

Chapter 1 – A New Mother

“This is it, lass—the final day of our honeymoon.”

Quinn put the last bag in the trunk of the car and then walked over to where Mandy was watching him. “How do you feel about going home today?”

They’d just spend six weeks on the Continent and were now heading back to Scotland to begin their married life. Yesterday they’d crossed the Channel on a ferry from France and had driven as far as Oxford, the famous university town that Mandy had always wanted to see. They’d spent the night there and were now only six-and-a-half hours from being home again in Scotland.

“Lass?” Quinn looked expectantly at Mandy, who seemed lost in her own thoughts. He put an arm around her and drew her close.

“Sorry, I was thinking about that little café in Calais.” She looked up at him with one of those smiles that drove him crazy—half youthful insouciance and half irresistible seductress.

“So how do you feel about going home again?” he asked again.

“I’m not sure. I loved every minute of our trip, and, honestly, I could have stayed twice as long, but I know you need to get home again.”

“*We* need to get home,” he corrected her. “We need to check on how the house renovations are coming along, and we should probably find a place in Edinburgh, too.”

The house in question was on the Earl of Morleton’s lands and was reserved for the earl’s heir, in this case, Quinn, his firstborn son, who was the viscount. After a struggle to gain his father’s permission, he’d finally wed Mandy, the young woman he’d met in Houston the previous year. They were deeply in love, but for Mandy, now Lady Amanda, learning about a completely new way of life had been difficult.

Mandy sighed. “It will be totally real life when we get home, won’t it? No more wedding plans or anything. What will I do all day?”

“You’ll still have Maisie and lots of decisions to make about the house. And don’t forget, there will still be tutors.”

Mandy rolled her eyes. Maisie was Quinn’s vivacious sister, and the two of them were great friends, but the tutors were a different matter. Ever since she’d first arrived in Scotland almost eight months ago, the family had brought in a series of tutors to help her learn what a young viscountess was expected to know—Scottish history and culture, an understanding of the aristocracy, protocol, and even a mastery of the Queen’s English.

At first, Mandy’d been an enthusiastic student, but as her interest in names and dates that had no meaning to her had waned, a bad report from her tutors had earned her a trip over Quinn’s knee. Ever since, she’d been a conscientious pupil, but it still wasn’t always interesting.

“I’d like to do some kind of writing,” she said. She had supported herself writing in Houston, and, in fact, they’d met when she’d interviewed him for an article.

“How’s your Queen’s English coming along?”

“It’s ever so fine, old chap,” she replied in her very best straight-from-the-movies accent.

Quinn laughed and gave her a kiss. “We need to get going. Are you ready?”

Mandy nodded but then added, “Wait! I have something else I want to put in the trunk.”

Quinn turned, shrugged his shoulders, and gave her a blank look.

Mandy frowned at him. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Quinn ignored the question. “All right, let’s go,” he said as he opened her door.

“Quinn, I need to put something in the trunk,” she repeated. “Would you please pop it?”

Quinn responded the same as before, shrugging his shoulders and looking at her as if he had no idea what she wanted.

“What are you doing?” she demanded impatiently, glaring at him.

“Trying to get you into the car.”

“But I need you to open the trunk first.”

“This car doesn’t have a trunk.”

“What do you mean? What are you doing?” She sounded thoroughly annoyed.

Quinn looked at her a moment and then replied, “I’m trying to help you with your Queen’s English.”

“It seems to me like you’re trying to wreck our last day.”

A shadow flitted across Quinn’s face, and he took Mandy’s hand and walked her to the front of the car. “What is this called?” he asked, pointing at the hood.

Mandy scowled at him briefly as awareness hit. “I don’t believe you!” she said, shaking her head.

“What’s it called?” he repeated.

“A bonnet.”

“Very good. And you would like me to open what?”

“The boot.” Mandy rolled her eyes. “Oh please, my lord, open the boot.”

“Very good again. Of course your attitude could use a little work now.” He gave her a smack on her backside, but Mandy knew he wasn’t really upset with her. Quinn popped the ‘boot’ and watched as she put a large bag in.

“Now can we go?” he asked.

