

# THIS WAS NO WILD DYNASTY PLOT – A REAL-LIFE DR EVIL HELD MY DAUGHTER IN HIS CLUTCHES

The US soap actress Catherine Oxenberg tells *Helena de Bertodano* how she battled to free her child from enslavement by a sex cult and its malign leader

At first glance the scene of domesticity at Catherine Oxenberg's Malibu home seems unexceptional. Her daughter India has left a bowl of homemade dough to rise on the kitchen counter. The Dynasty actress's mother, Princess Elizabeth of Yugoslavia, sips a mug of tea while Frosty, the family cat, weaves between her legs. Oxenberg is on the phone arranging delivery of a coop – she has just bought 14 chickens.

Yet this time a year ago such a vignette would have been unthinkable. India, 27, was part of a sinister cult that had turned her against her mother, cutting her completely out of her life. "I thought I'd lost her," says Oxenberg, her eyes filling with tears. "It's such a relief to have her home – like the return of the prodigal son."

Thanks to Oxenberg's tireless efforts to expose the cult and free her daughter, its leader, Keith Raniere, is now behind bars, awaiting trial on charges including sex trafficking. His trial is scheduled for January next year and, if found guilty, he faces life in jail.

It was Oxenberg herself who introduced India to the cult back in 2011 – thinking it was a self-help course to hone business skills. Founded by Raniere in 1998, Nxivm – pronounced "Nexium" – reportedly attracted about 16,000 people. Oxenberg, 57 yesterday, admits she's always been a sucker for alternative ideas. "I tried every kooky idea out there," she writes in her book about the ordeal. "I'd meditated, chanted, 12-stepped, past-life-regressed, fasted, rehabbed and sweated in lodges."

At the time, India had ideas of opening a bakery. Oxenberg thought the course might give her an edge. "I thought it was a

“I didn't know I was the type of parent that would take a bullet for my kid”

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benign seminar. Oh, was I wrong!" Alarm bells went off in Oxenberg's head at the first meeting, especially when those attending were told they would learn life-changing skills after paying several thousand more dollars. India, however, was gripped.

So Oxenberg signed them both up – and her now ex-husband, the actor Casper Van Dien, with whom she has two younger daughters. Within a year India had become a "coach" at Nxivm and was distancing herself from her family. When India came into an inheritance at 21, she started giving money to the group. At first Oxenberg stood back: "I wanted to be respectful of her choices."

But in April last year she received a phone call from a former member. "You have to save India," said the woman, revealing that India was part of Nxivm's secret slave-master inner group. To join, women signed vows of obedience and gave damaging material about themselves that could be used to keep them silent. They were put on starvation diets and, blindfold and naked, were branded with Raniere's initials. "He's having sex with at least 20 of them," she was told.

India, who had been branded, was dangerously thin and her hair was falling out in clumps. Oxenberg swung into action: first she tried to stage an intervention, which failed; then she started gathering evidence to get the police and FBI involved, to no effect. As a last resort, she took the story public. When The New York Times ran an exposé on the cult last October, the authorities moved in.

Born in New York in 1961, Oxenberg is no stranger to family drama. One of her earliest memories is an argument between her parents, Princess Elizabeth and Howard Oxenberg, a close friend of the Kennedys. "I remember being at a cocktail party and my mum smashed a champagne glass on my dad's head. And that seemed completely normal."

After her parents divorced, she moved to London with her mother and sister. As second cousin once removed to Prince Charles, she moved in royal circles and dated Prince Andrew. "He was very romantic," she says. "He sent huge boxes of long-stemmed red roses to my room in Claridge's." Once, at a ball for Charles and Diana, Princess of Wales, he took her aside and, without exactly proposing, tried to gauge her interest.

"He said: 'Do you think you'd be interested in marrying someone like me, or would you prefer to be an actress?' I said: 'I'd really prefer to be an actress.'"

She had become obsessed with acting when her mother was engaged to the actor Richard Burton (between his divorce and remarriage to Elizabeth Taylor). "I was 13 and he took me on sets. The whole lifestyle was so alluring. Whereas the royal lifestyle was not."

The two lifestyles intersected when, at 19, she was cast as Diana in a television movie. "I was thrilled, then torn because my mum was so concerned about how the royal family was going to take the fact that I was mimicking one of theirs."

