

Chapter 1 - Good Luck, Michael!

Maisie couldn't remember a time when she hadn't known Michael. They'd played in each other's nurseries when their families visited or simply when their nannies took them for what we call today playdates. As they got older, they'd climbed trees together and then fallen out of them again, they'd tumbled off banisters and even into a stream, they'd stolen little treats from the kitchens and hidden from their nannies. If Maisie was often the driving force behind the escapades, Michael was a more than willing participant. The adults would shake their heads and frown and sometimes even scold, but Maisie was a bit spoiled, and Michael wasn't his father's heir, so leeway was given.

By the time Maisie was in her teens, there was an assumption that she and Michael would marry some day. She was the youngest child and only daughter of the Earl of Morleton, and he was the second son of the Earl of Larchmont, and it seemed a good match all around.

After Maisie's oldest brother Quinn, the viscount, went against tradition and married Mandy Stuart, a young woman from Texas, Maisie started to see things differently. Quinn's marriage was not a comfortable arranged one but rather was based on romance and passion. She'd never seen that in her world before, and she wanted the same for herself.

By that time, she'd been engaged to Michael for several years, but he was away serving as a fighter pilot in the Royal Air Force, something many later-born sons of peers chose to do. When she got restless and started considering breaking off the engagement, Quinn got her to share her feelings with him and then gave Michael good advice: Forget about the little girl you played with and focus on the beautiful and sexy woman Maisie had become.

Michael heeded his advice, and his renewed attentions won Maisie over. She would marry the handsome pilot when he came home to stay.

The wedding was a grand affair. The Earl of Morleton had only one daughter, and he intended her celebration to be a proper one. The church overflowed with relatives and friends of the two families, and there were probably more titles present that day than there were hymnals. Mandy was her sister-in-law's Matron of Honor, but she was almost six months pregnant and beginning to show, so Maisie chose a dress style for her that hid the tiny bulge.

After a fantastic reception in the ballroom at Dunfirth Hall, the estate house where Maisie had grown up, she and Michael left for a honeymoon on the Mediterranean coast and the Greek Isles. They had several years of mostly absence to make up for, and they set to doing it with great gusto.

Michael had always been handsome and more rugged than his older brother, Logan, the viscount, and his pilot's training had added a hardened virility that Maisie found fascinating. The knowledge that he'd been trained in survival and knew how to stay alive in a hostile environment or even how to kill a man with his bare hands sent a little shiver down her when she lay with him and studied his face.

He still had his fun-loving side and could kick back and relax or make love for hours with Maisie, whose enthusiasm for life made her a passionate partner in bed, but he'd matured. There was a firmness in his face and a self-confidence in his voice that hadn't been there when he first went away, but hurling through the sky alone at 1500 miles an hour in a twelve-ton high-tech machine loaded with missiles can make someone grow up quickly.

He was no longer just the youngest child, the 'spare' in the heir-and-a-spare peer hierarchy. He was a man who had been trained into a code of honor and who could defend himself and those he loved. While Maisie had stayed home and amused herself, often in a way not that different from when she was younger, he had undergone strenuous training and lived a disciplined life, and, when he came home again, it was as a man who knew who he was and what he wanted from life.

When they returned from their honeymoon, their relationship was on firm footing again. They enjoyed each other's company and had a dynamic sex life. The future was looking good.

Maisie and Michael were living in his parents' home, Carlton House, while one of the smaller houses on the estate was being renovated for them. Michael's quarters in Carlton House were spacious, and the two of them frequently dined in their own apartment rather than with his parents. Right now they were there in their own small dining area having breakfast.

"I'm not taking my own car this morning because Stanley's going to look at it," said Michael as he poured himself more coffee. Stanley was in charge of the estate's vehicles.

"What's the matter with it?"

"The heater doesn't always come on."

"I can look at it for you," Maisie volunteered.

Michael looked at her with surprised amusement. "Is there something I don't know about your skills, Emmie?"

When they were children playing together, they'd nicknamed each other 'Em' and 'Emmie,' in honor of their names both starting with the letter M. Maisie only occasionally used 'Em' in speaking to Michael now, but he still more often than not affectionately called her 'Emmie.'

"I expect there's a lot you don't know about my skills," she replied, giving him a provocative smile.

"You're probably right, but let's leave tending my car to someone who actually knows about cars."

"I know about cars," she replied indignantly. "Stanley shows me things when you're not around."

Michael looked at his irrepressible new wife sitting across from him and smiled knowingly. "I suspect he shows you things to keep you out of other mischief, not to turn you into his assistant."

"That doesn't matter. The point is that I know things."

"I'm sure you do, but I'd prefer that Stanley be the one to look at my car."

Just as Maisie was getting ready to argue further, Michael's phone rang, and by the time he was done with the call, which was from his brother, Logan, Maisie was on a call of her own.

Michael got up, gathered a few things, and then came back to kiss Maisie goodbye, so she pressed her phone against her body and put her face up.

"Be good," he said as he kissed her and then kissed her again.

"Bor-ing!" Her voice went up and then down again, and Michael shook a playful warning finger at her before turning to leave.

Maisie finished her call and then considered the day ahead of her. Maybe she'd go riding. She'd really be glad when Mandy had her baby so they could go riding together again.