“If you’d been bilingual, we could have gone five minutes ago.” She smiled sweetly at him before continuing. “Quinn, I know those words, and you know that I know them, so why did you make such a big deal out of them?”

“I was making a point. You know the words, but you haven’t adopted any of them into your own vocabulary. If you want to write, you need to sound more local. Either that or write as a total outsider.”

“There’s an idea! Maybe I could write a column about life in Scotland from an American perspective.”

Quinn looked unenthusiastic. “That might cause some ripples, at least now. Maybe sometime in the future.”

As they zipped along the motorway, they reminisced about the last six weeks. It had all been new for Mandy, who’d never been in Europe before.

“What was your single favorite place?” Quinn asked. He’d thoroughly enjoyed sharing her excitement as she’d visited places she’d dreamed of and others she’d never even heard of.

“I don’t know that I could name just one,” she answered slowly as she thought about everywhere they’d been in the last six weeks. “I’d maybe say Paris, but that sounds trite, because everyone loves Paris. I loved driving on the country roads in Italy, but I also loved seeing the castles on the Rhine River.”

Then she suddenly changed subjects. “I didn’t know you knew all those languages. That was very impressive.”

She'd been surprised when they'd first arrived in France to discover Quinn spoke fluent French, and, as the trip had progressed, she'd also discovered he knew enough sketchy Italian and German to get by.

Quinn smiled. "I told you, my education was rather universal, and the German came from a German nanny I once had." He chuckled and added, "She was a true joy."

"You never told me about her."

"There are many things I've never told you," he replied with an amused look. "I don't find tales of a nanny who could have given lessons to Hitler to be the best way of entertaining charming young ladies."

Mandy gave him her best faux-stern look. "And exactly how many young ladies were you trying to entertain?"

"From the day I met you, only one." He reached his hand out and squeezed her thigh.

Mandy giggled but then added more seriously, "Someday I'd really like to hear about your childhood. You've never said much about it."

"Maybe someday," he answered noncommittally.

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"It's lovely to have you two back again," remarked Quinn's mother, Lady Isobel, as she looked at them across the dinner table.

"Indeed," agreed the earl, succinctly. Then, looking at Quinn, he continued, "Considering your stay in Houston, you've spent more time away from home than here in the last year or so."

"Yes, sir, but I think that's behind me now," he answered as he smiled at Mandy.

The struggle to obtain his father's permission to marry a woman from Texas had almost torn their family apart, and Quinn owed a huge debt of gratitude to his mother, who had somehow convinced his father to at least meet Mandy. There had been some very tense times, and Quinn had come close to renouncing his position as heir.

"Tell me, Amanda, what did you think about Europe?" asked Lady Isobel as she looked at her young daughter-in-law.

"I loved it, thank you, Lady Isobel," replied Mandy enthusiastically. "It was like walking through a huge history book."

Lady Isobel smiled and nodded, then said, "If you're free after dinner, Amanda, could you join me for a few minutes in the small parlor? I have a matter I'd like to discuss with you."

Mandy's stomach did a flip-flop. Why did the countess want to see her? Had she done something wrong? Quinn's mother had always treated her well, but spending private time together was very unusual.

"Yes, of course." Mandy glanced at Quinn, who had a surprised look on his face.

She barely heard the rest of the conversation for worrying about why Lady Isobel wanted to see her. As everyone rose at the end of dinner, Quinn came over and took her hand.

"What's going on?" he asked, nodding his head slightly in his mother's direction.

"I have no idea," she answered unhappily. "Do you think she's mad at me about something?"

"No, not really. I guess you'll just have to go find out what she wants. I'll be upstairs." He squeezed her hand for moral support and then left.

A few minutes later, Mandy hesitated at the door to the small parlor.

"Come in, Amanda," the countess invited when she caught sight of her. "Come sit down here close to me."

“Yes, ma’am,” Mandy answered with her best Texas manners. She knew ‘ma’am’ wasn’t really used in such situations, but she wasn’t sure what else she should say. Probably ‘Lady Isobel’ again.

“Now that you and Quinn are married, Amanda, I think it’s time that you called me ‘Mother.’ The other titles are a bit formal and cumbersome under the circumstances, don’t you think? Would you feel comfortable calling me ‘Mother?’”

