

Chapter One

She was the last woman to enter the drawing room at Sandringham that Thursday night, hurrying down the stairs in her black satin slippers, one slim hand adjusting a glove. She'd kept the Prince of Wales's guests waiting a full quarter hour while her maid, Sharpe, finished dressing her hair. The cream-and-gold room was filled with the chatter of her most intriguing enemies and friends. The men were elegant in black evening dress and the ladies like a bouquet of tulips in their draped pastel gowns. Every head turned as Jennie Churchill swept through the doorway. The genteel chatter ceased. More than one gentleman ran his eyes the length of her figure; a few women gasped. Was her appearance *that* spectacular?

She glanced at her reflection in the towering looking glass over the mantle. She had ordered the blood-red damask from Worth in Paris, and it was the very latest fashion: skirt gathered flat against her pelvis and flared at the rear in a half bustle, with a demi-train that flirted across Sandringham's Aubusson carpets. Falls of black lace and jet graced the plunging neckline. Sharpe had piled her thick black hair high on her head and left a few curls trailing at the nape. A seven-pointed Cartier star glittered with diamonds on her brow. It was the only jewel Jennie owned, but she was famous for it.

Yes. That spectacular.

She smiled secretly at her reflection and sank into a curtsy deep enough to encompass the entire room.

Consuelo, Viscountess Mandeville, winked back at her. Minnie Paget, another old friend, turned away and redoubled her efforts to charm Harry Cust. But it was Jennie he was staring at over Minnie's shoulder.

"You're looking well, Jane." The Marquess of Hartington came toward her with a glass of sherry. "That color suits you. Matches the flush in your cheek."

Hart always called her Jane; it was a mark of affection. As he was old enough to be her father and in love with another woman, she laughed at him and said, "I've been squabbling with my maid. She made me scandalously late. How was the shoot today, Hart?"

"Damnably wet." He handed her the glass. "You should have come out with us. Fresh air and mud would do you good."

Spring storms had deluged Sandringham all week. The gentlemen played billiards and potted rabbits when the weather was bad. The ladies gathered in the library and the morning room, writing letters and trading gossip and making faint gestures at needlework none of them gave a fig about. Jennie was used to riding in London nearly every morning and she longed to tear through the Norfolk fields. Her body ached tonight with restlessness.

"Nothing will keep me indoors tomorrow," she confided, smiling up at Hart, "if I have to scrape the mud from my boots with a chisel. Are you taking me into dinner?"

"I believe that honor is mine," Harry Cust broke in.

"You bounder!" George Curzon protested, with a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You *know* we tossed for the privilege, and I won!"

"Gentlemen," Hartington said warningly. "It does not do to make a prize of the lady. Particularly when your Prince is present."

Jennie glanced swiftly toward the fire, where Bertie, the Prince of Wales, surveyed her with heavy-lidded eyes and thumbs thrust in his waistcoat pockets. In most English households, guests entered the dining room by order of social precedence. Not at Sandringham. Bertie liked to buck convention, and he loved women in Worth gowns. They were unabashedly feminine—one reason Jennie had ordered the red damask. Bertie's wife, Princess Alix, wasn't allowed to patronize French dressmakers. Her mother-in-law, Queen Victoria, thought it unpatriotic.

“We shall draw lots for Lady Randolph,” Bertie said deliberately.

A titter of interest followed his words. The cluster of men around Jennie fell back. The Prince summoned a footman. A pen. A pad of paper. He jotted down the names of his male guests and dropped the twisted squibs into a silver ewer. Then he offered it to Jennie with a slight bow.

She reached into the ewer's depths, twirling her fingertips among the possibilities. Her lips were parted, her long-lashed eyes swooped lazily at half-mast. Minnie Paget, her thin brows soaring to her hairline, was muttering behind her fan to the Duchess of Manchester. Jennie was pleased to note that Louise Manchester looked merely bored.

She withdrew a slip of paper and offered it triumphantly to the Prince.

He grunted, and passed it to Hartington.

“*Count Charles Kinsky*,” the Marquess read aloud, and turned his head to the far end of the double drawing room.

Jennie followed his gaze.

