, Thomas van Straubenzee, in 2013, in what was dubbed the 'Royal Wedding of the North'. She was best friends, too, with Chelsy Davy, the Ferrys and the like, whisking them back to hers for outdoor pursuits at the weekends. 'Hers' being Northumberland pile Alnwick Castle (or Harry Potter's Hogwarts, as it's now commonly known), the Percys' ancestral home for more than 700 years.

In 2016, life took a wrong turn for Missy. She and Thomas divorced, just three years after their lavish wedding. It left her shattered – and out of social sight. She went to a Californian retreat to heal, before jetting off to a Japanese ski resort to work as a chef and driver. 'I went there thinking I was being adventurous,' Missy, now 32, laughs, 'and then thought, "What *am* I doing?" There was so much snow, it was terrifying and I freaked out.' But it gave her the head space to figure out her next step, setting up Mistamina – a country clothing brand, inspired by her passion for fishing and shooting – and deciding to say yes to any positive opportunities that came her way. Taking her chances meant taking a big bite out of the Big Apple and settling in New York, where a spark of Oppenheim-inspired spontaneity has led Missy to find happiness once again.

Her home is now a modern four-storey townhouse on Park Avenue, decorated with treasures from Alnwick, a quirky collection of objects that includes a hanging shark, and pictures of her loved ones covering surface after surface. She lives there with Remy Trafelet, 49, an American billionaire financier, whom she has been discreetly dating for the past three years; her three future stepchildren, Remy, 16, Charlotte, 14, and Franny, 11, stay from time to time. There is a diamond band on her engagement finger (temporarily taking the place of the ▷

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

◁ huge yellow diamond by JAR with which Remy proposed, currently being resized in Paris) and a growing baby bump she absentmindedly strokes as she sips a mug of decaf tea. Her megawatt smile is firmly back in place, just as it was on a rare outing to Windsor for Princess Eugenie's wedding in 2018.

'You know, I never actually liked going out,' she says, as she pours more tea from a steaming pot. 'I was good at it, but I always looked forward to coming back and getting into my pyjamas. I'm a home person, I love being in the country.' She smiles at her fiancé. 'Remy knows I'm in a happy place when he comes back from work and finds me cooking.' Sinking into the cosy oatmeal sofas of their open-plan living room, designed with the help of interiors guru Gil Schafer, the pair laugh easily together as they recall how their whirlwind romance began after an 'awkward' kitchen supper back in 2017, set up by mutual friends Laetitia and Laurie Oppenheim.

'It was so cringe,' says Missy, laughing. 'They knew how much we had in common, so kept prompting me with questions about shooting in Alnwick. As if I would talk about that on a first date! And whenever Remy and I started talking, the whole table would go silent, trying to listen to what we were saying.' Remy shared the cringe. 'It was obvious we were being set up, but they were dead right,' he says. 'They'd first mentioned a girl – Missy – who they thought I should meet during a shooting trip at my plantation in Georgia, but I ignored it.'

No surprise, really. Remy was going through his own public marathon of a divorce battle – the bitter $200 million clash with his ex, Manhattan socialite Lara, was splashed all over the New York press. A new relationship was the last thing on his mind. 'I was in the third year of the divorce, but I was still going through all the silly legal stuff. I didn't think twice about meeting anyone, I didn't even remember who it was they talked about. But they were really pushing it.

'I go back and forth to London for work,' Remy continues, 'so they set up the dinner. Even though it was awkward, they were so sweet. And we talked about fishing, shooting, our lives and everything – we have so many common interests. But Missy is also an amazing person, which I quickly realised.'

So quickly that when, just days later, Missy was due to launch her Mistamina clothing brand, Remy sent her a good luck text. A month later, he was still thinking about her. He sent her a photo of his teenage son catching a salmon, as it reminded him of a picture Missy had shown him at dinner of her at the age of seven, grinning with no front teeth, as she held aloft her own first big catch. Intrigued, Missy decided to be forward and ask him to dinner. He couldn't make it, so he invited her for a first, unset-up date at his salmon camp on the Moisie River in Canada instead. She said yes.

'It was punchy on both our parts,' says Missy, still surprised by their fateful leap of faith. 'But it was also part of [getting over] my divorce; within reason, I'd say yes to everything. I was determined to go and do things and not hide out; go on adventures and open doors, not close them.' So much so that, 'the night before I was going to Canada, I was having a barbecue with Mum and Dad, and Dad said, "I hear you are off fishing tomorrow." And I said, "Yes, I'm going with this guy, Remy," and he said, "Remy who?" But I didn't know!' Missy roars with laughter. 'After the shock, Dad said, "Well, I've got some good fishing flies if you want to borrow them."'