As she was heading out the door, she spied Michael's keys on the hall table, so she tucked them into the pocket of her riding jacket 'just in case' before going happily on her way. She rode for over an hour, and then, as she was walking back to the house, she saw Stanley get in one of the estate's vehicles and drive away.

Suddenly remembering the keys in her pocket, she looked around and saw Michael's sleek red BMW sitting in front of one of the garages. Stanley had just left the estate, so maybe she'd have a look at the heater herself. She knew exactly where the wires were, because she'd seen Stanley fix a heater once before, and it would be fun to watch Michael eat his words.

She smiled as she climbed into the car and moved it to a less conspicuous spot around the back of the garages. Then she removed her riding helmet and went back to the garages for a few items she'd need—a flashlight and a small set of tools that Stanley kept there for her.

She got back into the car and restarted it and then began turning the heater on and off. *That's strange, she thought. It comes on every time for me.* She tried it again several times but with the same result: It came on perfectly every time.

She frowned. She was well aware that these kinds of problems were always the same—they behaved perfectly once you wanted someone to check it out. She'd just have a look anyway, because it might be something really obvious, like a loose wire.

She lay on her back and wiggled herself far enough in between the steering wheel and the pedals that she could see the wires behind the dash panel. Hm-m. . . there was something hanging down that maybe shouldn't be. She gave it a little tug and the whole thing came off in her hand. *Well, that's obviously a problem right there, she thought as she took the handful of wires and laid it on the seat.*

She peered up once again to see what else she could see and then took a long screwdriver and poked around a bit. A metal cap fell off, and, nodding knowingly, she picked it up off her chest where it had landed and put it on the seat with the wires. Then she wiggled out again and sat down on the edge of the seat to examine the parts she'd collected.

She had no idea where the wires went or even if they were important, and the little metal cap could go to anything, so she set them over in the passenger's seat and then started the car again. Well, she *would* have started the car, except this time, when she pressed the starter button, there was silence—complete and utter silence. It didn't even sound like it was trying, it just sat there tranquilly.

I guess the wires must be important, she thought as she picked them up to study them. She could see a couple places where they had connectors on the ends, so, with the wires in one hand and the flashlight in the other, she wiggled back into her place on the floor and shone the light up to hunt for a place to reconnect the wires. After a bit of searching, she did manage to hook the wires to some open connectors, and, feeling satisfied with herself, she wiggled out again and sat in the driver's seat. The metal cap was still in the passenger seat, so she tossed it into a tray in the console before pushing the starter button again.

Pffht... pffht! A very unfriendly crackling came from behind the panel, accompanied by a few sparks visible where she'd just been lying. Maisie stared in dismay at the results of her efforts. Maybe she'd better let Stanley handle this one. She reached to turn the car off again, but it went silent on its own first, leaving only the smell of something burned.

"What the devil are you doing?"

Maisie jumped. *Michael! Where did he come from?*

She slid out of the driver's seat and found herself looking at a very angry man whose eyes were shooting the same kind of sparks that his stupid car had just been doing.

"I asked you a question, Emmie. What are you doing?" His voice was a far cry from the happy-husband one who'd bid her goodbye only a few short hours ago.

"Well, I was *trying* to fix your car for you—and you're welcome—but it's got a lot bigger problem than just the heater."

“Does it now?” Michael’s voice had a hard edge to it that Maisie didn’t appreciate. She’d tried to do something nice for him, and this is how he repaid her.

“Yes, it does, and it can just sit here and play dead for all I care!” She picked up her riding helmet and started to walk away, but Michael reached out and took hold of her arm, spinning her back around to face him.

“Did I or did I not tell you to leave the car alone?” he asked, staring at her sternly.

“No, you didn’t. You never said that. You said you’d *prefer* that Stanley fix it, but that’s not the same as telling *me* to leave it alone.” She flashed him a smug look, and for a minute he actually thought she might stick her tongue out at him.

He was furious, but he didn’t intend to stand in the middle of a public space and have an argument, so he simply said, “I don’t suppose it occurred to you to check with anyone before attacking my car?”

“Very funny. I didn’t attack your car. I treated it very gently.”

“So gently that it ended up throwing off sparks?”

“It’s not my fault. You already admitted it had a problem.”

“Yes, Emmie, it *had* a problem, and Stanley had already fixed it. It was sitting here fixed and ready to go, and now god knows what you’ve done to it.”

“You know what, Michael? I’m not going to listen to you get mad at me when I was only trying to do something nice for you. Fine, it didn’t work out the way I planned, but it’s the thought that counts, and my thought was a good one.”

With that she turned and ran towards the house, and this time Michael let her go. As he watched her disappear around the corner of the large building, his thoughts were troubled. He loved her upbeat nature and her perpetual optimism, but she was as lacking in discipline as she’d been when she was six. She was like a small cyclone that moved through each day, bringing excitement and disaster in equal measure.

Suddenly an image from their wedding day came back to him. As he and Maisie had been leaving the reception, her brother, Quinn, had shaken his hand and said with twinkling eyes and a look of mock commiseration, “Good luck, Michael!”

At the time, he’d taken it as big-brother teasing, but maybe Quinn had meant exactly that: Good luck!

He and Quinn needed to have a man-to-man talk really soon.