

Chapter 1 – Would it Kill Him to Smile?

Mandy ran up the steps of the museum. She was already fifteen minutes late for her appointment, and she had no idea where she was supposed to find this Mr. Douglas. She'd spoken with him on the phone and had the impression of some dusty old man, so she really wasn't much looking forward to the meeting.

She stopped at the information kiosk and asked directions, then ran breathlessly up some stairs and down a corridor. Near the end of the hall she stopped, read the name on an office, and went in.

"Is Mr. Douglas here?" she asked, trying to sound composed. "I'm Mandy Stuart."

"Miss Stuart, do come in," said a deep voice off to her side. She whirled around and stopped dead. Standing in the doorway of a large office to her right was one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen. He was well over six feet, with full dark hair, piercing dark eyes, and a strong square jaw. He had an athletic body even though she guessed him to be in his mid-to late thirties.

"Mr. Douglas?" she asked, trying to cover her surprise.

"Aye." The word was clipped and wasn't accompanied by a smile. He stood to the side of his door and motioned her in, so she entered the office and waited for him to follow.

"Please sit down," he said, motioning her to a chair in front of his desk. "I'm afraid we won't have much time. I have a three o'clock engagement, so with your tardy arrival, our time will be limited."

Mandy stared at him in disbelief. Could he be any ruder?

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said, smiling at him. "Something's going on outside and they've got several streets blocked off."

Mr. Douglas looked at her evenly and nodded. The young woman sitting across from him was definitely pleasant to look at, with her strawberry-blonde hair and blue eyes that seemed not quite serious. She had the American way of smiling for no reason at all, and even now she looked as if she might start humming at any minute.

"Tell me again what it is you want from me," he said.

"Well, as I told you, I'm an independent writer and often do features for the *Houston Times*. I'd like to do an article on the visiting exhibit you've brought here, especially because we've had several other articles about Scotland over the last year. Your exhibit on life in nineteenth-century Scotland will have a lot of appeal to many of our readers."

She stopped and took a breath, then continued. "When I spoke to you on the phone last week, I suggested several areas of particular interest we might focus on."

"We've never spoken before," he replied. "It was my father with whom you spoke."

"Oh." Mandy was temporarily taken aback. "Should I be talking with him now instead of with you?"

"He had to return to Edinburgh due to a family emergency, so I shall be handling the exhibit in his place." He noticed the look of hesitation on Mandy's face and added, "Don't worry, I sometimes work with him on these projects. I am fully credentialed to deal with such matters."

Mandy blushed slightly and looked uncomfortable. "I didn't mean to imply that you weren't," she said, looking at his impassive face. He looked like someone Hollywood would cast as the stern master of a nineteenth-century estate. She smiled to herself. Maybe he was well equipped after all to oversee the exhibit.

"Shall we get started then?" came the deep voice. It sounded more like a command than a question, and Mandy hastened to comply. "Of course," she said, getting out her phone to record.

They spent the next thirty minutes with her asking questions and then recording his answers, and it was obvious that he did indeed know a lot about the subject.

"If I could just ask a couple personal questions," Mandy added. "I assume that you yourself are from Scotland. Did you grow up there, and was your family there in the nineteenth century?"

The younger Mr. Douglas studied Mandy a minute before answering, and she had the feeling he somehow found the question objectionable.

"Yes, I grew up there, and yes, my family was there in the nineteenth century," he replied finally. "The Douglas clan is an old one, with roots going far back. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to have to end our conversation." As he spoke, he rose from his chair, so Mandy quickly gathered her things together and also rose.

"I really appreciate your taking time to talk to me today," she said, extending her hand to him. She had a big smile on her face.

Mr. Douglas shook her hand and said something polite, but his face remained serious.

"May I call you again if I need to?" asked Mandy, still smiling.

There was really no way Mr. Douglas could decline, so he agreed, and, in truth, he found the idea of being with this attractive young woman again rather agreeable. There was something about her that seemed to bring life and energy into the room.

Mandy spent an hour looking at the exhibit and making notes. She'd come back again with a photographer, but for now, she needed to start writing.

"Oh, my god, Jenny, you can't believe how awful he was! I swear he had a broomstick stuck up his you-know-what." Mandy was sitting with her best friend Jenny having supper in their favorite Irish pub. They were both laughing.

"Well, at least you don't have to work with him. Will you be seeing him again?"

"I'm not sure. I might need to talk to him one more time." She shook her head. "Do you know the whole time I was there he never even smiled? I wonder if he thinks he's supposed to stay in character with the exhibit?"

They both laughed again. Then Jenny suddenly remembered something.

"Are you going to that international party the Chamber of Commerce is putting on this Friday?" she asked. "I know you like to go to those kinds of mixers to see if any interesting ideas pop up."

"I'm going, but I'm surprised you're asking," answered Mandy. "What does it have to do with you?"

"I got stuck being the liaison for our office," Jenny replied. "Marta usually does it, but she's out for maternity leave."

"Then I guess I'll see you there."