Mandy stared at her. This was the last thing she’d expected to hear. She realized she’d been holding her breath and let it out again.

“Yes, ma’am—I mean Mother,” she answered quickly. “I think that would be really nice. Thank you.”

“Well, then, that’s settled.” She smiled at the young woman who was so eager to please her new family. “The earl is a bit more formal, so I think it would be best if you didn’t change your manner of address with him quite yet.”

“Oh, no ma—Mother!” agreed Mandy, unable to imagine calling the stern earl by an intimate name.

“Well then, that’s all I needed from you. I’m sure Quinn is pacing the floor awaiting your return, so let’s not keep him waiting.” The countess nodded slightly, and Mandy knew that was her dismissal.

“Thank you very much,” said Mandy as she stood up. Then she hastily added, “Mother.”

“You’re very welcome, Amanda.”

“So what did my mother want?” asked Quinn several minutes later when Amanda arrived in their room.

“You’re not going to believe it! She wants me to call her ‘Mother.’”

“Really?” Quinn was surprised. His mother was a kind person, but she had all the formality normal in a landed family. “She must really like you, because that was very quick.”

He sat down on a sofa and patted the cushion next to him, and Mandy came over and joined him. Then he continued. “How do you feel about it? Are you comfortable calling her ‘Mother,’ or does it conflict with how you view your own mother?”

Mandy looked at him in disbelief. “How I view my own mother?”

Mandy had a very strained relationship with her mother going back to her childhood. Her mother hadn’t been much interested in motherhood, and the problem had been exacerbated by the fact that Mandy looked just like her father, who had left when she was five. There were many ins and outs to the mother-daughter relationship, but her mother had not been invited to the wedding and, in fact, had not yet been notified of it.

Quinn made a gesture indicating that perhaps his words weren’t quite what he should have said.

“All right, I know you don’t have a close relationship, but still, I didn’t know if calling someone else ‘Mother’ would feel strange.”

“To tell you the truth, I’m not sure yet,” answered Mandy slowly. “It was just so nice of your mother to want me to call her that. I was so afraid to come to Scotland, but ever since I’ve been here, I keep getting more and more family. It’s really strange, but strange in a good way.”

Both of Mandy’s parents had been American of Scottish descent, and after she’d come to Scotland with Quinn, she’d met her father’s father—her grandfather, also an earl, for the first time. She’d had no idea of his existence, and the reunion had been a touching one. The elderly earl had been deeply moved by finally meeting the only child of his long-dead only son, and had not only

walked Mandy down the aisle but had also given her an extremely valuable pearl necklace, one that had been in the Stuart family for a long time.

“You know, lass, speaking of mothers, there’s something you need to do.” Quinn reached out and took her hand.

“I know,” Mandy sighed. Now that they’d returned, she needed to let her mother know about the marriage.

“Are you going to call or write?”

“What do you think I should do?”

“Probably call her,” he suggested. “It’s more personal.”

Mandy was silent, so Quinn tried to encourage her. “Why don’t you just get it over with? If you want, I’ll sit here with you while you call.”

Mandy sighed again but got up to get her phone and then returned. She put in her mother’s number and then looked puzzled as she listened to a recording saying the number was no longer in service. She tried again but got the same result.

“Now what?” She suddenly had the same insecure feeling she’d had so often growing up. Her connection to her mother was thin in the best of times, and right now, even that seemed to have disappeared, not for the first time.

Quinn wrapped his arms around her. “Did she tell you the name of their dive shop in Maui?” Her mother and her long-term boyfriend had moved from Dallas to Maui a little over a year ago and only four months later had remembered to give the new phone number to Mandy.

“She didn’t really say. You heard that message she left.”

Quinn had indeed heard the very off-handed message her mother had left for her only child and had found it hard at the time to comprehend such a casual attitude toward one’s own daughter.

“Who else would know where she is?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” Mandy’s shoulders sagged, and she suddenly felt tired. She knew she shouldn’t let it bother her so much, but she couldn’t help it.

“Let’s not worry about it tonight,” said Quinn as he pulled her closer. “Tomorrow I’ll ask our solicitors to find her. In the meantime, this is our first night back here since our wedding, and I have a few ideas about how we can spend it.”