
Chapter 1

Jenny Hanson watched excitedly out the window of the Boeing 757 as it settled gracefully onto the runway of Edinburgh airport. The trip from Houston had been long and had included a plane change in Newark, but she was finally here and could hardly wait to see her close friend Mandy Douglas. They'd been best friends back when Mandy had lived in Houston, but then Mandy had fallen in love with a visiting Scotsman who, much to both of their surprises, had turned out to be a viscount from an old aristocratic family.

Jenny had been a bridesmaid in her friend's wedding—a wedding like none she'd ever imagined. The centuries-old church in Edinburgh had been filled with titled aristocrats, the men in kilts and the women in tiaras, and at the end of the service the viscount had knelt in front of Mandy and presented his sword to her as a symbol of his protection.

Jenny and Mandy, now normally referred to as Lady Amanda, had stayed close and messaged each other frequently, but this was Jenny's first trip back to Scotland to visit. She'd seen lots of pictures over the last few years of the happy couple and their now-two-year-old son, but for the next couple weeks she

and Mandy could talk for hours in person and giggle over private jokes.

“Miss Hanson?”

Jenny turned in surprise towards the young man who had addressed her as she exited the jet way into the airport.

“Yes?”

“If you’d come with me, please.”

Jenny wasn’t quite sure why she’d been singled out, so she hesitated. Was there a problem?

As if reading her mind, the young man smiled and added, “Lord Douglas asked me to see you through immigration and customs. They’re waiting just outside for you.”

“Oh. Thank you.” Jenny smiled at the young man and hurried after him. She’d forgotten the little extras that paved the way for those in her friend’s new world. No long lines for the friend of the viscount’s wife!

“JENNY!”

Mandy spotted her friend exiting baggage claim and rushed towards her. Her husband watched with amusement and then moved towards the young man pushing a luggage trolley.

“Is everything in order?” he asked.

“Yes, my lord. Shall I send someone to get your car?”

“That won’t be necessary. If you’ll wait with the ladies, I’ll bring it around myself.”

Jenny and Mandy talked a mile a minute as they waited at the curb, and soon a sleek black Mercedes slid to a stop in front of them. The young man held the doors for the ladies and then loaded the bags into the trunk.

“Thank you,” said Quinn as he slipped several bills into the young man’s hand. “I appreciate your help.”

“Not at all, my lord,” answered the young man, relieved that

everything had gone so smoothly. He frequently accompanied peers at the airport, and while some were gracious and appreciative, others could be difficult and demanding.

“Quinn, do you have a thing about black Mercedes?” asked Jenny with a giggle as the car pulled away.

“Not necessarily. Why do you ask?”

“Well, you had a black Mercedes in Houston, you were driving one the year you got married, and now here we are again, so it’s a fair question.”

Jenny giggled again, reminding Quinn of what he had to look forward to for the next couple weeks. The year he’d spent in Houston had made him acutely aware of the difference between American women, many of whom had what he thought of as a ‘cheeky gene’, and the more staid Scottish women he’d grown up around.

Of course his own younger sister Maisie was anything but staid, so the comparison wasn’t absolute. In fact, he frowned slightly to himself at the idea of what the three women together might dream up. Maybe he’d have a word with Mandy.

In the following days the two women had as much fun as they’d hoped, and they frequently included Maisie in their activities. When Jenny had come for the wedding, Maisie had taken her under her wing since Mandy was so occupied with final preparations, so all three were well acquainted. They took lunch outings into Edinburgh, went riding, shopped at Mandy and Maisie’s favorite lingerie shop, and generally had a fantastic time. If Quinn felt a bit left out, he accepted it with good grace. He tried never to forget that Mandy had left her own culture and way of life to become part of his world, and at the time he’d promised her that he’d fly Jenny over as often as she wanted.

Last night at dinner had been interesting because the conversation had turned to the original meeting of Mandy and Quinn. He’d been in Houston for a year and she’d gone to interview him for a freelance article she was writing for the newspaper. Jenny

well remembered Mandy's comments afterwards as she described the hopelessly Old World man she'd just spent an hour with. They'd joked about it, and Mandy had said she hoped she wouldn't need to have any more dealings with him. As she'd complained to Jenny, "Would it have killed him to smile?"

Of course as events took their course, she discovered that he could indeed smile, and that underneath his propriety was a man she found herself quickly drawn to, a man whose impeccable manners and high standards didn't prevent him from being a caring and attentive lover.

Then had come that terrible day when she'd been confronted by an emissary of the Earl of Morleton, an emissary who had been sent to offer her a huge amount of money to stop seeing his son. It was the day when words like *earl*, *lord*, and *viscount* first entered her vocabulary. She knew Quinn was old fashioned, but she'd had no idea his father was an earl and that he himself was a viscount. Jenny had comforted her as she cried heart-broken tears. Quinn swore he loved her and would somehow work out their future, but in her heart she couldn't imagine how she could ever fit into such a world as he came from.

Jenny had been there for all of it—the initial shock and heartbreak and then the eventual miracle as Quinn overcame his father's resistance and asked Mandy to be his wife. Later she'd listened to Mandy for hours during her difficult period of adjustment to an aristocratic lifestyle in a new country, and of course she'd come to participate in the wedding she'd never forget. Through it all the two young women had remained close, and now they were together again for two glorious weeks.