Mandy entered the large hall at the Houston Downtown Marriott and looked around. Attendance was good, and there was a general din of overlapping conversations. Around the edges of the room were booths where different international groups had information about their activities as well as about their countries. Mandy got a drink and then wandered from booth to booth, occasionally picking up a brochure or handout.

When she got to the Scottish display, she noticed that a nice flyer was available telling about the visiting museum exhibit. Just as she reached out to pick one up, someone jostled her from the side, making her stumble a bit. Her drink splashed onto her dress, and she bumped into someone behind her rather hard. As if on cue, a hand came from nowhere and steadied her.

"I'm so sorry," she started as she regained her balance and turned around. Then she froze. *Oh, no! she said to herself.* There she was, looking up at none other than Mr. Douglas from her appointment the other day. It just had to be him she collided with!

His dark eyes were looking at her intently. "No problem," he said as he withdrew his hand from under her arm. "Are you all right now, Miss Stuart?"

"I'm fine, thank you," she said, politely. She gave him a brief smile. "I'm sorry I stepped on you like that. And please, call me Mandy."

Those dark eyes were still looking at her intently. "Quinn," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"My name is Quinn." The briefest hint of a smile seemed to pass across his face.

"Sorry. I'm a little slow tonight. Anyway, thank you again. I would have hated to land on the floor." She looked amused at the idea.

"Would you like to sit down while I get you a new drink?" he asked, gesturing towards one of the tables.

Seriously? This might be one of the last people she'd like to sit down with, but she had to admit he was being nice, and she certainly didn't want to offend him since she'd probably need his help again before she was done with her article.

"Sure. Thanks," she heard herself saying. At least she'd have a good story for Jenny tomorrow. She sat down and crossed her legs, then handed her glass to Quinn.

"What are you drinking?" he asked, taking in her long shapely legs. She'd worn a pantsuit to his office, but tonight she was wearing a short dress that revealed much more of her obviously fit body. She looked barely out of college, and he wondered briefly if she was even old enough to be drinking.

"White wine will be fine, thank you."

She watched as he walked towards the bar. He might not be the world's most personable guy, but he was certainly over-endowed with good looks. She guessed him at 6'2 at the least, and those eyes! Maybe when you had eyes like his, you didn't need to talk.

"Here you are," said Quinn, setting a new glass of white wine down in front of her. He had a glass of red for himself as he sat down next to her at the small round table. For a moment neither of them said anything, and Mandy began to suspect this was going to be as bad as she'd feared. Then Quinn sat back in his chair and looked at her.

"Is Houston your home town?" he asked.

"Not originally, but it is now," she answered.

Quinn was always amused at how differently the words "home town" were interpreted on this side of the ocean. For him, a home town was where your roots were, and that didn't change, but here in mobile America, they did.

“I was born in San Antonio, but we moved around a lot. I went to Rice, so then I just stayed here afterwards.” She smiled at him and took a drink of her wine, then added, “I like Houston.”

“It’s an interesting city,” Quinn said noncommittally.

“You mentioned Edinburgh in our interview. Is that where you’re from?”

“We have a family home near there, yes,” he replied.

Mandy thought it was a strange way to word it, but she let it pass. In all honesty, she didn’t much care where he came from.

“It’s lucky you could drop everything and come look after the exhibit when your father had to go back to Edinburgh,” she said, searching for something to talk about.

“I was already here.”

Mandy looked surprised. “I thought you lived in Scotland.”

“I am from Scotland, but I’m a visiting lecturer here in Houston this year.”

“At one of the universities?” asked Mandy. She couldn’t quite imagine him holding the interest of a class, although the women might all sign up based solely on his looks.

“At several of them, actually. Rice first invited me, but the University of Houston and TSU have both asked for some time as well. They’ve kept me quite busy.”

“So what exactly are you lecturing on?” asked Mandy, surprised to discover she really was interested in the answer.

“Different things at each school. Scottish history in the seventeenth- to nineteenth centuries, Robert Burns, modern Scottish culture, the differences between English and Scottish life, those types of areas.”

“Have you actually studied those things, or is it just because you’re Scottish?”

Mandy realized her question sounded a bit rude, and Quinn looked at her strangely before answering.

“I have actually studied such things,” he said dryly.

“Sorry. I guess that sounded kind of rude.” She giggled, and Quinn looked at her in surprise.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know that much about Scotland,” she went on. “When I was looking at the exhibit the other day, it was all new to me. It seemed like Scotland was really different from England in a lot of ways.”

Quinn nodded, then added. “If you’d like, I’d be happy to walk around the exhibit with you and answer any questions.”

Mandy was startled by the offer and even more startled to hear herself accepting. Had she just gone mad? Why did she keep arranging to spend time with this man? Yes, he was gorgeous, but would it really kill him to smile a few times a day?

They agreed on the next afternoon and said good-bye.

She chose to ignore the small part of her that watched in fascination as Quinn’s tall strong body made its way towards the exit. *Wait until Jenny hears this! Mandy thought to herself. She’s never going to let me live it down.*