By the time the pair arrived at the isolated camp, with no phone reception, no English-speaking locals and only basic wooden huts to stay in, Remy was already feeling a special connection. 'We were together nine hours a day for three days in the middle of nowhere, in a canoe in the rain, talking and fishing. It's one of my favourite places in the world and it was the most amazing place to get to know someone. And she caught lots of salmon.'

And they talked. 'I was nonstop chatting,' admits Missy, who was taken aback to discover Remy had already stayed at two of her ancestral family homes, Alnwick and Burncastle Lodge in the Scottish Borders. 'We got to know each other incredibly quickly; I've never been with ▷

EASY LIVING

Below and opposite, Missy's open-plan living room, where a painting she spotted in a Mayfair gallery hangs above a sofa

Polo-neck bodysuit, £160, by **WOLFORD**. Wool dress, £794, by **CUSHNIE**. Leather boots, £496, by **PARIS TEXAS**. Earrings, £271, by **JENNIFER FISHER**. Gold ring with yellow and white diamonds, £19,400, by **NINA RUNSDORF**

Previous page, polo-neck bodysuit, £160, by **WOLFORD**. Leather coat, £1,546, by **FLEUR DU MAL**. Leather boots, £1,625, by **JIMMY CHOO**

LADY IN RED
Missy with fiancé Remy Trafelet. The pictures on the wall, by Alexander Creswell, are of her family seat, Alnwick Castle

Georgette blouse, £290; georgette skirt, £570; satin shoes, £595; strass earrings, £395, all by **MULBERRY**

◁ someone who has such a similar character to me. We're both quite hyper. I was surprised I was so happy, too; I never thought, "Oh god, what's happening?" It felt so normal, so natural.'

During the trip, talk inevitably turned to their respective divorces. 'It was so nice to speak to someone who understood,' says Missy, smiling at Remy. 'We both had marriages that didn't work and learnt a lot from them, and we hope not to make the same mistakes in this one. We are so aware of the things that can creep in if you don't make a conscious effort to work at it. We're much wiser this time around.'

Recalling her own very public break-up, Missy admits the scrutiny she was under was at times unbearable – and almost unavoidable, given the rarefied circles she'd been moving in. Worse, because she had been living in America, playing professional tennis from the age of 14 to 21, her social life suffered. 'Every single person I met socially was through Thomas,' she says. People she had once regarded as friends started 'inevitably' to take sides, so she decided to step away and checked into the Golden Door, a Californian health and wellness retreat favoured by Hollywood stars.

'I felt like a new person when I got back,' she says. 'I was on this path and let nothing affect me, whatever was written about me, whatever was said. I learnt how to meditate and had a real shell around me. I remember a horrible article came out and all my family were hiding it from me. I had already seen it and knew they were hiding it, but I just went to my room and meditated. I fell asleep and when I woke up everyone was like, "Are you OK?" Before, I would have reacted differently, but I was like, "Who cares? Nobody really knows [the truth]."'

Thankfully, Missy wasn't put off the idea of romance. After six months of long-distance dating, she moved in with Remy in New York, and devised a business plan to launch Mistamina in America. 'I knew America would be the perfect market, especially around Texas, Georgia, Carolina. That's where all the girls who do sports like riding, quail hunting and fishing are based.'

Things moved quickly. 'I knew straight away the kids were really going to love Missy,' smiles Remy, fiddling with a beaded bracelet made by his youngest daughter. 'So us getting married was an open secret; because of what the children had been through with the divorce, [the relationship] had to be extremely serious. So it was always obvious that it was heading that way for me.'