The first time Jenny had seen Quinn back in Houston she'd declared him a twelve on a scale of one to ten, and as far as she could tell, the intervening almost four years hadn't changed that. He was still drop-dead gorgeous. While she wasn't sure she would want to make the same changes Mandy had needed to, she

certainly wouldn't mind if she were to meet her own version of a Greek god.

"LADY MAISIE TO SEE YOU, my lady," announced Mandy's housekeeper, but the words were barely out of her mouth when Maisie burst through the door behind her and hurried over to the seated women who were enjoying a pitcher of strawberry lemonade. Dispensing with formalities, Maisie waved an envelope and grinned as she joined them at the table.

"I have a very interesting invitation for us," she announced as she watched Mandy pour her a glass of the lemonade. She paused to taste it and wrinkled her nose.

"Is this straight?" she asked in a cross of disappointment and disapproval. She and Mandy had spent many hours with pitchers of 'enhanced' lemonade, so she was surprised to not see a bottle of enhancement near the pitcher.

"Yes," laughed Mandy. "I'm sure you can survive. We might drive into town in a bit, so we have to be good."

"Well, if you had someone drive you, you wouldn't have to worry about it."

Mandy shook her head at her irrepressible friend. "I'm not worried about it. What about the invitation?"

"How would you like to go to a house party this weekend at Catherwood?"

"Catherwood!" exclaimed Mandy looking surprised. "I've never been there before. I really don't know them."

"A lot of people barely know them, but I've met Caroline several times, and she's the one giving the party. I told her about Jenny being here, and she's going to send an invitation here for the two of you. What do you think?"

"What's a house party?" asked Jenny, always up for any new adventure.

“This one’s just for women,” answered Maisie. “It’s from Friday night to Sunday night. Who knows what Caroline will plan?” She laughed and added, “Anything could happen at Catherwood.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Mandy crinkling her forehead. “What don’t I know?”

“Oh, you know, it’s Catherwood, home of endless rumors and goings-on. I’ve heard they even still have a dungeon in the basement.” Maisie’s eyes positively sparkled at the idea of such impropriety. “I don’t know how anyone would ever find it, though.” Turning to Jenny she said, “Catherwood gives new meaning to the term ‘huge’. No one could know their way around the whole place. I’m sure Caroline has her own apartment, although come to think of it, she might have a separate house. I guess we’ll find out.”

She turned to Mandy again. “So, are you two in?”

Mandy seemed hesitant, so Maisie upped the pressure. “You couldn’t ask for anything better to amuse Jenny with. She’ll probably be the only person back in Houston who’s gone to a house party on a march the size of Catherwood.”

“What’s a march?” asked Jenny.

“It belongs to a marquess.” Maisie pronounced it *mar-kwess*, causing Jenny to look puzzled.

“What’s that?”

Maisie laughed and looked again at Mandy. “Oh, Mandy, you’re not properly educating Jenny.”

Mandy rolled her eyes and shook her head. “I’m pretty sure she’ll survive without that piece of information.” Then she looked at Jenny and explained, “A marquess is a rank one step higher than an earl, and his little kingdom is called a march just like an earl’s kingdom is called an earldom.”

“Why are we talking marches this morning?” came a deep voice from the doorway.

“Quinny!” Maisie jumped up and threw her arms around her

older brother, whom she adored. She'd never left behind her childhood habit of calling him Quinny, and he good-naturedly went along with it.

"Do you want some lemonade?" asked Mandy as he approached the table.

"That sounds good, thank you." He sat down and took the glass she offered. "So, what are you ladies up to this morning, and why are you speaking about marches? It hardly seems an exciting topic of conversation."

"We have an invitation to a house party at Catherwood this weekend," replied Maisie, her eyes dancing with the very thought.

Quinn didn't look particularly pleased. "Who's 'we'?"

"Not you, don't worry. It a ladies-only weekend." Maisie waved the invitation and smiled playfully at her older brother.

Quinn still had a serious look on his face. "I didn't realize you were friends with anyone there. Who exactly is giving the party?"

"Caroline."

"And Caroline is..."

"Quinny! Don't be so uptight. Caroline is the marquess' youngest daughter and the earl's sister. She's about my age. I've been at some parties with her, but I don't know her really well. You've probably danced with her sometime or other."

"She's not married?"

"As far as I know, no. I think she still lives there at Catherwood, at least part of the time."

Quinn looked like this was hardly reassuring news. He turned to Mandy. "I didn't realize you knew her."

"I don't think I do," she answered. "Is it a problem?"

The look on Quinn's face made it obvious that it might well be a problem, but he replied simply, "We'll talk about it later."

Maisie sighed loudly. "Quinny, please don't make a problem where there isn't one. It'll be a lot of fun, and what a great thing to take Jenny to."

Maisie was nine years younger than Quinn, so for her, he'd always been both a big brother and, as viscount and heir to her father's earldom, an authority figure. Even though she was married now, if Quinn were to announce that he didn't want the women going, her own husband Michael, the second son of the Earl of Larchmont, would surely back him up, and they wouldn't go. She knew it was almost archaic by today's standards, but such was the world she lived in.

Quinn rose to leave again. "Thank you for the lemonade. I'll see you ladies later."

"What was that about?" asked Mandy once he was gone. "What's with Catherwood?"

"They have the reputation of being very unconventional," replied Maisie with a quick laugh. "Caroline's fine though, and I think her brother is too. They can't help all the other things that go on there."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. I've always heard stories about Catherwood, but you know how people talk. It might be nothing at all. Caroline's perfectly nice, and that's all that matters for our purposes."

Then she added, "I just hope Quinny doesn't mess it up for us."