A dark-haired young man whose face tugged at her memory was studying her in a way she recognized: both assessing and caressing at once. He had not been present at breakfast or tea.

“A new arrival,” she said, ignoring the leaping flame at her heart.

“He won the Grand National last month,” Hart told her. “I’ll take you over to him.”

Jennie had heard a good deal about Charles Kinsky—or more accurately, about Count Karl Rudolf Ferdinand Andreas Fürst Kinsky von Wchinitz und Tettau, as the Austrian peerage called him. He was the eldest son of Prince Ferdinand Kinsky, a knight of the Holy Roman Empire. Charles held a minor post at the Austrian embassy, but his job was far less important than his family pedigree, or his father’s palaces in Vienna and Prague, or the stud farms his dynasty cultivated in the pastures of Bohemia. The *Equus Kinsky*—the Kinsky Horse breed—supplied the Austro-Hungarian imperial cavalry, and all of Europe knew it. Blue blood had run in Kinsky veins since the twelfth century.

He stood carelessly in the Prince’s drawing room as though it were the platform of a railway station and he had somewhere else to be. Kinsky was blue-eyed and tall, with a straight nose and a dashing hussar mustache. His perfectly fitted evening clothes, Jennie guessed, had come from Henry Poole, the Prince’s Savile Row tailor. She found the contrast between him and Bertie almost painful. Queen Victoria’s son was forty-two years old, bloated with self-indulgence and incipient coronary disease. Kinsky was just twenty-five: elegant, athletic, and whipcord-lean. He had won the premier English steeplechase a few weeks before at Aintree on his own horse, Zoedone, jumping her viciously round a field so muddy that it brought all but three contenders to their knees.

No amateur had ever won the Grand National. When Kinsky triumphed at Aintree, Jennie saw his face suddenly in all the sporting magazines and some of the ladies’ weeklies as well. Clubs concocted drinks they called “the Kinsky” and toasted him whenever he passed through their doors. Jennie’s friends begged for his presence at their balls and round their dining tables

and, it was rumored, in their beds. He was chary with his time and attention. It had taken weeks for Alix, Princess of Wales, to lure him to Sandringham.

Jennie's pulse quickened as the Marquess of Hartington led her to the Count. She had been a guest at Sandringham for three days already. She knew every single person wandering through the great house and had nearly exhausted her fund of trivial conversation. That must be why her heart leapt at the sight of Kinsky, she decided; he was a welcome diversion. He couldn't be worse than the tedious spring weather. She dropped him the curtsy due to a minor royal.

"But we've met before," Kinsky protested.

"Have we?"

"Ireland, County Meath," he said immediately. "Lord Langford's estate, Summerhill. Four years ago. Your husband's family hosted the Empress Elisabeth. I was in her party."

"I'm surprised you remember." Jennie lifted her brows.

"How could I forget? You were the only woman in that wild country wearing a riding habit by Redfern."

"Good Lord, how could you tell?" She had discovered the sporting tailor years before, in Cowes; now no lady in England would hunt in anything else.

"Like you, my mother is a magnificent horsewoman. She taught me to recognize quality and elegance—wherever I find it."

Did he intend the compliment? Delighted, Jennie laughed at the Count and allowed him to carry her into the dining room.

It was an intimate space for a royal household, the walls lined with Madrid tapestries after the style of Goya, dark and vivid. A fire crackled at one end. Kinsky led Jennie around the

long table, set for twenty, assessing the place cards. He found hers and without hesitation picked it up. “Do you know what I remember most from that time in Ireland?” he asked.

“Sisi’s leather riding habit? Or the fact that she was sewn into it each morning?”

“The sapphire-blue gown you wore the night we danced together. You looked glorious. More like a panther than a woman.”

“A *wild beast*, Count? Should I be flattered or insulted?”

“Neither. I’m simply telling the truth.” He exchanged her place card for the one next to his own. “Indulge me, Lady Randolph. It’s long past time we got to know each other.”