The children mattered to Missy, too. 'I know some people say they'd rather not take on ▷

WHAT'S THE CATCH?
The hanging shark was a present from Remy. Although Missy loves sharks, it was also a reminder of a close encounter she had on a diving trip with Remy in the Seychelles

Wool jumper, £1,434, by **ZAC POSEN**. Wool trousers, £795, by **ROKSANDA** at **HARVEY NICHOLS**. Suede shoes, £475, by **RUPERT SANDERSON**. Earrings, £271, by **JENNIFER FISHER**

For stockists, see Address Book.
Hair & Make-up: Michelle Coursey.
Photographer's Assistant: Evan Mann.
Producer: Muffie Sproat

FAMILY SEAT

Above, the desk and chair came from Alnwick. Right, Missy's grandparents at their wedding in 1946, alongside Royal Family members including George VI, Queen Mary, the Queen Mother and Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret

◁ someone with kids, but I was the opposite – I really liked that he had children,' she says. 'I remember the first time I met them so well, because they checked me out and said, "Cool shoes."' She says she gets excited when she picks up his youngest daughter from school ('It's good practice') and the children have been warmly welcomed into the Percy clan with trips to Alnwick, though Missy shies away from the 'whole stepmum thing. I feel I can be a better older-sister figure at the moment.' But her role as a stepmother became inevitable in May. First, during a drive on the grouse moor, Remy nervously asked Missy's father for her hand. Then, after a delicious lunch for two at Harry's Bar in London, Missy and Remy returned to the west London house where they were staying, and Remy, heart racing, got down on one knee and proposed with the yellow-diamond ring Missy had chosen six months earlier on a romantic trip to Paris.

'I felt this surge of energy come over me,' remembers Missy. 'I didn't cry because I was just so happy. I said, "Of course, of course I will!"'

Apart from telling her family and a couple of her closest girlfriends, including Chelsy, they kept the news to themselves. The plan had been to marry in spring 2020. 'Then we found out in June, when we went back to where we had our date on the Moisie, that Missy was pregnant,' smiles Remy, clearly not fazed at the prospect of more sleepless nights. 'We thought it would take a while, but it happened a lot quicker.'

'Then there were tears. I was over the moon,' grins Missy. Her parents are equally thrilled. Her younger brother, Lord Max, has just had a daughter, Romy, with his wife, Princess Nora of Oettingen-Spielberg, so there's already a playmate to hand. 'Mum keeps calling to tell me to rest and talk about all the things she has bought for the nursery. There's even talk of redecorating my "princess" bedroom in Alnwick, which has been the same since I was 10.'

Remy persuaded Missy it would be fun not to find out the sex of the baby. 'Normally in life, surprises are good or bad, but this is good no matter what,' he says. But the suspense is killing Missy, who keeps coming up with ways to wheedle the news out of her doctor.

Whether the baby is a girl or a boy, it is guaranteed to grow up with a love of the great outdoors. The lifestyle the couple have in America is almost a carbon copy of the life Missy has back in Britain; instead of escaping to Scotland for their game fix, they head to Remy's plantation in Georgia for quail hunting and fishing.

It's there that they plan to invite their family and friends for a three-day wedding next year, with a service led by the Rev Canon Paul Scott, of St Michael's Church in Alnwick. They'll have a formal legal service, just the two of them, before the baby is born. 'Alnwick would just be wrong,' says Missy. 'The plantation was one of the first places I visited with Remy, and it's beautiful, like something out of *Gone with the Wind*.'

She won't be wearing the family tiara again, either, as she did for her first marriage. 'One of [Remy's] girls must have googled me and seen a picture of me in it and asked Remy if I was a princess,' grins Missy, who rarely even uses her title. 'My dream would be to have Remy [Jnr] as best man, and the girls as my bridesmaids, one walking down the aisle with my dog, Uni, and the other carrying the baby – our family.'

Missy recently swapped 'the sweetest messages' of congratulations with her friend Princess Beatrice, who also got engaged in 2019, to Edoardo Mapelli Mozzi. But returning to London for Princess Eugenie's wedding was daunting – her ex, Thomas, who she hadn't seen in three years, was expected, plus former party pals, including Princes William and Harry, who had been her ushers. While she didn't get a chance to speak to the Princes, or meet Meghan ('It was a huge wedding,' she says graciously), she put old ghosts to rest.

'Thomas and I met before [the wedding] for a drink. I introduced him to Remy… Actually, he introduced himself to Remy, so it was great. It felt like we'd closed a chapter. And he's engaged now, too, so it's perfect. It's great we are both happy again.'

In the meantime, there's one piece of icing to put on her cake: Missy is hoping Chelsy will help her plan a hen do in Las Vegas. 'I've never been,' she yelps. 'And I figure after I've had the baby, I'll be desperate for a night out, so where better to go?'

For one night only, the King's Road's loss will be Las Vegas's gain. Even if Missy is in her slippers by midnight. □