Charles gave the royal seal of approval. "He said, 'If they're going to make the film anyway, at least Catherine can bring dignity to the role' – which was very sweet." She pauses. "Not that I was ever invited back to Buckingham Palace after that."

Later she appeared in the soap opera Dynasty. We try to remember her character's absurd story arc. "I try to seduce my mother's husband." Successfully? "I can't remember," says Oxenberg. "I blocked it out. Then I meet a prince and at our wedding everyone gets shot." She laughs: "It was so kitsch and arch and melodramatic but it never apologised for what it was. It's just sad for me that my fame was in a decade that was so unattractive: the shoulder pads and the hair..."

Oxenberg's real life proved stranger still. The cult episode, she says, "was no Hollywood movie. Keith was a real-life Dr Evil."

Throughout the ordeal, her 82-year-old mother has been a pillar of strength, her no-nonsense approach bringing a touch of hilarity to the proceedings. For months India would speak only to her, not her mother. When Nxivm hired a psychiatrist to mediate between India and her mother, Elizabeth wrote to her granddaughter: "Darling, I know this man may seem like a dear old dicky bird, but he has been paid a huge sum of money by Nxivm to report to them what they want to hear, so how can he be a mediator? You were always exceptionally bright, so there is no excuse to suddenly lose all perspective..."

Oxenberg knew she risked alienating India for ever, but it was a price she was prepared to pay if it meant saving her. "I didn't know before I was the type of parent that would take a bullet for my kid. There were death threats... My goal was not to stop until she was safe and sound."

We glimpse India, who looks healthy and happy, outside with her boyfriend, returning from the beach. "We like him," whispers Oxenberg. "He's been instrumental in helping her." Indeed India recently moved back home, and Oxenberg is trying not to grill her about her experience. "If she opens the dialogue in that direction, then I'm responsive. I'm just so grateful to be spending time with her. We go hiking and grocery shopping. I'm treasuring every shared experience – nothing is too mundane."

Oxenberg says she no longer takes anyone in her family for granted. "We always assume there's this indelible bond. But in a nanosecond my daughter was gone."

For years, says Oxenberg, she felt "anguish" that she had inadvertently exposed India to such danger. "[But] if I hadn't, this man would be still exploiting and abusing. She participated in bringing down a very dark operator."

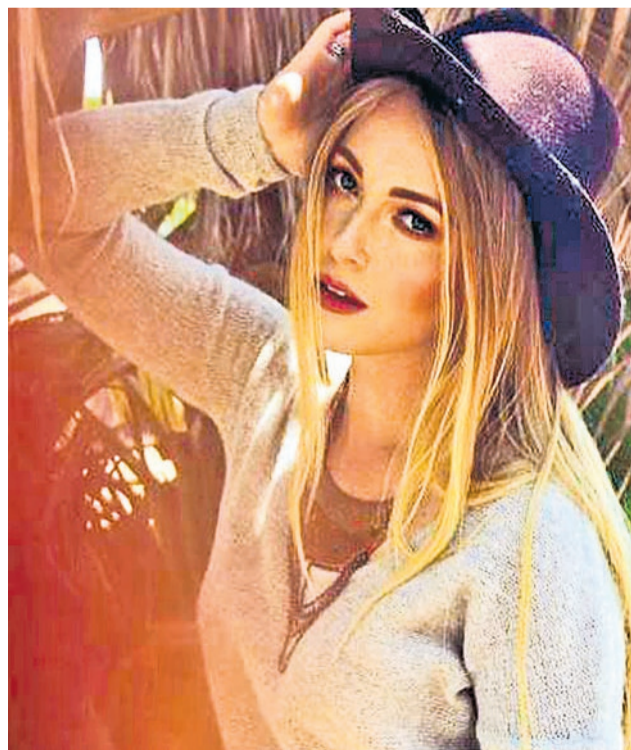
The future may be uncertain but Oxenberg is sure of one thing: she will never again go near a self-help group. "It's all psychobabble bullshit."

*Captive*, by Catherine Oxenberg, is published by Simon & Schuster US

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Catherine Oxenberg with India: she agonised over the fact she had exposed her daughter to danger



India Oxenberg was branded with the cult leader's initials, top