Dinner at Sandringham never lasted more than an hour. That night Jennie found it far too short. The soup and fish and saddle of mutton passed in a blur; her wineglass was effortlessly refilled; she turned with regret from Kinsky on her right to the Earl on her left; and when the ladies rose to follow Princess Alix, leaving the men to their port, she paced alone before the great fireplace in Bertie’s saloon as the other women talked indolently amongst the velvet sofa cushions. She was frustrated with herself. What was so instantly dazzling, so absorbing and consuming, about Count Kinsky? She knew hundreds of men—men of power, intelligence, fashion. Some of them had gone down on their knees, begging her to be their mistress. So why, suddenly, had this man caught her interest?

“I’m told you’re an American,” Kinsky had said over dessert, “but no one with your command of French grew up in New York. When did you live in Paris?”

“Mamma settled us there for her health when I was thirteen.” It was the standard explanation for her parents’ separation, but Mamma had never been ill a day in her life. She’d been sick of Papa’s opera singers.

“And suffered at the hands of a governess?” Kinsky guessed.

“I was sent to a convent school.” When she’d rather have gone riding each day with Papa back at Jerome Park. “I caused endless trouble for the nuns.”

“Of course you did.” His warm blue gaze met Jennie’s. Disconcerting; most dinner partners kept their eyes firmly on their plates. “That explains the French. You were young, and the young pick up languages effortlessly.”

“Your English is just as good,” she countered.

“Thank you. My father was a diplomat before me. I was raised as much in London and Paris as on my own estates.”

My own estates. That was part of what made Charles fascinating—he was one of those men who ruled the earth, or at least a good swath of it. He expected to have whatever he wanted. Her husband Randolph was similar—a duke’s son, in the habit of ordering people around. But second sons owned nothing.

“Don’t tell me you were in France during the Prussian invasion?” Kinsky asked suddenly, frowning. He must have hazarded her age and done a few sums. The invasion, a dozen years ago.

“Not quite. We caught the last train out of Paris,” Jennie supplied, “ahead of the cavalry. Our maid was supposed to follow. She never did.” Marie had simply pocketed the train fare and lived on in the empty house, selling the Jerome family’s belongings piece by piece to survive.

“We managed to cross to Dover and install ourselves at Brown’s Hotel, like the other refugees.”

“So much for the convent.”

“Well . . .” Jennie flashed him a smile. “I was seventeen by that time, and straining at the leash. But poor Paris! The Prussian Siege was bad enough. The Commune that followed . . .”

“You saw that, too?”

That Churchill Woman

“Mamma insisted on returning to France once the war was over.”

“For her *health*,” Kinsky suggested, amused.

“A mistake, Count, from which Mamma eventually recovered.”

The enchanting city in ruins. Sixty-five thousand people buried in mass lime pits on the outskirts. The Bois de Boulogne, through which Jennie had galloped almost every day, cut to the ground for firewood. The Tuileries Palace a heap of smoking rubble.

“You have a gift for survival, Lady Randolph.”

She shrugged. “Americans are hard to kill.”

“And eventually you settled in England?”

She’d met Randolph Churchill when she was nineteen, two years after the Commune. It seemed an eternity ago. “Barring a few visits to Paris dressmakers? Yes.”

Charles touched his glass to hers. “Then France’s loss is England’s gain, my lady.”

Minnie Paget was studiously shunning Jennie as a result of the lot-drawing before dinner, but Consuelo Mandeville joined her in front of the fire. She was petite and plump and had masses of dark bronze hair, secured to her head by ebony combs riddled with emeralds. Consuelo’s father was Cuban but she had been born on her mother’s cotton plantation in Louisiana before the Civil War. She was one of Jennie’s oldest friends, along with a girl named Alva Erskine Smith, who had recently become Alva Vanderbilt back in New York. The girls had met at Delmonico’s dancing class when they were nine, then gone on to the same French boarding school a few years later. Alva had named her first child Consuelo in honor of Viscountess Mandeville. The three of them did not really trust Minnie Paget, the fourth member of their American set. Minnie had

carried tales as a girl, and Jennie knew she was still doing it now, when the cost was so much higher.

“You look like a caged lion, my love.” Consuelo parted her rosy lips and blew an admirable set of smoke rings; she made a point of waving Cuban cigars around the Prince of Wales. It was not enough for Connie to be called her ladyship; she wanted to be called *exotic*.

“I look like a panther, Connie. Or so I’ve been told.”

“Was that meant as a compliment?”

“A challenge, I think.”

Consuelo sank down on a loveseat ranged below the Prince’s Spanish tapestries. She was a lazy creature and Jennie’s energy always exhausted her. “From the dashing Kinsky? He’s brought up your color. You look more ravishing tonight than I’ve ever seen you.”

“Nonsense! I’m always ravishing,” Jennie retorted tartly. With just a courtesy title and a modest fortune to her name, she had no choice but to look her best. Her face and wit needed to open all the right doors.

“It’s good Freddie’s not invited this week,” Consuelo murmured. “He’d force Kinsky to a duel.”

Colonel Freddie Burnaby of the Horse Guards was Jennie’s latest flirt.

“I’m growing rather tired of Freddie,” she mused. “He has so little conversation.”

“But such massive shoulders.” Consuelo patted the silk cushion beside her. “Come and have a cigar, darling. You can tell me all about your new Austrian conquest.”

Jennie did not see Kinsky again that night; he was recruited to play whist with the Prince, and no one refused that invitation. The men would be at cards until dawn. At eleven o’clock, with the

rest of the ladies, each holding a lighted candle, Jennie ascended Sandringham's wide paneled staircase, which was lined with prints of Bertie's favorite horses. She did not look for Count Kinsky's name on one of Alix's engraved cards pinned to the bedchamber doors along the carpeted passages. The Count had arrived too late in the week; he would be placed in one of the outer wings with lesser mortals. And he would sleep until noon.

She was astonished, therefore, to find him in the stables the next morning as she prepared to mount the little mare Alix had set aside for her use—Candida was her name, a silver-gray sprite with a soft mouth and a dancing gait. The rain had stopped, a fragile sun shone on the wet spring grass, and Jennie meant to ride with two of Bertie and Alix's daughters: Princess Louise, who was sixteen, and Princess Maud, two years younger. Their grooms would accompany them through the Wild Wood—part of Sandringham's six thousand acres.

Charles Kinsky wore a dark field jacket, a low-crowned derby, and tight pantaloons tucked into black leather boots. He was shaking his head at the roan gelding a groom had led out for his use. "Be a good fellow and find me a mount that can gallop. That black devil over there will do."

The groom eyed Kinsky. The Count's racing reputation had run like fire through the stables.

"Devil is right, sir," the groom muttered as he led the roan back to its stall and turned out the black. The horse rippled with violent energy. "Barely two years old and not fit to saddle. HRH intends him for the next National."

"Then let me school him for you. What is he called?"

"The Scot. My master will have my head if you break his neck—or your own, sir."

“Tell the Prince I had a death wish,” Kinsky said easily. “It’s true enough, most days.” He walked up to the horse with his palm extended, and the flaring nostrils blew briefly at his hand. He slid his fingers over the velvet nose and The Scot thrust his head into Kinsky’s chest in a gesture of acceptance Jennie recognized immediately. Hadn’t she wanted to do the same thing last night?

She mounted hurriedly. The two princesses wore matching dark blue riding habits, thoroughly sensible. Maud resembled her mother, Alix, though without her ethereal beauty; Louise, poor thing, looked like Bertie.

Kinsky edged his stamping, nervy horse near Jennie’s Candida, who tossed her head and danced sideways.

“Your stallion’s as fresh as paint,” Jennie told the Count. “Please keep your distance from my charges, sir; I should hate to have to answer to their mother.”

“*Are* they your charges?” Kinsky murmured. “I thought their grooms looked after them. You must be longing for a gallop.”

“Of course,” Jennie said, “but—”

With a casual flick of his riding crop, Kinsky grazed Candida’s flank. The mare snorted, then wheeled for the arched entrance to the stable yard, Jennie’s thigh braced against the pommel of her sidesaddle. Kinsky was right on her heels. Even if she had wanted to stop the mare, she could not safely have done so; The Scot would have run her down.

The open ride to the Wild Wood was graded and beautifully turfed, an invitation to race.

She gave Candida her head and did not look back.